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**ARAB WOMEN: STATUS, CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS
OUTCOME OF THE REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION
OF BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AND BEIRUT DECLARATION
IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN JULY 2004 AND DECEMBER 2006**

Summary

This document comprises a review of the progress that has been made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action in the period between the second and third sessions of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Committee on Women. As a result of their adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that were the outcome of the Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995, Governments have assumed primary responsibility for implementing the Platform and for creating an enabling political environment. Those countries also subscribed to the first review in 2000 and the 10-year review in 2004. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and established a three-tiered intergovernmental mechanism comprising the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on the Status of Women, which plays the primary role in overall policy-making and follow-up and in coordinating the implementation and monitoring of the Platform. Given that ESCWA is the regional commission in Western Asia, it is the party responsible for coordinating the follow-up to global conferences at the regional level. This report was prepared as one of the activities undertaken by the ESCWA Centre for Women, for submission to the third session of the Committee on Women on 14 and 15 March 2007. The aim of the report is to throw light on the achievements that have been realized, detail obstacles and challenges and affirm the importance of continuing work along the lines set forth in the Beirut Declaration on Arab Women 10 Years after Beijing: Call for Peace, which was adopted by the Committee at its second session.

This report covers the three years since the regional 10 year review and adoption of the Beirut Declaration and is based on the responses to a questionnaire that was prepared by ESCWA and distributed to Arab Governments in July 2006. That questionnaire contained questions on a number of themes, including institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, national legislation and international agreements, the economic empowerment of women, the political empowerment of women, a gender-disaggregated database, and women in the media. All except one ESCWA member country responded to the questionnaire and replies were also received from non-ESCWA member countries Algeria, Djibouti and Tunisia.

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Introduction

1. From 8 to 10 July 1994, at United Nations House in Beirut ESCWA held the Arab Regional Conference 10 Years after Beijing: Call for Peace. The Conference was convened pursuant to General Assembly resolution 58/148 of 22 December 2003 concerning follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women, in which the General Assembly recognizes the importance attached to the regional and subregional monitoring of the global and regional platforms for action, the implementation of the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, which was held from 5 to 9 June 2000, and an assessment of progress made in mainstreaming a gender perspective within the United Nations system.
2. At its second session, which was held from 8 to 10 July 2004, the Committee on Women adopted two resolutions, the first of which concerned the Beirut Declaration on Arab Women 10 Years after Beijing: Call for Peace. That Declaration affirms the importance that must be given to implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, and urges all Governments to strengthen national mechanisms for women's affairs by allocating sufficient human and material resources for that purpose. It also requests the ESCWA secretariat to provide consultancy services, at the request of national Governments in the field of the advancement and empowerment of women, with special focus on the collection of gender-disaggregated data, the strengthening of national mechanisms, the provision of support in preparing reports on implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and mainstreaming gender in policies and programmes.
3. The Beirut Declaration presents a general vision of issues that should be incorporated into the concerns of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and implemented in the current decade. That vision contains 32 directional and procedural points for the empowerment of women and improvement of their living conditions and for their increased participation in political, economic and social life. That vision was incorporated into the questions contained in the questionnaire that was distributed by ESCWA, the outcome of which will be reviewed below. The Declaration does not contain plans for action with measurable goals, a timetable or indicators for monitoring and evaluation.
4. The second resolution concerned the subprogramme on the empowerment and advancement of women within the proposed strategic framework for the biennium 2006-2007.¹
5. The Conference determined the need for the Centre for Women to be involved in improving implementation and for ESCWA to adopt a clear and effective policy to ensure the mainstreaming of gender equality into its main programmes. That demand was confirmed by the General Assembly in the outcome of its twenty-third special session, entitled "Women 2000". Conference participants requested the United Nations organization, including the regional commissions, to support Government efforts and to formulate complementary programmes to achieve full and effective implementation of the Platform for Action. They also requested assistance for Governments in mainstreaming the gender perspective in national development plans, building institutional capacities, formulating national plans of action, and supporting non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and, in particular, women's organizations, in building their capacities with a view to supporting, implementing, evaluating and following up the Platform for Action.
6. Participants also affirmed the need to continue to promote the pursuit of an effective and clearly delineated public policy to propagate the gender perspective through ESCWA programmes, United Nations units in the specialized agencies, specialists in gender affairs in such United Nations regional offices as the United Nations Development Fund for Women, Regional Office for the Arab States, and those of the United Nations Population Fund, the International Labour Organization, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and through national development programmes. United Nations institutions should ensure that all its staff, including ESCWA staff, should have training in respect for gender equality issues in the workplace. The impact of the gender equality programme should be analysed and appropriately followed up; periodic reports should be presented on the progress made in promulgating respect for gender issues; and information provided on the major achievements realized and best practices, in

¹ E/ESCWA/WOM/2004/IG.1/6.

order to allow recommendations to be made for further measures and strategies for future action by the United Nations.

