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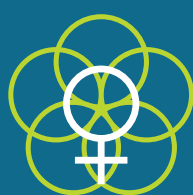
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Amman, Jordan



not without us

Women's Rights Activists from the Middle East and North Africa
Call for Sustainable Development Centered on Human Rights

2018 MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
REGIONAL CONSULTATION OF THE



**GLOBAL SOUTH
WOMEN'S FORUM**
ON SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT
(**MENA GSWF**)



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DEDICATION

We dedicate this convening in the Middle East and North Africa to women human rights defenders from the region who are no longer with us. We pay tribute to your tenacity in fighting to uphold human rights in the face of countless challenges and strive to continue your work.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to sincerely thank all the participants of the MENA Consultation of the Global South Women's Forum on Sustainable Development for their contribution. Not only those who were able to join us in Jordan but also those who provided input to the outcome document. Your commitment and activism are inspiring. Our thanks also to our facilitator Roshmi Goswami who facilitated and guided the rich discussions.

We also could not have held the convening without our local host the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU), in particular Aseel, Saria and both Nadias for their unwavering support. We would also like to sincerely thank our Board Member Dr. Amal Hadi for her commitment in making this convening a reality. Your support and insight have been invaluable.

Thank you to Dialogue Edge for the excellent interpretation service which enabled all activists to fully engage in the discussions, Yasmin Abu El-Agha for providing timely translations to make sure participants could access resources in Arabic, Thashyni Pathmanathan for being our rapporteur, and to Thilini Perera for working on the layout and design of the outcome document.

Finally, thank you to Oxfam Egypt for providing timely support to women's rights activists from the MENA region by funding the convening and the creation of knowledge products such as this outcome document which will influence how civil society in the region engages with the SDGs.

The MENA consultation of the Global South Women's Forum is part of IWRAP Asia Pacific's strategy on women's human rights and sustainable development, which is being implemented with core support from the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation.

INTRODUCTION

Human Rights, Sustainable Development and the MENA Region

The grounding of development priorities in women's human rights is a legal, political and moral imperative and increases their overall impact by enhancing accountability and due diligence, with a focus on implementation and results that reach the most vulnerable and marginalised. Human rights are integral to achieving the universally acceptable standards of living and wellbeing, and conditions of economic growth and development echoed in national and international obligations.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), have been criticised for failing to centre existing international commitments, notably international human rights norms and standards, which are fundamental to achieving progress with sustainable development targets and indicators. When discussing the SDGs, it is important to note there is much scepticism about the extent to which global commitments, made in the absence of a rights framework, without explicit reference to existing international human rights standards and without a robust accountability framework, can succeed in the elimination of poverty and discrimination.

The 2014 evaluation of the MDGs by the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)¹, acknowledged the general limitations of addressing the full spectrum of issues impacting women's human rights. As the UN Secretary General summed it up, "the experience with MDGs indicate that we know what should be done, but achieving more progress requires strong political will and long-term collective work". In his assessment, the Secretary General noted that while some indicators based on mainstreaming gender equality were achieved, the narrow focus of the gender equality goal did not address the full spectrum of gender inequalities and structural discrimination. The SDG must not repeat the same mistake. The infusion of feminist perspectives, human rights principles of universality, non-retrogression and indivisibility are necessary to address the governance, financial, environmental and human rights challenges that present

themselves in the current global context. Initiatives and processes need to reinforce the principle that achieving gender equality, women's empowerment and human rights are autonomous ends in themselves and not simply instruments to achieve economic growth.

Given the current trajectory of the development discourse, it is pivotal that women maximise the opportunities and spaces created, including those in treaty body and other UN mechanisms. Women need to participate in the continuing process of fine tuning the 2030 Agenda and ensure the goals are implemented without undermining existing gains made in enforcing women's human rights, so that women and girls will benefit equally through development and economic growth.

