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Expert Group Meeting Women and Economic Empowerment in the Arab Transitions

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Meeting Report

Following the revolution in Tunisia, the rate of unemployment amongst women increased drastically. When researched, it was found that women who were housewives or engaged in domestic work were no longer describing themselves as housewives in labour surveys, but were describing themselves as unemployed marking a significant shift in Arab women's claims of their "right to work".

Rabea Naciri

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INTRODUCTION:

The full economic potential of the Arab region, which is rich in human, natural, and capital resources, has yet to be tapped. Arab economies are plagued by low productivity, high unemployment, and low competitiveness, resulting in growing poverty and inequalities for women and men alike. The changes sweeping the Arab world are clear evidence that the region needs a new development model that is inclusive, sustainable and firmly rooted in social justice. Arab citizens are calling for a new “social contract” that addresses growing inequalities and is grounded in the universal principles of political, economic and social rights.

A major aspect of inequality in the region is that of gender inequality. The region remains the lowest in the world for female economic participation. Labour force participation rates for men average 76 per cent in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while they are 27 per cent for women (versus 74 per cent and 56 per cent respectively for the rest of the world).¹ The world of work in Arab states is not attractive to women, partly due to social values that assign women the primary role of caring for the family, and more importantly due to the failure of policies to provide women with opportunities and incentives to enter the labour market. Laws, regulations, and economic and fiscal policies pose obstacles to realizing Arab women’s economic rights. Ignoring Arab women’s vast economic contribution and potential and adopting exclusionary and ineffective policies have been among the factors that have constrained the realization of the potential of the Arab region.

New policy responses to barriers to women’s economic participation are urgently needed to address past failures and to enable women as well as men to fulfil their rights to decent work and development. At this critical stage of transition, economic reforms should be grounded in principles of human rights, social justice, gender equality and good governance. Economic policies should contribute effectively to increasing women’s economic participation, increasing their opportunities in new and productive economic sectors, and securing social protection. Governments, the private sector, trade unions and civil society must join hands in order to achieve sustainable human development within a framework of accountability.

There are concerns that Arab countries in transition are not addressing women’s rights adequately. In these countries, gender equality advocates have pointed to threats of regression in constitutions, nationality law, the penal code, family law, and pension regulations among others, due to increasing social conservatism and economic difficulties. In addition, a new systematized wave of gender-based violence in the region is threatening women’s ability to voice their demands and claim their rights. The current debates on gender equality and the role of women in society are a stark reminder that women’s rights are constantly being renegotiated. Every effort must be made to ensure that governments in countries in transition effectively address gender gaps and protect hard-won gains with regard to women’s rights if the aspirations of the uprisings for more equal, inclusive and productive societies are to be achieved.

¹ ILO-UNDP. *Rethinking Economic Growth: Towards Productive and Inclusive Arab Societies*. (Beirut). 2012. Pg 21.

ORGANIZATION OF THE MEETING:

Meeting objectives:

As part of the integrated UN Development Group strategy for responding to the popular uprisings across the Arab region, the ILO and the UNDP published a report entitled “Rethinking Economic Growth: Towards Productive and Inclusive Arab Societies”, that focused on identifying the requirements for inclusive development. Data cited in the report showed that the status of Arab women is central to addressing the challenges faced by Arab economies.

In May 2013, the ILO Regional Office for Arab States convened a meeting of a group of regional and international experts to address women’s economic empowerment in the Arab transitions.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- a. Provide a solid analysis of past successes and current challenges to the realization of a gender inclusive and productive development framework in the Arab world;
- b. Identify the key policy making elements and systems of governance that would effectively address current challenges, including the threats of regression in Arab women’s economic and social rights, based on good practices from the region and beyond;
- c. Identify strategies for programming and policy advocacy to secure and advance Arab women’s economic rights in the context of the transitions in the region.

Meeting format and themes:

The expert group meeting was convened over two days to facilitate the exchange of ideas and in-depth discussions. It encouraged an open exchange of experiences through dynamic interaction structured around three main themes:

- a) Economic justice: To what extent have past policies addressed women’s economic and social rights and where should future investment be made?
- b) Social rights: What approaches to entitlements and protection are needed in times of crises and transition to lay the basis for sound development?
- c) Governance: What systems can ensure gender responsive, productive and inclusive Arab societies?

The meeting was concluded with a round table discussion reflecting on regional and country entry points to promote progressive equitable socioeconomic strategies.