I. THE ACHIEVEMENTS THAT HAVE BEEN REALIZED BY ESCWA AT THE LEVEL OF IMPLEMENTATION

7. ESCWA has included within its programmes a number of policies and strategies relating to gender equality and the advancement of women. Its second strategy in 2005 affirms the need to mainstream gender issues in ESCWA programmes. The bases for that strategy were the final document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly Economic and Social Council agreed conclusions 1997/2, which support the policy of gender mainstreaming, and Economic and Social Council resolution 2004/4, which reaffirms that gender mainstreaming constitutes a major strategy for the full implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and Beijing +10 as a complement to strategies for women's empowerment, achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) concerning women, peace and security.

8. In July 2005, ESCWA prepared and carried out a training programme to raise awareness of gender issues amongst all ESCWA employees. The programme took place over one month. It was designed on a sectoral basis in order to empower ESCWA technical and administrative staff to build their capacities and become familiar with new ways to mainstream the gender perspective and use gender-disaggregated data to ensure that gender was respected in all ESCWA programmes. An interdivisional network was established for the coordination of gender-related issues in sectoral programmes. The importance should be noted here of ESCWA programmes for the dissemination of gender-disaggregated data: the Statistics Coordination Unit collects such data and provides advice and training to statistics office staff in Arab countries. The Unit was involved in setting up a comprehensive database of gender-disaggregated data, and also produced a complementary system of gender indicators, preparing 10 country case studies that use figures to illustrate the status of women and men.

9. The regional commissions, including ESCWA, have played a decisive role in supporting the efforts of member countries. They have provided special support in strengthening national mechanisms for the advancement of women. ESCWA has urged its member countries to establish permanent mechanisms for gender issues. Those endeavours have resulted in cooperation with women activists and NGOs. In 2006, all except one of the ESCWA member countries had established mechanisms for the advancement of women. In the remaining country, the Ministry of Social Affairs continues to follow up women's issues.

10. The commissions have also assisted Governments in formulating strategies and national and regional plans and programmes for the empowerment of women. ESCWA has assisted its member countries in monitoring and evaluating the progress made in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and arranged regional preparatory conferences for Beijing +10.

11. On the basis of the United Nations report on Beijing +10, ESCWA has identified the following challenges and obstacles:

(a) Political will and accountability at the highest levels are important issues for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, the outcome of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and Beijing +10;

(b) Methods of applying gender awareness should be adopted in job descriptions and work plans and gender mainstreaming performance should be included in performance evaluations;

(c) On-going, effective training must be continuously undertaken by staff at all levels;

(d) Suspicion of matters related to gender equality and lack of incentive to take part in training are pending issues that are in need of follow-up;

(e) There is a need for additional capacity-building efforts in such fields as economic policy, rural development, social security and infrastructure;

(f) Gender-disaggregated data has a role in demonstrating the essential importance of gender equality in national development strategies and in removing the resistance and misunderstanding that are faced when trying to propagate awareness of gender issues.

12. ESCWA distributed to all Arab countries a questionnaire prepared by the Centre for Women, and replies were received from almost all ESCWA member countries, as well as from non-ESCWA member countries Algeria, Djibouti and Tunisia.

13. Government replies contained information about their principal achievements in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action, highlighting legislative amendments and the development of institutions and programmes in general. The main gaps and challenges that have continued since the beginning of the twenty-first century were identified: the specified time period, namely, 2005 and 2006 was clearly considered very short.

14. Some responses indicated an increase in awareness of gender equality issues, but to varying extents, depending on the Government and the social elements involved. A small number of replies referred to attempts to spread awareness of gender issues and to the difficulties and resistance faced, as well as lack of familiarity with or suspicion of their goals. Furthermore, there was a lack of specialized skills and capacities, insufficient material resources, and no implementation facilities. National mechanisms continue to use general concepts for improving the status of women, including the eradication of illiteracy and poverty, health improvement and increased political and economic representation for women in general. Social recognition for the role of women in development continues to be sought, and action taken to alleviate the suffering of women victims of war.

15. Several replies mentioned an increase in the number of women's organizations and networks and the basic role that they play in raising awareness of violence against women. Several replies noted an improvement in the level of data collection and production, adding information that indicated that certain NGOs and academic centres were undertaking more research and training and teaching trial academic courses on women's issues and gender equality.

16. Governments affirmed that they continue to face challenges, mentioning low levels of female representation in decision-making positions; rigid attitudes, behaviour, customs and traditions; and violence against women as some of the persistent main challenges, along with the increasing feminization of poverty and the severe impact on women of war. Some Governments expressed concern that public opinion in their countries viewed the main issues relating to the advancement of women as having been resolved, because women were playing a greater role in health and education. It was also noted that certain classes of women are unaware of their rights and therefore make no demand for those rights.