The SDGs are now in their second year of implementation and in 2016 and 2017 there have been high-level forums at regional and global levels such as the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, and the High-Level Political Forum. The latter has seen an increase in the interest of countries from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to report on the SDGs. Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, and Qatar having already participated in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), with upcoming VNRs in 2018 for Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates. Because of many factors, language being one, the MENA region has repeatedly been excluded from the discussions and advocacy of the international women's movement, and usually are latecomers to relevant events, which impact negatively on their regional and national activism and advocacy.

While engagement with regional and global processes is important, it is state accountability at the national level that would drive the 2030 Agenda forward. Women's rights activists and organisations in MENA want to know how we could hold our governments accountable for their strategies, reviews, and statements and how to move from the rhetoric about "leaving no one behind" to impact the realities of women's lives.

It is in this context that the 2018 MENA Regional Consultation of the Global South Women's Forum (MENA GSWF) came about. It aimed to strengthen capacities of national and regional women's rights organisations (WROs) to hold their governments accountable on the implementation of the SDGs, and to join global advocacy efforts.

Global South Women's Forum on Sustainable Development

Since 2012, International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP AP)¹ has continued to work on improving understanding of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as an instrument that adds concrete significance to the concepts of substantive equality, non-discrimination. We work on highlighting the relevance of treaty law in improving the global development agenda and processes and national level action plans geared towards social justice, women's equality and empowerment of marginalised groups.

We continue to promote the domestic implementation of international human rights standards by strengthening the capacities of women and human rights advocates to claim and realise women's human rights.

To deepen our understanding on the SDGs, we conducted a survey with women's rights groups about how they would like to engage with the 2030 Agenda. The survey responses revealed the diverse ways national governments are responding to the implementation of the SDGs at national level.

For example, governments were assigning accountability through one ministry, a new ministry or an inter-ministerial approach. There were also different approaches to 'first steps' towards implementation (e.g. a policy development approach, statistical development approach, national versus international approaches). Women's rights groups also had varied approaches to engaging with the 2030 Agenda; from raising community awareness and engaging with governments; to establishing coalitions and developing action plans, position papers and indicators.

Despite lofty ambitions, the 2030 Agenda does not have a built-in compliance framework to ensure accountability to the prescribed goals. IWRAP AP believes that in order to ensure gender equality is prioritized and localized, meaningful, reciprocal communication channels must be forged to facilitate vital exchange between local and global levels on current information on the progress of gender equality worldwide. Such a structure can create coherence between the SDGs, human rights treaties and civil society on gender equality. However, we recognized that any structure can also create barriers and therefore committed to creating a

platform that is both living and growing; that is organic, dynamic and symbiotic with other existing processes. This is how the Global South Women's Forum (GSWF) on Sustainable Development, a forum that links local experiences to global processes, came to be.

In the past two years IWRAP AP began to mobilise Global South WROs around the 2030 Agenda. The first GSWF was held in Cambodia in 2016 and the second in Rwanda earlier this year. The Forums brought together women from different parts of the Global South who addressed the conceptualization of sustainable development as a women's rights issue and strategised to work collectively. A few women from the MENA region participated in the two events but constraints on travel, language and funding restricted wider participation.