Participants:

Participants included approximately 45 key experts from governments, employers’ and workers’ organizations, Arab and international political leaders, policymakers and development practitioners, networks of civil society organizations, youth, the media and academia (see the full list at http://www.ilo.org/beirut/events/WCMS_214372/lang--en/index.htm).

Documentation:

Background documentation was provided to facilitate discussion of the issues and challenges and to suggest ways forward. Related documents and presentations prepared for the meeting are available in English and Arabic on the ILO website:

http://www.ilo.org/beirut/events/WCMS_213397/lang--en/index.htm

KEY MESSAGES:

- a. Social justice, with its intrinsic focus on equality, was one of the key demands of the Arab uprisings. Arab women were at the forefront of the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, and the calls for reform in Jordan and Morocco, but the discourse of key actors (policy makers, political parties, civil society and labour unions) for **a new agenda of social justice has not reflected women's rights and gender equality**.
- b. One of the key failures of past policies is that of **building a productive economy** and generating adequate employment. Data on women's low labour force participation in the region reveal **gender-specific biases that have led to a greater impact of economic failures on women**, leading to "crises" of women's economic participation. Arab women are concentrated in poorer economic sectors (namely agriculture), and are increasingly found in vulnerable employment (the informal economy, unpaid work, or vulnerable private sector jobs).
- c. Women's low economic participation can be attributed to policy biases that are based on the assumption of the male breadwinner. The **dearth of public services and labour rights that recognize women's roles as workers and as mothers** have presented barriers to the exercise of Arab women's right to work, as have poorly designed policies of social protection, maternity leave, wages and social services that do not provide incentives for women's entry and retention in the labour market.
- d. Increasing women's participation in the labour force requires recognition of **Arab women's "right to work"** and thus complying with the obligation to remove all barriers to their realization of this right. The undervaluing of women's work is reflected in large pay gaps across the region.
- e. **Women's economic empowerment is also a strategic avenue for inclusive and effective growth**. Gender inequality in the region is not only a symptom of discriminatory policy failures but it is also a key constraint for recovery in all stages of the economic cycle. There is a need to develop and expand evidence-based economic arguments showing how the fulfilment of women's rights can help to replenish depleted pension funds and drive growth and poverty reduction strategies.
- f. There are **grave concerns over the regressive discourse around women's economic, social and political rights** and international human rights instruments – in particular the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) - that have emerged since the Arab uprisings. The tension between human rights values and conservative values related to women's human rights should be challenged based on the international law obligations undertaken by the countries concerned.
- g. The political, economic and social policies adopted during the Arab uprisings need to demonstrate a new vision for inclusive economic and political systems that are in line with demands for change. The priorities of the democratically elected governments

should address the existing challenges of **economic failure, widening inequalities, and the weaknesses of institutions of good governance and rule of law in a holistic manner.**

- h. The **economic challenge** needs to ensure that prescriptions for economic transition shift away from neoliberal economic approaches that do not meet the demands for social justice and gender equality and have failed to establish productive economies. The adoption of austerity measures, tightening of social protection, lack of investment in productive growth and lack of innovative approaches to social justice and sustainability are likely to prove detrimental to the efforts to overcoming this challenge. A gender responsive economic policy would:
- Innovatively address barriers to gender biases (beyond projects of micro-enterprises and microcredit, which tend to perpetuate women's exclusion from the labour force and access to economic rights and protection).
 - Institute redistributive policies in public spending and service provision, taxation, and comprehensive social protection, including both maternity and paternity leave.
 - Transform national plans and budgets into instruments for implementing a vision of social justice, productive growth and human rights.
 - Explore valuable lessons from experiences of transition in Chile, Poland, the Asian Tigers, and emerging economies (including Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa known as BRICS).
- i. The **equality challenge** needs to address inequalities due sex, age, people with disabilities, and religious minorities, among others. **Women's economic, political and social rights should be viewed as an integral part of a comprehensive national agenda for equality** and non-discrimination within broader national and political demands. A gender responsive policy agenda to address equality and non-discrimination should secure the following:
- Legislative reforms especially of labour laws and social protection that recognize women's as well as men's contribution to the productive and domestic spheres.
 - Education and dialogue to challenge discriminatory values and social roles.
 - Affirmative action to facilitate inclusion in the economic and political spheres.
 - Inclusive spaces for national dialogue on policies to address these challenges.
- j. The **governance challenge** involves the establishment of the rule of law based on principles of equality and social justice and institutionalized accountability. Democracy goes beyond ballots. Rather, it is about the accountability of elected officials to their citizens. It is about the effectiveness of the government in removing discrimination and eliminating barriers to the exercise of rights of all citizens. A gender responsive policy agenda that is focused on addressing the governance challenge should secure the following:
- An enabling environment for dialogue and participation (freedom of association – freedom of speech) and participatory processes for dialogue and consensus building.
 - Acknowledgement of barriers to women's participation and organization including within trade unions, professional and students associations, civil society and policy making.
 - Scrutiny of public spending, transparency of budgets and public spending, economic agreements and trade partnerships.