17. There is still a deep divide between policies and practices in the field of strengthening gender equality. Questionnaire responses and general remarks on the situation in the Arab countries make it clear that there is a need to apply comprehensive and multi-dimensional methods in order to overcome the obstacles and challenges that continue to obstruct the advancement of women: attitudes towards the advancement of women and increased gender equality will not change in unison with public policies and the legal and institutional frameworks. Unambiguous resistance to rigid attitudes and deep-seated discriminatory practices is a vital element in the comprehensive implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and Beijing +10.

II. ACHIEVEMENTS AND OBSTACLES IN THE FIELDS COVERED BY THE QUESTIONNAIRE

A. NATIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

18. The questionnaire contains a number of questions relating to national arrangements and mechanisms for the advancement of women. Most such mechanisms were established in Arab countries between 1992 and 2005, namely, between the year in which preparations were begun for the Fourth World Conference on Women and the year in which Beijing +10 took place. The establishment of those mechanisms is one of the

most significant achievements related to Platform directives that have been realized in the Arab world, along with increased awareness of gender issues and recognition of the importance of collecting gender-disaggregated data. However, serious obstacles continue to stand in the way of increased respect for the gender perspective and acknowledgment of its connection with the principle of gender equality.

19. Most Arab countries currently have a Government mechanism for women's issues. In certain countries, including Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Qatar and the Syrian Arab Republic, that mechanism was established as the result of a presidential decree and linked to the highest position in the state hierarchy, while in others the mechanism is tied to the Cabinet or women's issues remain the province of committees within ministries of social affairs.

20. For the most part, those national mechanisms are independent councils and national institutions for women's issues. In order to improve the status of the mechanism, five Arab countries, namely, Iraq and Palestine (ESCWA member countries) and Algeria, Djibouti and Tunisia (non-ESCWA member countries) have raised the national mechanism to the standard of ministry or sub-ministry.

21. According to the information in the questionnaire, when their national mechanisms were established, most Governments adopted national public strategies and programmes of work for the advancement of women, which are updated as required. Jordan, Qatar and Yemen said that they had prepared a strategy for the advancement of women in 2003, and revised and updated it in 2006. Bahrain said that it had prepared a national strategy in 2005, while the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs noted that it is currently preparing a national strategy. Egypt reported that it had prepared a national women's strategy which is reviewed periodically, noting that the main ministries were involved in formulating the vision for the empowerment of women. The experience in Egypt is considered ground-breaking in the Arab region, in that it involved various ministries in identifying issues to be included amongst the tasks to be carried out by ministries.

22. All the Governments that responded to the questionnaire affirmed the clear task that had been assigned to the national institution for the advancement of women, underlining that their duties focus on the principal items mentioned in the questionnaire, as follow:

- (a) The formulation of a strategy for the advancement of women;
- (b) The linkage of women's issues with State policies;
- (c) The mainstreaming of gender in the plans and programmes of Government institutions;
- (d) The provision of training for State institutions;
- (e) The review of legislation and proposals for amendment thereof;
- (f) Control of discrimination against women;
- (g) Cooperation between civil society and the academic and scientific sectors.

23. It is clear from the responses of certain Governments that they have made reservations with regard to mainstreaming gender issues in plans, programmes and Government institutions and related training, as they have made reservations with regard to monitoring discrimination against women. On the other hand, the duties of national mechanisms in some countries have perceptibly increased, thereby going beyond the framework identified in the questionnaire. National mechanisms have been given names that relate their mandate to, for example, the family and the child, thereby giving the institution more responsibilities than it can undertake. That departure from the direct goal may be the result of incapacity to take on board any issue that goes beyond the stereotypical and traditional role of women, as if the decision to establish the mechanism in such cases ties the mandate of the mechanism to the duties delegated to women and their traditional role, namely, pregnancy, childbirth, renewing life, caring for the children and ageing persons of the family, in addition to their productive and development role. That has led to the confusion and the duplication of mechanism duties and those of such other ministries as ministries of social affairs.

24. With respect to the provision of the human and material resources necessary to empower national mechanisms to perform their duties, most responses affirmed that such resources were meagre or inadequate, and that they had not been increased during the period covered by the study, other than in certain GCC States, where responses indicated that, while financial resources were adequate, there was a lack of human resources that were specialized and qualified in women's issues and needs.

25. Certain national mechanisms outlined the main obstacles to the performance of their duties, most of which were linked to the security situation in Iraq and Palestine: the blockade, killing and destruction make it difficult to work effectively and exacerbate the economic situation, increasing the incidence of poverty amongst women, in non-oil countries.

26. The most significant obstacles to the advancement of women that were identified by national mechanisms include the following:

- (a) Basic obstacles linked to the structure and composition of the mechanism, including the lack of capacities, trained staff, data and statistics;
- (b) The novelty of work on women's issues and lack of sufficient expertise to carry out the mandate of the mechanism;
- (c) The multiplicity of parties working on women's issues, and lack of proper coordination between them;
- (d) Mechanisms are not provided with adequate facilities for achieving their goals, or adequate funds to carry out their duties;
- (e) The dearth of expertise in gender mainstreaming and failure to follow up and coordinate.