¹ <http://undocs.org/en/E/CN.6/2014/3>

¹ <https://www.iwraw-ap.org/>

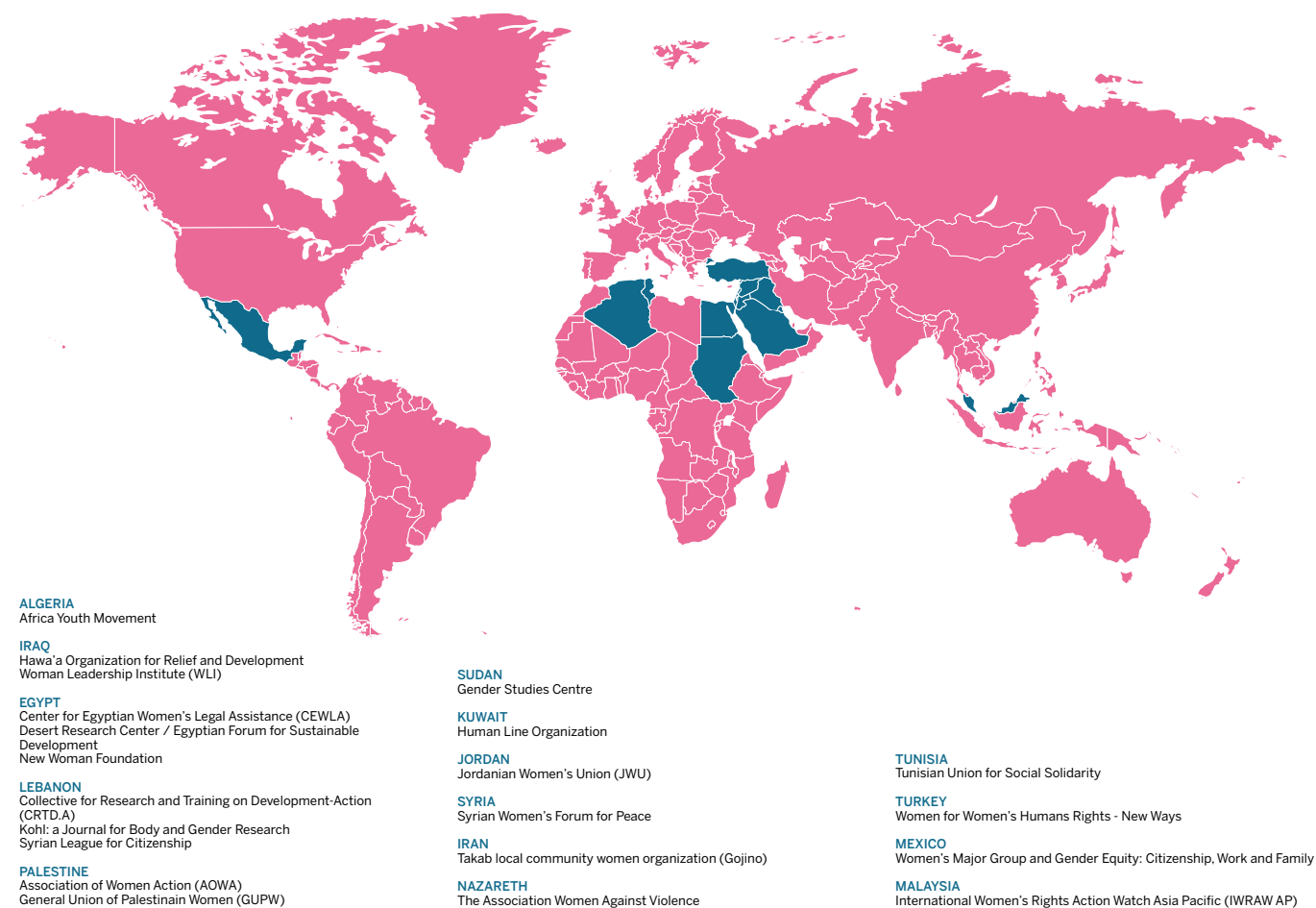
Middle East and North Africa Regional Consultation

The post “Arab Spring” anti-democratic backlash in many Arab countries had led to shrinking democratic spaces for WRO and other CSOs in the region to work freely and effectively. The new NGO law (in Egypt) imposes very restrictive rules on NGOs particularly with regards to receiving foreign funding, where the process for approval of grants can take long months. The current political environment in the region may hinder women and girls' rights and access to opportunities, including in the context of implementing the SDGs.