- The new key alliance between women’s organizations and ministries of finance requires a change of language (but not of principles) by gender activists as much of the gender discourse is not understood by economists.
- k. Conflict, occupation, political instability and the breakdown of civil security in the Arab uprisings has increased militarization, ethnic divisions and gender-based violence, which presents a serious threat to women and men’s ability to contribute to human and economic development in the region.
- l. **UN agencies have a key role to play** in supporting women’s rights in Arab transitions by promoting strengthened accountability and compliance with human rights instruments, and through their technical assistance to economic policy making and the decent work agenda.

OUTCOMES:

The following activities have been identified for follow up after the meeting:

- The production of two analytical papers on women’s economic empowerment in the Arab transitions:
 - o “Regression or Progress? The Arab uprisings and barriers to equality of economic opportunity” by Nadia Hijab.
 - o “Waiting for the Bloom: Correcting policy barriers against Arab women’s economic rights” by Nisreen Alami.
- A page on the ILO’s website specifically dedicated to the theme “Arab women and economic transitions” which will include documentation from the expert group meeting as well as other resources.
- A series of specialized consultations related to women’s economic empowerment supported by the ILO Regional Office for Arab States in order to fill the knowledge gap on Arab women workers’ rights, and identify linkages aimed at developing innovative and forward looking interventions in support of the new development agenda in the region. These include:
 - o Knowledge on Arab women’s participation in the informal economy as part of the preparations for the International Labour Conference 2014-2015 which will focus on the informal economy, and knowledge of Arab women’s access to social protection as part of the consultations on responsibility of social protection.
 - o Work on maternity protection, extension of social security, advocating for work on micro-credit’s entrepreneurship development at the policy level, work on care, cooperatives, and time use surveys.
- A strengthened focus on ILO country programming in responding to the effects of the transition on women’s labour force participation.
- Increased support to UN coordination efforts with regards to employment generation and economic development.
- Facilitation of cross regional learning on economic transitions and lessons learnt for women’s economic empowerment.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MEETING:

The meeting began with opening remarks by Nada Al-Nashif, the Regional Director of the ILO Regional Office for Arab States and interventions by two guest speakers: H.E. Houria Mashhoor, Minister for Human Rights in Yemen, and H.E. Elena Salgado, Former Deputy Prime Minister of Spain.

Minister Mashhoor's intervention focused on the challenges presented by the transition for Yemeni women and their increased vulnerability to unemployment and insecurity. As many as six million youth were unemployed, and measures to address the problem such as creating 60,000 jobs in the public sector were inadequate and simply caused under-employment. However, she also noted some opportunities to position women's rights on the agenda of democratic processes. She highlighted a number of strategies adopted for the promotion of women's rights in Yemen's transition. One strategy is to mainstream women's priorities within national strategic processes (e.g. national development planning, constitutional reform and budgeting). However, she indicated there were tensions and challenges in pushing forward with this strategy, including combating accusations that it was supported by foreign agendas. A second strategy is to mobilize and organize women as voters and candidates (Yemeni women constitute 56 per cent of voters in the country). Here too problems were faced. For example increased voter registration sometimes meant that women gave their votes to men because they were not aware of their rights. A third strategy is to introduce gender budgeting and investment into the training of cadres at the Ministry of Finance. She also highlighted the importance of representing women's rights in the constitution at this time of transition so as not to miss out on a historic opportunity, encouraging dialogue on women's rights to respond to an increased rejection of concepts of human rights and attacks on CEDAW, and building on successful models for tapping progressive interpretations of Islamic Shari'a.