27. Further obstacles are linked to the capacity of society to change and interact with Government undertakings, regional and international developments and requirements for building a modern society; the prevailing view of women in society as a second-class citizen; women's ignorance of their constitutional and legal rights; the gap between the speed at which new legislation is promulgated and its practical implementation in daily life; and the cultural and social legacy that limits women's participation in public life.

28. Needs may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Institutional development of the ministry that encourages women to participate effectively;
- (b) Courses to strengthen the technical capacity of task forces in the principal national mechanisms and related subcommittees;
- (c) National mechanisms must be considered as the Government body responsible for following up women's issues;
- (d) National strategies for the advancement of women must be strengthened, developed and activated;
- (e) The link between ministries must be activated in order to support Government policies related to gender issues in mainstream policies and programmes;
- (f) National staff in the various State institutions must be trained in gender mainstreaming;
- (g) Sufficient human and material resources must be assured;
- (h) Proposals should be put forward as to how to amend certain legal texts that discriminate against women and obstruct their advancement;
- (i) Courses and workshops that aim to raise community awareness of the important role of women must continue to be provided;
- (j) Gender-disaggregated data and statistics are needed;

(k) Modern studies and research must be prepared in all fields related to women;

(l) Financial and technical support must be provided for the implementation of programmes aiming to spread a culture of women's rights in decision-making circles, amongst lawyers and in public opinion. A mechanism must be found for monitoring discrimination against women and taking the steps necessary to eliminate it. The policies necessary for the advancement of women must be adopted;

(m) A media, awareness and communication strategy must be formulated in order to assist the mechanism to establish a culture of women's rights and bring up children with a mentality of equal opportunity and gender equality;

(n) Support must be provided for the interchange of experiences and expertise with civil society institutions and international organizations;

(o) The work of NGOs must be encouraged and it must be possible for national mechanisms to coordinate with them.

29. Nevertheless, the countries of the region have, by means of bodies concerned with the advancement of women, made significant progress in recent years, and appear convinced of the need for national mechanisms to have a structure and strategies, and effective methodologies and tools to ensure they are able to continue to carry out their duties. Egypt, for example, has appointed a departmental secretary whose duties include dealing with and verifying women's complaints relating to discrimination in the workplace or in the law and domestic violence, in order to monitor progress made in respect of gender equality and verify violations. Egypt has also involved the various ministries in addressing women's issues, beginning with identifying the problem and finding ways of resolving it.

30. The Women's National Committee of Yemen affirms that it has made implementation of CEDAW one of its most important goals in the 2003-2005 national strategy for the development of women/gender and the updated strategy for 2006-2015. The Committee has endeavoured to mainstream components of that strategy into the general plan for development and the alleviation of poverty for 2006-2010, and to disseminate respect for gender issues in general development programmes and projects. It has also attempted to raise the issue of the way in which public and sectoral budgets respond to the need for gender equality, and to target women through such special programmes as the programme for the political empowerment of women and a violence against women programme, while continuing to reform the legal and legislative systems in order to ensure all women's rights and implement programmes that support women's issues, with a view to changing positions and points of view that oppose women's issues and promote trends that support and strengthen women's roles in public and private life.²

B. NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS

31. The information that appears in the questionnaire indicates that women-related mechanisms in Arab countries have, since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, to varying degrees, been working hard to review national laws and legislation that are prejudicial to women's rights or discriminate against women, and to bring those laws into line with the international instruments to which certain Governments are a party. Women's mechanisms, particularly in those countries that are parties to CEDAW, are endeavouring to amend existing or promulgate new legislation. Many such mechanisms noted that they have reviewed the national legislation that impacts on the status of women, while others affirmed that they have made amendments to certain parts of legislation in order to bring them into line with developments in the status of women and the requirements of international agreements and resolutions. Such legislation includes laws on labour, civil service, political representation and the right of women to stand for election, personal status and family law.

² Sixth national report on implementation of CEDAW, 2006.

32. Certain countries, namely, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar and Yemen (2006) have taken action to amend laws on labour, civil service, social security and retirement and pensions. Qatar amended its law on retirement and pensions to ensure that the children of Qatari women are, in the event of their deaths or retirement, treated in the same way as those of Qatari men. In 2003, the United Arab Emirates amended its law on maternity leave, while Oman made amendments in 2003 and 2004. From the economic point of view, Egypt and Jordan amended entry taxes and removed differences between men and women in respect of limits on tax exemptions.

33. Many countries state that they have amended their family and personal status laws. Those countries include Jordan and Morocco, where temporary new personal status laws have been promulgated; Qatar, where there was previously no written law and where sharia law of the Hanbali school was applied, which in 2006 formulated a law guaranteeing judgement in family courts; Algeria which in 2005 specified the basic elements of marriage and the equal rights and responsibilities of both partners; and Egypt, which in 2004 established a family security fund and adopted a law on the establishment of a family court. In 2005, the United Arab Emirates promulgated a family law, and in the same year, Tunisia and Yemen made amendments. Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria, in 2003, 2004 and 2005 respectively, amended their nationality laws, giving mothers the right to transfer their nationality to their children. Other countries have amended their penal codes: Jordan in 2001, Algeria in 2004 and 2006, Tunisia and Egypt in 2004, through the family court, and Bahrain in 2005, through measures involving the sharia courts.