Taking into consideration the restrictive situation mentioned above as well as the need for more engagement of WROs in the MENA region in the discussions on sustainable development, IRAW AP collaborated with WROs in the region to organize a MENA Regional Consultation of the GSWF. The regional consultation sought to create a space where women's rights activists can discuss the particular challenges of sustainable development and women's human rights priorities in the region, including structural barriers to their implementation, and mobilise around collective strategies for advocacy and in influencing their states, as well as contribute to regional and global discussions. Some of our objectives were to:

- **Enhance the capacity of feminist and women's rights activists and organisations to actively engage with the SDGs process at national, regional and global levels through a sharing and learning strategy.**
- **Integrate the rights-based approach through use of the CEDAW framework as a mechanism for keeping governments accountable for their declared commitments to the 2030 Agenda.**
- **Develop national/regional strategies and plans for monitoring the implementation of SDGs and hold governments accountable to their declared commitments. These activities will be supported through fundraising efforts of participants.**

The following organizations and countries were represented at the convening.



POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF MENA AND THE SDGs

Human Rights and Sustainable Development: Political Currency of the SDGs

There continues to be a clear disconnect between sustainable development and human rights, whether in terms of language or implementation. Key players in sustainable development are yet to fully incorporate human rights into their work¹. The 2030 Agenda is no different in that while the declaration to the Agenda recognizes human rights², the goals and targets make no reference to human rights or human rights instruments³. As observed by Neil Hicks of Human Rights First⁴, "Many of the goals have intrinsic or implicit human-rights content, but the omission of the actual term is notable and is indicative of a global climate where more and more states are assertively pushing back against universal human-rights standards and labeling international pressure to encourage compliance as unacceptable interference in their sovereignty."

It is important to acknowledge that the human rights framework and instruments are not dependent or premised upon any particular economic model, whereas the sustainable development framework and the SDGs are based on a specifically neoliberal agenda. Kumi et al (2013: 539) delivers us the obvious irony that "neoliberal policies of privatization, trade liberalization and reduction in governments spending stand to affect the attainment of sustainable development"⁵.

As mentioned before, we've seen an increase in the number of countries from the MENA region voluntarily reporting on the SDGs, although the quality and accountability of such reporting is still under discussion and scrutiny⁶.



This brings up several questions.

- How does the region's interest in the SDGs compare to its track record in reporting to human rights mechanisms, and CEDAW in particular?
- What are the driving forces behind the enthusiasm of our states to report to the SDGs?
- How do we ensure that state engagement with the SDGs is centered on existing human rights obligations of our states and reflect the geopolitics and lived realities of the region?

¹ http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/274

² "The new Agenda [...] is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties [...]" (para 10)

"We reaffirm the importance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as other international instruments relating to human rights and international law." (para 19)

"We emphasize the responsibilities of all States, in conformity with the Charter of the United Nations, to respect, protect and promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind as to race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, disability or other status." (para 19)

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

³ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/neil-hicks/the-sdgs-missed-opportunity-on-human-rights_b_8164384.html

⁵ <https://ayildiz.yasar.edu.tr/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Kumi.pdf>

⁶ Voluntary National Reviews: What are countries prioritizing? http://www.together2030.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FINAL-Together-2030_VNR-Main-Messages-Review-2017.pdf

A Comparison of CEDAW Reporting Track Record of MENA Countries Reporting to the HLPF

Country	Voluntary National Report to the HLPF	Last reported to CEDAW	Next reporting to CEDAW	CEDAW Reporting on track
Bahrain	2018	2014	2019	✓
Egypt	2016, 2018	2010	2014	✗
Jordan	2017	2017	2021	✓
Kuwait	2019	2017	2021	✓
Lebanon	2018	2015	2019	✗
Morocco	2016	2008	2014	✗
Palestine	2018	2018	2022	✓
Qatar	2017, 2018	2014	2019	✓
Saudi Arabia	2018	2018	2022	✓
Sudan	2018	Not a signatory to CEDAW		
Tunisia	2019	2010	2014	✗
Turkey	2016	2016	2020	✓
United Arab Emirates	2018	2015	2019	✗

The above comparison shows that while many of the countries reporting on the SDGs are on track with their CEDAW reporting, there are as many who are not and in the case of Sudan not even a signatory to CEDAW. It is debatable whether reporting to treaty bodies can be considered the benchmark for holding states accountable to their human rights obligations, especially given the many instances of misinformation and misrepresentation by states during the reviews¹. However it is undeniable that the state legal obligation to implement the rights recognized in a treaty once it's ratified is of significance.