Ms Salgado shared the experience of Spain during its democratic transition in the 1970s, which focused on a three tiered vision: a) economic growth, b) a broad social welfare policy that was financed by progressive taxation, and c) reform of public institutions. The government adopted a number of policies targeting women which resulted in progress in increasing female labour force participation. These included measures that: responded to women's care burden; assessed the gender impact of austerity measures (on education and health); regulated gender pay gaps and promoted measures for equal sharing of care responsibilities and legal reforms, including formalizing domestic work; financed care for children and the elderly; and the passing of a law on violence against women. These policies and programmes were based on refined data capturing the trends in female labour force participation, especially in relation to their role in the family and the intersection with unemployment, childbearing, male unemployment, and age. Temporary quotas were introduced in the public service and private sector and almost all political parties have introduced real parity. This can be presented as "smart economics" that contribute to significant increases in a country's GDP. The preconditions to women's empowerment included legal, civil, political, and labour rights. Ms Salgado stressed the role of the judiciary in applying gender related laws and the education of law enforcement agents on gender with the support of civil society, the media, trade unions and men. She also mentioned positive actions such as part-time working arrangements. In driving this agenda, women's organizations benefited from building alliances with men.

THEME 1: Economic justice: To what extent have past policies addressed women's economic and social rights and where should future investment be made?

Under this theme, discussions focused on two main topics. First, an assessment of the pro-market development model and economic reforms introduced in the Arab region since the 1980s, and their negative impact on generating sustainable employment and adequate social services and social protection. Secondly, an overview of the barriers to women's economic rights and progress and the challenges women have faced over the past years.

- **Development model: Failing Arab men and women**

The session was moderated by Mr Ziad Abdel Samad, Executive Director of the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND). Presentations by Mr Lahcen Achy from the Carnegie Middle East Centre, Ms Lina Hundaileh, a business woman from Jordan, and Mr Ahmine Chaffir provided an analysis of the economic context in the region and shed light on economic policies and laws adopted in the region over the past three decades.

The presenters identified some key characteristics of past economic models which have contributed to the failures in governance, economic development and social justice. The first of these assumptions was that development is possible in the absence of democracy and participation. The second assumption was that economic growth automatically leads to social and human development. Both assumptions have resulted in a crisis of governance, accountability and equality. Arab models of governance were based on the rentier state model that expanded a corrupt elite. The populist policies of the past were not sustainable. Indeed, the previous social contract based on services in return for political concessions had led to unsustainable levels of indebtedness. Pro-market reforms were not a choice but had been imposed and resulted in crony capitalism. The absence of political space for participation led to frustrations that culminated in the uprisings.

The macroeconomic policy approach had focused on controlling inflation, prioritizing balanced budgets, and forging harmful trade partnerships while remaining completely delinked from the social development agenda. This approach prevented the emergence of a productive, inclusive employment generating economy. Failures in economic management were compounded by policy biases against women and the existence of gender discriminatory laws regulating citizenship rights, property rights and personal status rights. Indeed, a number of countries in the region do not recognize women's property rights. Women in the labour force were more greatly affected than men because they were concentrated in the public sector as well as sectors affected by globalization such as the textile industry and agriculture. Even in countries where there are democratic processes, the factors resulting in women's weak participation remain untackled.

Building on lessons from the past and from other regions, the presenters identified a number of elements that should constitute the basis for the agenda of inclusive economic and development prosperity in the region. These are: 1) a dynamic **role of the state** in managing a process of productive economic growth that is based on a long term vision and holistic approach and that sets concrete targets and a system of generating and redistributing wealth; 2) **economic policies** that encourage diversification, productivity and innovation; 3) distributive policies that ensure economic growth is more attuned to demands for **human rights, gender equality and social**

justice and that cater to youth and excluded groups; 4) policy measures that ensure a **gender responsive labour market** by replicating effective policy options such as fair and equal wages, flexible hours, childcare service provision and maternity leave, among others; 5) strengthening the rule of law and ensuring fair and effective implementation **and regulation of legislation**; 6) strengthening the **gender responsive accountability mechanisms of economic institutions**; 7) securing the **right of association and bargaining for civil society and trade organizations and freedom of expression**.

Discussions also pointed to the need to pay closer attention to the impact of global and regional conditions, including the need for political stability in order to enable the private sector to flourish and to learn from the experiences of BRICS and other economies.

- **Barriers to equality of opportunity for Arab women**

The session was moderated by Ms Asma Khader, Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). Presentations by Ms Nadia Hijab from Development Analysis and Communication Services, Ms Nadia Belhaj Hassine from the International Development Research Centre in Cairo, and Ms Sylvana Lakkis, President of the Lebanese Physical Handicapped Union in Lebanon provided reflections on structural constraints to women's economic empowerment and opportunities and challenges presented by the current transition in the region.