34. In May 2005 the Government of Kuwait amended the law governing elections to the parliament and municipal councils, thereby giving women the right to political representation. Palestine and Iraq made amendments to laws governing municipal and parliamentary elections. In 2004, Algeria and Tunisia became the first countries in the Arab world to promulgate laws banning sexual harassment, which carries the same penalty as sexual violence, and mainstreamed the concept in the legislative system. Both Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic announced the preparation of a series of draft laws, which have yet to be submitted to the relevant bodies.

35. The most significant laws that remain in need of amendment because of their positive impact on the lives of women and the family in general are the laws of personal status and nationality. They require constant updating as appropriate to the status of women in all sectors and, in particular, the changes that are taking place in the relationships between and roles of men and women. It is clear that there are many challenges and obstacles in the field of legislation. An attentive and objective reading of the amendments that have been made to existing laws and other, updated laws, makes it clear that no perceptible change has been made to the core of the basic laws that would, if amended, guarantee equal rights for citizens of both sexes and lay the foundation for complete citizenship.

36. As of June 2006, 18 of the 22 Arab countries had signed or ratified CEDAW. Those which have not yet done so are Palestine, Qatar, Somalia and the Sudan. However, 11 of the 18 countries have made reservations to certain articles; and some have noted that they make no commitment to implement any article of the Convention that is inconsistent with sharia law.

37. In the main, Arab countries have made reservations to articles 2, 9, 15 and 16. Article 2 provides that States Parties shall embody the principle of the equality of men and women in their national constitutions and ensure, through law and other appropriate means, the practical realization of this principle. Article 9 concerns women's right to acquire, change or retain their nationality and provides that women shall have equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children. Article 15 provides that women shall be accorded equality with men before the law; equal rights to conclude contracts and to administer property and shall be treated equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals. Nearly all Arab countries registered reservations to Article 16, which concerns family law, saying that the article is not consistent with the Islamic sharia.

38. Under the 1969 Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties and Article 28 of CEDAW, a reservation incompatible with the object and purpose of a treaty shall not be permitted. At one of its general reviews, the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women stated that Article 2, regarding State undertakings with respect to the Convention, and Article 16, concerning equality in marriage and family life, were two of the most basic articles of the instrument, any reservation in respect of which

would constitute a violation of the object and purpose of the Convention. However, that Committee and other United Nations human rights treaty bodies have no authority on which to rule the illegality of a specific reservation: that is the preserve of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). No country has to date sought the opinion of ICJ as to the legality of a reservation. It is therefore considered preferable that reservations should be withdrawn and that Arab countries be urged to become parties to both the letter and the spirit of the Convention.

39. It should be noted here that the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya is the only country to have become a party to the optional protocol, which permits victims of discrimination on the basis of gender to take a complaint to the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. It should also be noted that neither Palestine nor Qatar have yet signed the Convention.

40. Many countries have submitted periodic reports to the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Those countries are the following: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mauritania, Morocco, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have not yet submitted any report. Oman is expected to submit its first report in 2007.

41. Arab States Parties to CEDAW, with the exception of Bahrain, Iraq and Jordan, have noted that they are currently reviewing reservations. Djibouti and Yemen have affirmed that they have no reservations to the Convention. The United Arab Emirates states that it is preparing its first report: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has formed a committee comprising representatives of several pertinent ministries and NGOs to review State reservations and take action to withdraw those reservations when no conflict with the sharia is involved. The Syrian Arab Republic states that seminars are to be convened and jurisprudential studies prepared on the extent to which the Convention is compatible with the sharia, and that a memorandum will be prepared in that regard and submitted to the Head of the Cabinet, with a view to withdrawing most of the reservations. Action will be taken in cooperation with the Union of Lawyers to eliminate discrimination against women throughout the country. Oman states that it has recently become a party to the Convention and formed a committee to follow up implementation of its articles, one of the duties of which will be to study and review reservations. Kuwait says that it has withdrawn its reservation to Article 7, paragraph (a) after coordination between the relevant parties in the ministries of foreign affairs, justice, interior and fatwa and Islamic legislation. Egypt states that reservations will be reviewed by a committee of experts established by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that comprises all the relevant parties, including the National Council for Women. Algeria states that, on International Women's Day in March 2004, the President of the Republic asked the Government to reconsider its reservations. There is a positive indication that the reservations will be withdrawn, in that the family and nationality laws have been revised, and the issue has become a procedural rather than a substantive matter. Tunisia states that the withdrawal of reservations will be addressed within the legislative framework.

