INFORMATION NOTE

1) INTRODUCTION

The turmoil created by the Arab uprisings since late 2010 will affect the region for years to come. The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen have not only led to significant, ongoing political transitions but also brought about severe economic challenges with energy and food rising costs, particularly in non-oil-exporting countries, as well as the loss of income in key economic sectors such as tourism. As a result, governments imposed austerity measures that have particularly affected spending on social services and protection and increased unemployment. Moreover, recent and long-standing conflicts continue to afflict several countries in the region. The cross-border and/or internal turmoil in Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Bahrain all create significant threats to social and economic development.

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. Such a development model would emphasize the social and economic policy reforms needed in the economic sphere in parallel to political processes to institutionalize democratic systems.

There is no question that past development models have led to improvements in the areas of health and education. However, the full economic potential of the Arab world has yet to be tapped. Arab economies are plagued by low productivity, high unemployment, and low competitiveness, resulting in increased poverty and inequalities for women and men alike.

Furthermore, data show that the status of Arab women undoubtedly is central to addressing the challenges faced by Arab economies. Even though Arab women have achieved high levels of education, these have not translated into economic outcomes and the region still 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) versus 74 per cent for the rest of the world, but the respective rates for women are 27 per cent in MENA versus 56 per cent for the rest of the world.¹

The fact that women and men face considerable barriers in accessing decent work and other economic, social and political rights has been a key element in the Arab uprisings. As the above data indicate, women face even greater barriers than men. Pro-market and legal reforms, national budgets, and economic decisions have been neither inclusive nor responsive to demands of development and equality; rather, they have been gender blind. In general, the world of work in Arab States is not attractive to women, in part due to prevailing social and cultural beliefs that assign different social and economic roles to each gender. These different roles have been translated into laws, regulations, and procedures that pose obstacles to women’s internationally recognized economic rights. Ironically, these obstacles result in discrimination not only against women but also against men, children, and the family in a part of the world where the family is revered as the cornerstone of society.

In the years leading up to the Arab uprisings, women’s organizations and their allies had chipped away at many of the discriminatory laws and regulations. They had, in different Arab countries, achieved changes in nationality law, the penal code, family law, pension regulations, and benefits, among other areas impacting women’s economic opportunities. There is a serious danger of regression in post-uprising countries due to increasing social conservatism and economic difficulties among other factors, and it is important to identify the areas where progress had been made in women’s human rights that are now particularly threatened with regression. In addition, a new systematized wave of gender-based violence in the region is threatening women’s ability to voice their demands and fight for their rights.

Women are often the first losers in times of transition. The current debates on gender equality and the role of women in society are a stark reminder that women’s rights are constantly renegotiated. Ignoring Arab women’s vast economic contribution and potential and adopting exclusionary and ineffective policies will not trigger the full 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. At this critical stage of transition, effective economic reforms should be grounded in principles of social justice, gender equality and good governance. Economic policies should contribute effectively to increasing women’s economic participation, increasing their opportunity in new and productive economic sectors, and securing maternity and other rights. Government, private sector, trade unions and civil society must join hands in order to achieve sustainable human development within a framework that secures investment and promotes accountability and equitable economic growth.

2) OBJECTIVES

There is a need to keep the issue of gender equality high on the regional agenda and at the heart of economic and social reforms. In the current regional context, it is important to provide a platform for critical thinking and to engage regional and international experts in the quest for inclusive social justice. The primary objectives of this Expert Group Meeting are 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 of 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 transition in the region.

3) PARTICIPANTS

Participants will include 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, media and academia.

4) FORMAT

This will be a 2-day brainstorming meeting to facilitate the exchange of ideas and in-depth discussions. It will be 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) Economic Rights: What approaches to entitlements and protection are needed in times of crises and transition for sound development and inclusive economies?

c) Governance and Policy Making: What systems can ensure gender responsive, productive and inclusive Arab societies?

Specific topics under each theme will provide critical analysis and the opportunity for cross-fertilization within the Arab world and with other regions. The meeting will encourage an open exchange of experiences through dynamic interaction, and will conclude with a round-table discussion reflecting on regional and country entry points to promote progressive equitable socio-economic strategies.

Interpretation in Arabic and English will be available. Background documentation will be provided to facilitate discussion of the issues and challenges, and to suggest ways forward.

Theme 1 Economic Justice: To what extent have past policies addressed women’s economic and social rights and where should future investment be made?

International experience shows that those countries that have taken gender concerns seriously in their policy making processes and challenged some of the social constructs have been able to show better economic performance. The pro-market reforms introduced in the Arab region since the 1980s have failed to generate sustainable employment and adequate social services and social protection. They increased fiscal burdens through economic mismanagement and resulted in low
productivity, slow growth and low competitiveness, and failed to promote gender equality in the economic sphere. The barriers to women's economic rights remain considerable despite the progress made through the concerted efforts of Arab women's organizations and their allies in each country. Wide gender gaps in socio-economic performance remain; for example, women's unemployment rates are on average double those of men in all countries.