The presenters provided an overview of the progress achieved in a number of Arab countries in the area of legal rights related to citizenship, maternity laws, political participation, labour legislation and in health, education and training. However, in countries where there have been legal reforms, like Jordan, implementation has been limited and uneven. The presenters also looked at opportunities presented by the transitions to amplify women's voices and strengthen their political participation. The presentations also highlighted structural challenges facing Arab women and pointed to the current threat of regressive policies as well as the spread of sexual violence. In particular, political Islam was linking with patriarchal forces against women's rights, and a strong civil society and women's movements in the region were and are needed to prevent regression. In addition, there was and is a need for a new approach: the top down model of promoting women's rights no longer exists. The presentation from Ms Lakkis highlighted the constraints faced by persons with disabilities and the need for policy reform to ensure the introduction of reasonable accommodation measures in the labour market to unleash the productivity of this excluded segment of the labour force and realize their right to work. An integrated society is not only integrated by gender, age or culture: people living with disabilities must also be integrated into society. This is a question of economics, and not just rights.

Discussions focused on regressive debates around women's rights that have emerged during the post-revolutionary period. Participants expressed concern regarding attempts to delegitimize international conventions on women's human rights, as was the case during the debates around constitutional reform in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. In some cases, conservative forces have succeeded in reversing some gains in the area of women's rights. However, attempts to lower the age of marriage in Egypt and Morocco were strongly opposed and did not succeed, an indication of the strength of women's and human rights movements and increased social awareness, including among men. Some participants argued for an alliance with moderate

Islamists to push the cause of women's rights, giving female genital mutilation as an example of an area where successful alliances had occasionally been forged. It is also important to show the diversity of Islamic *Shari'a* across the Arab region and beyond. Others noted that in an age of waning dictatorships it should be possible to make use of legal and other tools available in the quest for rights.

THEME 2: Social rights: What approaches to entitlements and protection are needed in times of crises and transition to lay the basis for sound development?

There is growing demand for jobs amongst Arab women especially young women, but Arab labour markets have failed to provide them with opportunities for formal employment. Women are increasingly reverting to informal employment under vulnerable conditions. In addition, the lack of recognition of women's care burden results in structural barriers that limit women's ability to access labour market opportunities in the formal sector. Policies of social protection, maternity leave, wages, and social services are not designed to provide incentives for women's entry and retention in the labour market and in many cases they are designed to leave them out. The discussions of this issue focused on two sub themes: women in the informal economy and the provision of social care and services.

- **Informality, gender equality and workers' rights**

The session was moderated by Ms Magda Sanousi, Country Director for Oxfam Lebanon. Presentations by Ms Elsa Ramos-Carbone, a workers' activist from the Philippines, Ms Rabea Naciri, from the Democratic Association of Moroccan Women, and Basma Al-Battat from the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions, provided an analysis of challenges facing women's employment in the informal economy and in the formal labour market.

The presenters noted that there is no causal relationship between women's education in the Arab world and their rate of contributions to the formal or informal labour market. They highlighted the trend of increased concentration of Arab women in the informal economy under dire conditions with no labour rights or social protection. The presenters emphasized that informality is not the solution for high unemployment rates in the region neither for women nor men. The low quality of jobs in the informal economy is just one of the challenges of informality. The informal economy does not contribute to revenues and therefore restricts the ability of governments to generate the necessary revenue levels to meet its social protection responsibilities. The informal economy also distorts wages in the formal labour market. Therefore, what is required is a structural solution that seeks to generate the inclusive, productive development state, and formalize the informal economy.

The speakers cited examples from the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Morocco, Tunisia, Asia and Latin America, and identified the following key priorities to guarantee women's protection in the informal economy:

- Ensure that policy and legislative reform is geared towards securing the social protection and empowerment of women working in the informal economy. Good practices in guaranteeing the rights of informal workers from India (laws on the informal economy)

and Latin America provide useful examples of social protection programmes that empower women in the informal economy.

- Invest in making available refined research, analysis and data collection that captures Arab women's role in the informal economy, and that can be used to design interventions that respond to realities faced by particular groups of women such as domestic workers, street vendors, and women working in the informal economy in the context of the Israeli occupation.
- Support the efforts of women working in the informal economy to organize including forming trade unions and campaigning around specific demands.
- Strengthen representation of informal women workers in trade unions.
- Capitalize on international conventions around the rights of informal workers such as ILO Convention 189 on the rights of domestic workers by campaigning for ratification of those conventions and their use in national legislative reforms.