It is also important to recall that most countries from MENA have ratified CEDAW with one or more reservations, most reservations being on articles, 2, 9(2) on granting women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children, 15(4) on granting men and women the same rights with regard to the law relating to the movement of persons and the freedom to choose their residence and domicile, 16 on eliminating discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations, and 29(1) on resolution of disputes between states parties on the application of CEDAW through negotiation failing which arbitration and failing which through the International Court of Justice (ICJ). These reservations are another challenge to be cognizant of when we turn to the human rights framework to hold our states accountable to their human rights obligations.

¹ <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/saudi-arabia/women-s-rights-in-saudi-arabia-the-saudi-version-highly-criticized-by>

Country	Date of ratification or accession (a) of CEDAW	Reservations	Date of ratification or accession (a) to the Optional Protocol
Algeria	22 May 1996	Articles 2, 15(4), 16, 29	
Bahrain	18 June 2002 (a)	Articles 2, 9(2), 15(4), 16, 29(1)	
Comoros Islands	31 October 1994	No reservations	
Djibouti	2 December 1998 (a)	No Reservations	
Egypt	18 September 1981	Articles 2, 16, 29	
Iran	Not a party to the convention		
Iraq	13 August 1986 (a)	Articles 2(f), (g), 16, 29(1)	
Israel	3 October 1991	Articles 7(b), 16	
Jordan	1 July 1992	Articles 9(2), 16(1c) (1d) and (1g)	
Kuwait	2 September 1994 (a)	Articles 9(2), 16(f), 29(1)	
Lebanon	21 April 1997	Articles 9(2), 16(1c) (1d)(1f), 29(1)	
Libya	16 May 1989	Articles 2 and 16	18 June 2004 (a)
Morocco	21 June 1993 (a)	Articles 2, 15(4), 29	
Mauritania	2001	General reservation	
Oman	7 February 2006 (a)	Articles 9(2), 15(4), 16(1a,c,f), 29(1)	
Palestine	2 April 2014 (a)	No Reservations	
Qatar	29 April 2009 (a)	Articles 2(a), 9(2), 15(1), 15(4), 16(1a), (1c), (1f), 29(1)	
Saudi Arabia	7 September 2000	Articles 9(2), 29(1), General reservation	
Sudan	Not a party to the convention		
Syria	28 Mar 2003 (a)	Articles 2, 9(2), 15(4), 16(1c) (1d) (1f) (1g), 16(2), 29(1)	
Tunisia	23 September 2008 (a)	No Reservations	23 September 2008 (a)
Turkey	20 Dec 1985 (a)	Article 29(1)	29 October 2002
United Arab Emirates	6 October 2004 (a)	Articles 2(f), 9,15(2), 16, 29(1)	
Yemen	30 May 1984 (a)	Article 29(1)	



SDGs and Regional Geopolitics

There is diversity and many disparities in the MENA region which need to be taken into consideration as we strategize regionally. While many of our countries give an outward image of modernity and technological advancement, we are often governed by tribalism and religion. There is an absence of equality and justice in many spheres of life. Wealth inequality is a major issue in the region with 10% of the region receiving more than half the wealth of the Arab region. The United Nations was supposed to publish a report on this which was removed due to pressure from some countries including Saudi Arabia.