42. Some countries affirm that they have reviewed the reservations that they formulated to CEDAW with a view to withdrawing them. Discussions have been opened but no reservations have yet been withdrawn. The outcome of the questionnaire also indicates that programmes have been put in place to acquaint women with their rights. The national mechanism and NGOs are jointly organizing round tables and seminars to increase women's awareness of their legal rights, participating in regional and international conferences and establishing special rights organizations. In Jordan, for example, the Arab Women's Solidarity Association has been established, along with the Humanitarian Forum, the Mizan Law Group for Human Rights and the Arab Women's Union. That Union comprises women's committees in addition to the existing institutions. Preparations are under way for the convening of seminars in order to discuss rights-related issues with members of the Council of Deputies and prepare jurisprudential studies on the extent to which the Convention and the sharia are in conformity, with the understanding that reservations should be withdrawn.

C. THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN: APPOINTMENT TO HIGH ADMINISTRATIVE AND DECISION-MAKING POSITIONS

43. Most Governments say that specific goals and arrangements have been adopted by the State in order to perceptibly increase the number of women in administrative positions and achieve more equitable representation between men and women in Government positions and high public administrative offices,

with the emphasis on the lack of discrimination. However, statistics continue to show that there are discrepancies. It is well known that a very small number of women, that cannot begin to be compared with men, occupy high administrative positions. One State claims that the early retirement of women sometimes prevents their professional development and appointment to such posts, quite apart from the obstacles imposed by tradition. Women in various positions must begin to demand their right to be selected for and appointed to high public administration positions.

44. It appears from the questionnaire that some countries have formulated a national strategy for the advancement of women, and Bahrain and Egypt have taken measures to increase the number of women in leading positions: as the result of a ministerial decree, steps have been taken to appoint women to ministries and Government departments. In Kuwait, there is no difference between the sexes with respect to appointment and all legal provisions are applied without discrimination.

45. The principle of equality has been adopted in the competitions that are organized in Lebanon to fill vacancies in Government offices. The number of women ministers has risen, the highest number being in Iraq, where they constitute 31 per cent of the total.

46. Nevertheless, Arab women in decision-making positions continue to be marginalized because there is no effective political commitment amongst decision makers to reduce the gap between men and women in political life and decision-making positions, and because women are, in some cases, insufficiently aware of their rights and take no action to acquire them. The cultural and social inheritance of the community has a negative impact on women when it comes to leadership positions, albeit that impact has not been proved by studies. Furthermore, the lack of special arrangements to support women in administrative positions and women's retirement age, which is early in most cases, contribute to the decrease in the number of women, as is shown in the questionnaire. Given that some 95 per cent of administrative positions are filled by men between the age of 35 and 50, it may be deduced that women's early retirement age is not the obstacle to their appointment to decision-making positions. Some believe that the lack of initiative of women in various positions in demanding their right to be selected for and appointed to high public administration positions is another reason for the low number of women in such positions.

D. THE POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

47. The most outstanding legislative development linked to political representation during this period was the change that took place in Kuwait in 2005, acknowledging the political rights of women. Some countries, including Iraq and Palestine, have adopted a quota system for women in councils of deputies. The percentage varies, but in no case exceeds the 30 per cent that was specified in the Beijing Platform for Action. In consequence, the number of women in local and parliamentary councils in the two aforementioned countries has risen. In Palestine, the number of women on local councils has risen from 2 to 19 per cent, while after the elections in Iraq in 2006, women constituted 25 per cent of all members of parliament. National committees and women's NGOs have adopted programmes to train women candidates, with support from the European Union and regional Arab and international organizations. In cooperation with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), a programme has been put in place to support women members of parliament. To varying degrees, NGOs take part in the activities that are organized by national committees with a view to developing the political status of women. While female ministers have been appointed to most cabinets, there are usually no more than one or two.

48. In several countries, standing election committees have been set up for the purpose of raising awareness and increasing knowledge; promoting political participation; and monitoring and evaluating the election process. However, training programmes for women candidates and public awareness are insufficient, circumstantial and temporary, only being organized immediately before an election, while the process of training and awareness-raising should be permanent and on-going and include the greatest possible number of candidates. Countries affirm that there are training programmes for female candidates, which are supported by NGOs.

49. During the period covered by the study, women were elected to the state council in Oman and an official institution was set up to promote women's right to participate in political life, namely, the

Directorate General of Woman and Child Affairs. Women's unions contributed to the process of raising awareness, with a view to increasing women's involvement in elections. In Egypt, the number of women in leadership positions increased from 15 per cent in 1996 to 23 per cent in 2003. A woman judge was appointed for the first time, and the National Council for Women established the Center for the Political Empowerment of Women. Nevertheless, the number of women who put themselves forward for selection as candidates in Egypt remains very low, as it does in Oman and every other country in the region, because of the prevailing ideas and beliefs that continue to expect that political activity should be restricted to men. That is particularly the case in rural areas, where the population is high.