Discussions focused on the need to frame the debate about women in the informal economy within the larger discussion of “**the right to work**”. Ms Naciri highlighted the need to scrutinize political discourse around Arab women's work. Arab women's exclusion from the workforce is due to the continued emphasis on the role of women as wives and mothers as their primary role. This work is not even considered as “work” in official data. She cited examples from labour surveys that equate women's household work with male unemployment. She also referred to a number of countries where the man is considered the main breadwinner, even in instances where women are the ones who are providing for the family. Polls show wide acceptance of women's work among women and men – but primarily if the family needs it. Moreover, almost the same percentage of women agrees with men that the priority for work should be for men. Some women do not want change because their right to maintenance or inheritance might be affected.

When Arab women do find employment opportunities in the labour market, the absence of support services, social protection and social benefits present women with indecent conditions. Recent time use surveys in Morocco indicate that women working in the labour market spend almost the same amount of time on housework as women with no jobs, thus pointing to the double burden borne by working women which often results in qualified women leaving the labour force.

- **Unmet social care and service provisions constraining Arab women's economic participation**

The session was moderated by Ms Farida El-Allaghi, President of the Libyan Forum for Civil Society. Presentations by Ms Lina Abu Habib, Director of the Collective for Research and Training on Development-Action in Lebanon (CRTDA), Ms Saidh Draoui Mahfoudh from the University of Tunis, and Ms Mervant Tashkandi, from the Ministry of Labour in Saudi Arabia provided a reflection on the aspired role of the state in promoting women's economic rights. The discussions in fact went beyond the theme of the session.

The presenters elaborated on the fact that Arab governments have in the past defined the state's obligation to provide citizens with public services in a narrow manner. Systems for service

provision have been based on multiple layers of gender-based discrimination, not only because they are based on the male breadwinner assumption, but also because they do not include services that respond to women's care work. With the majority of women looking for jobs falling within the childbearing age, the absence of social services that cater for the burden of care work born by women points to a key cause of women's low labour force participation. In most non-oil producing Arab countries, public service provision was restricted to services related to health and education. Rarely did the state meet its obligation for a model of social service provision that is based on principles of equality and non-discrimination. Examples from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are somewhat different. In Saudi Arabia, the government introduced a range of policies, services and social security programmes within the public sector in order to increase women's labour force participation. These measures included campaigns to change the perception of women's work, and the provision of "unemployment benefit" (women constitute more than 80 per cent of beneficiaries of the National Unemployment Fund), social services that facilitate women's work, flexible jobs and maternity rights, in addition to support for programmes that cater to women's needs such as transportation and childcare services. It was noted in the discussion that generous welfare provisions can be a disincentive to women's work. It was also noted that some childcare solutions throughout the region created situations where others' rights were compromised, e.g. national and migrant domestic workers.

The presenters pointed to a weakness in the discourse on social justice that was prevalent during the revolutions of 2011. While the revolutions witnessed the unprecedented mobilization of workers on salaries and the significant visible presence of women, post-revolutionary discourse was missing references to women's economic rights and the rights of working women. The demands of the Arab uprisings and the labour movements were not specific on women's rights. High unemployment amongst men in the post-revolutionary period pushed women's demands for jobs, pay equity, and benefits into second place. There is yet to emerge a new development agenda that is inclusive of women's economic rights in the region.

The presenters noted the concern of an erosion of gains in women's rights, many of them achieved as a result of feminist activism under previous dictatorships. Participants referred to recent legal setbacks in the constitutional reform in Egypt, including calls to pull out of CEDAW. They warned of the negative impact of the current political discourse on women's rights in the region on women's already low labour force participation. They emphasized that democracy should be about instituting rule of law that is based on human rights standards. Cultural specificity cannot be used as an excuse to veil discrimination and human rights abuses against women.

The presenters also made a number of recommendations to international development agencies, urging that they increase their support to civil society organizations (CSOs) and especially urging that they strengthen coherence and coordination between bilateral and international organizations and International Financial Institutions (IFIs). They also called on development agencies to shift away from the "hit and run" support towards providing long-term, policy-focused capacity development. The session concluded with an urgent call for "new measures", "different instruments" and "smarter spending" where concepts of equality, right to work and social protection are reframed to be truly inclusive of men and women in order to achieve the development goals of the region and realize women's economic rights.