This session will make the case that gender blind economic policies hurt Arab economies and societies and shed light on the paradox of discrimination, which in fact harms not only women but also men, children, and the family. It will reflect on structural constraints to women’s economic empowerment including their concentration in the informal and public sectors and limited opportunities in growth sectors. It will identify the areas of law, policy, and procedures where progress has been made in Arab women’s economic rights and those where there is the most serious danger of regression taking into consideration conflict and violence which pose a barrier to women’s economic rights. Essentially, this session will pose the key questions how is economic empowerment an effective entry point for change in the region? And what policies and measures are necessary to bring about equitable development that translates into women's equality of opportunity and growing opportunities for both women and men? The session will benefit from lessons learned from countries that went through transitions and the measures they used to support change.

• The development model and Arab citizens
• Barriers to Equality of Opportunity for Arab Women

Theme 2 Economic Rights: What approaches to entitlements and protection are needed in times of crises and transition for sound development and inclusive economies?

The majority of Arab women of working age are engaged in unpaid housework and care work or are engaged in market work including agriculture that is largely underreported in official statistics. Focused surveys indicate higher representation of women in informal paid and unpaid household work than is usually indicated in national labour statistics. Unfortunately, the growing informality of work amongst Arab women remains unaddressed in policy making due to this bias in data collection which, in turn, contributes to discriminatory social protection measures. The Arab uprisings created severe economic pressures in several countries while generating conditions that required more public investment for social protection coverage to a larger portion of the population. Most Arab countries, including those that were not visibly affected by the current political changes in the region, introduced or expanded measures to provide social security, and various allowances after the uprisings. Yet key deficits remain in these social protection measures, and the proposed measures seem to have been thought as "peace dividends" requiring only short-

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term fiscal costs rather than as a form of public investment governed by long-term considerations and a universal vision.

Contrary to the “perceived wisdom”, public investment in basic social protection, when properly managed, can reap economic as well as political benefits. Evidence shows that expanding the set of measures commonly referred to as “social protection” can promote women’s agency in the labour market and in society in general. While there has been a shift in many countries around the world to guarantee basic social rights as a precondition for effective citizenship, most Arab countries continue to promote an older generation of social protection that has failed to create meaningful opportunities and did not tackle unfair exclusion or unjustified inclusion. This session will argue that increasing Arab women’s participation will require a more gender sensitive approach to women workers’ rights, including those in the informal economy. It will also argue the need to expand their economic opportunity by addressing some of the limited incentives to enter the labour market due to low wages, restricted mobility and heavy burden of care. In other words, this session will pose the critical question of to what extent is women’s work in all its forms valued, recognized and taken into account into macroeconomic policy design in the region?

- Informality, Gender Equality and Workers’ Rights
- Unmet Social Care and Service Provisions constraining Arab Women’s Participation

Theme 3 Governance and Policy Making: What systems would ensure gender responsive, productive and inclusive Arab societies?

The post 2015 Development Agenda places significant attention to issues of governance “at all levels (global, regional, national and sub-national) and commitment to the rule of law, including political commitment and leadership, and on the empowerment of people, especially those most excluded and vulnerable.” Countries in the Arab region have the possibility to shape governance systems that promote inclusive growth and development that should be grounded in principles of human rights, transparency and inclusion. Public spending needs are to be aligned with priorities of social justice, employment generation, equality and inclusion. Current transitions in the region open the door for public sector and budget reforms to address capacity gaps in public institutions and facilitate gender responsive implementation, monitoring and regulation.

Inclusive policy making also requires an empowered and vibrant dialogue between different social groups and governments. Such dialogue is not only important for identifying key priorities and gaps, but also facilitates a monitoring role for civil society that strengthens government accountability. A key component in such dialogue is an effective, representative trade union movement that can engage meaningfully with employers’ organizations and governments to advance workers’ rights, as well as a vibrant civil society able to engage in debates and to influence the direction of economic and social policy making. This session will argue that reform processes in

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the Arab region have created opportunities for good governance in the realm of economic policy making. By learning from international experiences, it will highlight those that have promoted gender responsive accountability mechanisms in government systems and the need for a solid women’s movement in the region. It will respond to the critical questions: to what extent have gender equality and women’s rights been incorporated in performance measures of economic policy and therefore to what extent have women movements been able to formulate their demands and being heard?

- Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting and Accountability in Economic Policies
- Towards a vision for Economic Justice in the Arab Region:

1. The global development debate – what prospect for Arab citizens?

2. Priorities for work in the context of conflict and transitions – what lessons from experience?

3. Effective approaches and inclusive strategies – an action agenda to be used to advance women’s economic and social rights?