50. With respect to the practical arrangements for increasing women's political participation, replies indicated, for example, that committees had been established for raising awareness of and providing education in rights and responsibilities, and for acquiring skills related to electoral work and the monitoring and evaluation of elections. Palestine has set aside two seats for women on local councils, regardless of the number of persons on the council. It has also established a quota for women in legislative elections: each electoral list must include one woman in the first three names, one woman in the next four names and one woman in the following five names. The quota for women in certain parliaments and municipalities remains below the level required to have an impact on the parliament.

E. THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

51. The Beijing Platform for Action addressed issues relating to the strengthening of women's economic rights, the most serious challenges that women face and the limited opportunities that are available to them as the result of globalization, and called for the focus to be placed on finding solutions to the impact of globalization on the economic position of women and the role of women in decision-making at the overall economic level.

52. The 2003-2005 World Summit on the Information Society and related Plan of Action promoted the principle of equality between the sexes and off-site employment, in order to increase the employment opportunities available to women. Such globalization-related effects as changing patterns of employment and production, accelerated technological innovation and the overall economic policy that includes structural reorganization and privatization, present both challenges and opportunities. Women suffer from increasing poverty and unemployment, deteriorating working conditions and social guarantees and lack of public expenditure, and could benefit from new employment opportunities, earnings and commercial markets. However, there are only a small number of women who have the education and skills to benefit from those opportunities.

53. The positions of Arab countries vary with respect to according due importance to women's economic empowerment. Many countries have decided that there is no call for that empowerment, on the grounds that the issue falls within the remit of the private sector. That is particularly the case in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. It should be noted here that the huge increase in female education in Saudi Arabia over the past three decades has led to a similar increase in women's participation in fields of employment outside the home and their performance of non-traditional roles.

54. Some of the positive replies refer to the commitment to achieve equality of opportunity and increase the participation of women in the workforce by diversifying university courses and linking education to employment, in order to avoid the increase in the number of graduates in fields that are not required by the labour market. In Qatar, for example, the State is making efforts through the pertinent mechanisms to appoint Qatari women to posts that fit their qualifications, and women are encouraged to join the training programmes necessary in order to improve their skills and competitive capacities in the labour market. Special incubators for women have been established for women in the field of investment.

F. A GENDER-DISAGGREGATED DATABASE

55. The production and dissemination of gender-disaggregated data is considered one of the main goals of national mechanisms for the advancement of women. ESCWA asks the Governments of member countries to provide national statistical bodies with the financial and institutional support necessary for that purpose. The

provision of such data is essential in order to monitor progress in the status of women and to follow up implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Government replies to the questionnaire acknowledge that deficiency and note that many national reports lack gender-disaggregated statistics. The recommendations of the Beirut Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals have underlined the importance of gender-disaggregated indicators and data.

56. In reply to the questions, a group of countries stressed that they were exerting continual efforts to develop gender-disaggregated databases, covering all the sectors mentioned, namely, employment, education, health, agriculture, industry, political participation and information technology (IT). Some countries, including Jordan, added that their efforts to develop statistics were being carried out in cooperation with the Department of Statistics, UNIFEM and ESCWA, as part of a programme to develop statistics in the region. Reference was made to the difficulty of obtaining statistics on the unofficial sector. The United Arab Emirates noted the establishment of a women's studies and research department within the General Women's Union. The Union is in the process of establishing a sophisticated database that will connect the Union with all the relevant information-gathering institutions. The Syrian Arab Republic stated that there was a lack of information and indicators on the mental health of women, and no gender-disaggregated statistics on the industrial and IT sectors, and a severe lack of data on women in the labour market.

57. Oman affirms that the biggest challenge is the lack of a mechanism to coordinate between parties in obtaining data. Palestine states that gender-disaggregated statistical data do exist; it is difficult to disseminate the data because adequate resources are not available for that purpose. Qatar also states that gender-disaggregated statistical data are available from the Planning Council and that the Supreme Council for the Family has a statistical observatory that cooperates with the Planning Council in issuing a biennial report that gives a statistical picture of women and men in Qatar. The first report was published in 2004 and the second in 2006. One of the major challenges is in obtaining statistics related to such issues as violence against women.

58. Kuwait acknowledges difficulties in gathering data and the need to intensify endeavours in that respect. Lebanon notes that it has a project for gathering data. Egypt refers to the efforts exerted with respect to the signature of a cooperation protocol with the Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics in order to develop the collection of data; and to the establishment of a geographical data systems unit for data on women, education, health, illiteracy, political participation, national identification number and registration in electoral registers. An electronic archives system has been set up in order to store files and data and for analysis of the system. Some 12,000 files and 500 pictures have been entered, in addition to voice and video recordings. An Internet statistics site has also been set up. Yemen says that work to improve and develop a database is on-going. Algeria reports that it has established a database in the National Statistical Department that amounts to an observation or monitoring system on the status of women. In 2004, a technical committee was established with responsibility for formulating a compact media system and database to follow up the economic and social status of children and women. The ministry responsible for the family and women's issues also established a fact bank on women and children and a data bank on women that will be regularly updated.