THEME 3: Governance and policy making: What systems would ensure gender responsive, productive and inclusive Arab societies?

Current transitions in the region have opened the door for public sector and budget reforms to address good governance challenges in economic policy making and institutional capacity gaps to facilitate gender responsive implementation, monitoring and regulation.

- **Gender responsive planning and budgeting and accountability in economic policies**

The session was moderated by Ms Jane Hodges, Director of the ILO Bureau for Gender Equality. Presentations by Ms Nisreen Alami from Jordan, Mr Mohammad Chafiki, from the Ministry of Economy and Finance in Morocco, and Ms Ewa Ruminska-Zimny, Professor of Economics at the Warsaw School of Economics Poland provided an elaboration on the significance of macroeconomic policies and budgets to address policy biases. They shared the view that policy biases have resulted in economic failure, and at the same time deepened gender biases. As a result, “crises” of women’s economic participation were exacerbated as indicated by the status of women with high unemployment, low participation and gender blind work conditions.

The presenters emphasized that macroeconomic and fiscal policies that are based on principles of inclusive growth, social justice and rights-based rule of law, can address gender bias through a number of measures. They defined social justice in macroeconomic policy and fiscal spending as more public spending on social services for social protection, job creation and productivity that can lead to a growth in wages and incomes. Such macroeconomic policies should be concerned with the impact of policy choices on gender gaps, gender relations and women’s rights as well as social equality. They should facilitate investment in productive growth and job creation and create a healthy fiscal space that enables spending on public services and social protection.

The presenters noted that the budget is a key instrument for carrying out fiscal policy and making available adequate services and fair taxation. It can also impact on economic growth by creating aggregate demand and stimulating growth and consumption. In addition, it is a key instrument of democratic transition that should be grounded in an inclusive process and mechanisms that ensure the quality and adequacy of public investment and taxation. It has been successfully used as a tool by Australia, Namibia, and South Africa. In India, a summary gender budget is presented in the newspapers and readers discover some budget lines that they thought had nothing to do with gender. The presenters emphasized that the key new alliance that is being forged between women’s organizations and ministries of finance requires a change of language (but not of principles) by gender activists as much of the gender discourse is not understood by economists.

Experiences of gender responsive budgeting were cited as an effective approach to ensuring the quality of public spending and effectiveness in achieving results related to gender equality and social justice. Mr Chafiki shared Morocco’s experiences in instituting gender equality as part of the performance-based budgeting reform in the country that was started in the early 2000s. The

process was also informed by ten years of constitutional reform and the expanding definition of human rights to, most recently, include non-discrimination. He described the annual budget reporting process which includes specific gender related performance indicators for each of the sector ministries. This report is submitted annually to the parliament for review along with the annual budget – the eighth gender budget that has been presented to date. The Ministry of Finance and Economy in Morocco has recently established a Centre of Excellence on gender responsive budgeting that is mandated to support sector and local governments in Morocco as well as facilitate the exchange of tools and experiences on gender responsive budgeting with other countries in the region.

Ms Ewa Ruminska-Zimny shared the Polish experience of transition in 1989 and highlighted a number of similarities in the challenges facing the Arab transition. During the transition period, her country witnessed a growth of conservatism and calls for “the return to motherhood” as well as the introduction of regressive laws. In addition, the adoption of a pro-market economic governance model has led to cuts in public services and limited the social protection measures that were previously in place. The women’s movement countered the exclusion of women’s voices and interests from economic policy making by establishing a broad coalition amongst women across political parties, professional associations, and labour unions. This coalition functioned almost like a shadow government and provided advice to government. It has organized in support of women’s rights in the pension reform process, including increasing the retirement age for women and advocating for maternity leave. It continuously invests in training economists on gender responsive economic policy making.

The discussions highlighted a number of challenges constraining the use of the budget as an instrument of democratic transition in Arab countries, due to: first, weak national planning and budgeting practices and systems; second, a lack of transparency and access to budget information; third, a lack of budget literacy that allows public engagement in budgetary policy making; fourth, weak budget monitoring and oversight by parliaments and CSOs; and fifth, high military spending. Some participants raised the point that gender budget analysis allows for a better assessment of the quality of public spending at both the sector and programme levels. The gender budget is a tool and the result depends on how it is used; in Chile, for example, a five per cent increase in women’s participation was linked to increased spending on childcare centres.

Round table discussion: Towards a vision for economic and social justice in the Arab region

A round table discussion was moderated by Ms Nada Al-Nashif, Regional Director of the ILO Regional Office for Arab States. Panellists were invited to respond to a series of questions addressing the global and regional context and reflecting the perspectives of representatives of academia, civil society, trade unions and experts from the region.

Dr Naglaa El Ehwany from the University of Cairo emphasized that the transition does not reflect a shift away from the jobless growth and inequalities that led to the revolutions. She highlighted that the shift towards the inclusive growth approach should reflect four characteristics: growth, job creation and investment in labour intensive sectors, inclusion and gender equality. These elements require a shift in macroeconomic policies to stimulate

investment in labour intensive sectors, a shift in public spending, orientation of policies towards labour intensive sectors, a shift in labour policies and responsiveness towards gender equality and women's empowerment.

Ms Fateh Azzam focused on the systemic gender discrimination and inequalities experienced by women as evidenced not only in laws on personal status, inheritance, property rights, and citizenship but also in women's economic rights and opportunities. Such discrimination stems partly from cultural values and is partly a result of the benefit generated by gender inequality to maintaining the patriarchal system. He emphasized the value of instituting the rule of law and addressing the "inferior" status of women in most legal systems in Arab countries. A rights-based legislative reform is an important instrument for addressing structural biases.

Panellists emphasized the value of international human rights instruments (CEDAW, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Covenants on Economic and Social Rights and on Civil and Political Rights, and ILO Conventions) for protecting women's rights, and the role of UN agencies in strengthening accountability and compliance with human rights instruments. The tension between human rights values and conservative values related to women's human rights should be challenged based on the human rights obligations made under international law.

Ms Lina Abu Habib and Mr Azzam emphasized that the challenge facing the Arab women's movement is to stop regression on past gains and to end the attack on CEDAW. The Arab uprisings present women's organizations with new challenges that require capacity and strategies.

The panellists highlighted a number of effective strategies for realization of women's economic rights. These include:

- Mobilization and organizing through trade unions, and cooperatives as well as CSOs;
- Public engagement in economic policies and overcoming economic policy "illiteracy" by building knowledge of economic rights;
- Dialogue with religious scholars on CEDAW and other international human rights instruments; and
- Articulating women's rights as part of a social agenda on equality and non-discrimination within broader national and political demands. In the current transition, women's rights claims cannot be ghettoized. This requires building effective alliances with other rights movements including youth groups and labour unions.

Mr Fadi Salem from the Dubai School of Government discussed the opportunities presented by social media and information technology as instruments for political mobilization as well as being a sector for growth. He cited a number of studies and surveys that have found that this sector provides women with an egalitarian space and with less gender-specific or geographic barriers, as the free flow of information removes gender specific barriers. He also pointed out that this emerging sector provides women with economic opportunities that are mainly utilized by youth.

Ms Nermine Sharif, of the National Union of Libyan Workers shared her experience on the ground as a labour activist and highlighted a number of challenges women workers face as well

as the efforts that have been taken to strengthen the role of labour unions in post-revolutionary Libya. She had herself grown up in a union family, eventually being elected to the executive committee of the Libyan Trade Union Movement. However, when tasks were allotted to executive committee members, she was given women's affairs. She asked instead for the membership and organization portfolio that committee members were only too happy to dispose of, which she used to increase the number of women members overall as well as the number of women in higher ranks. Ms Hanane Rihhab, a young Moroccan journalist, described the alarm amongst many gender advocates over a number of political signals threatening the gains made in the country over the past ten years.

Ms Nadia Hijab provided the final comments on the need for a holistic analysis of women's rights that incorporates social, political and economic issues. Such an analysis would provide a counter argument to the narrow definition of women's role and unleash their potential as full agents of development. She emphasized that a push for gender equality would benefit Arab men as well as Arab women.

In discussion, Mr Chafiki emphasized the need for a new discourse to push for women's rights. He gave as an example the fact that pension funds are going to go broke, largely because of low employment: the answer is to bring women into the workforce because almost three-quarters of the potential labour force in the Arab world is idle. Human rights advocates need to master the facts fast and have the economic and social data at their fingertips. International organizations, especially those dealing with labour issues, must invest in this kind of research.

In the wrap-up session, Mr Abdel Samad set out a four part agenda for civil society: monitor the policies and practices leading to discrimination; shift away from protesting to offering solutions and models of the desired development policies; develop strategies to exert pressure and to have an impact; and get ready for dialogue and be prepared to make compromises.