59. All countries with the exception of Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, Qatar and Yemen state that they have no early warning system on the status of women. In Qatar, the Supreme Council for the Family is responsible for monitoring the situation of women in all fields, while the Qatari Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children monitors violence in society against women and children. In Egypt, studies are being prepared and seminars and courses are being arranged that are considered a mechanism for monitoring the status of women. In Yemen the periodic and annual reports on the status of women, discussions between those involved and the annual national conference, in addition to the various measures that have been taken and such activities as demonstrations and marches, are considered aspects of and stages in an early warning system on the situation of women. In Tunisia, an observatory on the status of women has been set up in the Centre for Research, Studies, Documentation and Information on Women, and gender issues have been mainstreamed in the statistical system. Plans have been adopted and funding allocated, and a budget for gender issues is being prepared, all of which are considered part of an early warning system on the status of women. In Algeria, a national committee for the family and women has been established within the Ministry of Women and Family Issues, which encompasses all ministerial sectors institutions, consultative councils,

unions, the media and civil society organizations, thereby constituting an early warning system on the situation of women.

G. WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

60. Seven of the 15 countries that responded to the questionnaire said that they had a media strategy that aimed to encourage presentation of a sophisticated, unстереotypical picture of women, eradicate belittling views of women and focus on women's many roles in the social, economic and political fields, as well as promoting women's participation in decision-making at the highest level of the media. Those seven countries are Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Most countries said that women were poorly represented in high positions in all forms of the media. There also appear to be activities and media programmes that aim to raise women's awareness of their political rights and make them aware of women's health issues and the importance of eradicating illiteracy.

61. One of the most important measures that have been taken in the field of the media is making men and women working in that field aware of the importance of giving due weight to gender issues when covering the news, and building their capacities to adopt that perspective when drawing up media policies. Bahrain refers to the fact that it is drawing up a code of practice to be respected by all media institutions and ensure that negative images of women are not presented and that stereotypes are changed. It is also working to produce media messages that highlight the role of women as partners in building and advancing society and in decision-making. Countries that responded to the questionnaire affirmed that women should be trained and employed in all forms of the media and a gender balance achieved in media institutions at all administrative and executive levels. Women are well represented in the media in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, and to a lesser extent in Jordan and the Syrian Arab Republic.

62. Success stories include the Arab Women Media Centre, which has its headquarters in Amman, and monitors the experience of women in the media. Under the aegis of the Centre, a number of workshops have been held with a view to publicizing CEDAW through the media and to raising women's awareness of their political rights. In Bahrain, a cooperation agreement was signed in 2006 between the Supreme Council for Women and the Ministry of Information, pursuant to which the Ministry is to prioritize the concerns and goals of the Council when preparing plans, programmes and projects related to the advancement of women; interchange information, expertise, studies and research on women's issues; and the Council will hold training workshops that will help to provide a vivid picture of women. The Council has formed a youth council, one of the priorities of which is to acquaint youth of both sexes with the role of women and to create a generation of leaders who are interested in gender issues and equality. Women's success stories were monitored through a film that portrayed women's achievements in Bahrain in 2005. Bahraini newspapers give prominence to pictures of women who are successful in any field. In Dubai, a club has been established for distinguished journalists, the head of the administrative board of which is a prominent female media personality. The club highlights successful women working in the media.

63. The media broadcast programmes to raise awareness of such issues related to the advancement of women as the following:

- (a) The right of women to participate in politics and decision-making;
- (b) The elimination of all forms of discrimination against women;
- (c) The elimination of customs and practices that impede the advancement of women;
- (d) The preparation of programmes on awareness of gender equality and the provision of equal opportunities;
- (e) The preparation of awareness programmes in newspapers on women's political participation;
- (f) The organization of interviews and investigations and release of reports on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March each year.

64. It is clear from the foregoing that there has been improvement with respect to the political representation of women in some Arab countries, either through appointments to ministries and Government departments or through the exercise of the right to stand for election and vote in municipal council and parliamentary elections. The results achieved vary from one country to another.

65. A sustained improvement may be noted in the number of girls enrolled in basic and secondary education and in the health of women, as regards maternal mortality rates and the life expectancy of women as compared with that of men. Female illiteracy has also fallen. Arab women are more visible in the media and coverage of social issues has improved. However, questionnaire responses indicate that there has been little noticeable improvement in women's economic, technological and political role. The impact of the efforts exerted with a view to increasing women's participation in the labour market and economic activity remains very limited at the national level. It is also clear that there has been little progress in implementing CEDAW because of the reservations that render accession to that Convention meaningless.

66. The need remains for the Beijing Platform for Action and national strategies for the advancement of women to be pursued, and for a mechanism to be devised for follow-up of implementation at the regional level. There must be agreement at the Arab level as to schedules for implementation of the most urgent aspects of women's empowerment in the Arab region. The role of national mechanisms for women's issues must continue to be strengthened, and the necessary financial and human resources to promote the empowerment of women must be provided. Additional efforts must be exerted to raise awareness of gender issues in women's work strategies and link those issues to national policies.