Wealth inequality is replicated when it comes to education. Private education with its connotations of being a better education is accessible only to the rich and public education is equated with being option for the poor. For example in Turkey, more public schools are being converted to religious schools, where students who cannot afford private schools are forced to enrol even if they don't want to choose religious education. Inequality in education is gendered too with it still being a struggle for girls to receive even primary education in some countries of the region.

Another issue that influences geopolitics of the region is how we are addressing issues faced by refugees. Not enough countries including Jordan are taking responsibility for refugees. Refugee women face many socio economic hardships including gender-based violence. We also see migrant workers, especially women, working across the region in conditions akin to modern day slavery with no recourse to justice. In Turkey, the numbers of early and forced marriages, and multiple marriages, which are the means of the most common gender-based violence targeting both the Syrian -primarily- and Turkish women, have been increasing due to the displacement, poverty, and ambiguity as an inevitable result of the war. Moreover, these practices are mostly legitimized as cultural and religious patterns and customs. Early and forced marriages block refugee girls' access to the right to education. Among other things, language barrier, diploma equivalency issue and financial problems emerge as the basic determinants of the early and forced marriages.¹

WE NEED TO
ACKNOWLEDGE THAT
**HUMAN RIGHTS
ARE UNIVERSALLY
APPLICABLE
FOR EVERYONE
INCLUDING
REFUGEES.**

- JORDAN

SDGs and Human Rights Obligations

There can be no democracy or development without the achievement of women's human rights. We often see the government discourse on women's human rights being merely cosmetic such as when reporting to treaty bodies. This has been no different when it comes to the SDGs. We call for sustainable development to be based on human rights principles. Women's human rights cannot be limited to just SDG 5 on gender equality, it must be cross-cutting across the entire agenda from the environment to technology.

Those of us from Jordan shared the example that our country has been actively engaging with the SDGs and taking on the implementation of the goals but when it

comes to any reforms related to women's human rights we see the government continuing to resort to the usual excuse of unavailability of extra funds. Therefore even if we use the SDGs as a tool to accelerate progress towards the realisation of women's human rights, we are aware that no real change is possible without political will on the part of the government.

As we continue to engage with international processes and frameworks, whether it is the SDGs or various treaty body mechanisms, it is important to note that we need active regional frameworks and instruments that take into consideration specific challenges and contexts of the region. The distrust in the effectiveness of international processes

¹ Shadow NGO Report on Turkey's First Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for submission to the GREVIO Committee September 2017, p.61-62

**WE WANT TO SEE
GOVERNMENTS
MAKING GENUINE
LINKS BETWEEN
SDGS AND HUMAN
RIGHTS THAT
ENABLE WOMEN TO
LIVE IN DIGNITY**

- EGYPT

is not limited to states and is extended to society in general including civil society and feminist groups. In Palestine for an example, we continue to engage with CEDAW even as we recognize that this engagement still may not be enough to ensure that women's human rights don't continue to take a backseat in the face of other national priorities. However we view it as an opportunity to exercise our role as civil society in holding the state accountable and also as a way to give some amount of agency to women by strengthening our capacities. However, it is undeniable that if we are to make links between the human rights framework and the sustainable development framework then we need to go beyond the international and develop regional frameworks, instruments and processes that instil more trust in all relevant actors.

(Sustainable) Development in an Occupied State

As mentioned before, we are a region that is diverse and disparate and a political analysis of the region is not complete without putting the Israeli occupation of the State of Palestine at the centre of that analysis. While conflict and militarization are issues that structurally challenge the region and have become synonymous with the region, we refuse to let occupation be subsumed within this as the challenges posed by occupation, including its

implications on women and girls, are unique and context-specific.

How can we discuss development in an occupied State? How do we understand the SDGs in relation to an occupied State? We kept returning to these questions during the course of the consultation. The concept of development has been pushed to the margins in Palestine and is framed only as humanitarian development. We are no longer talking about long term development for Palestine and only instantaneous solutions. This needs to be addressed. It's almost as if we are accepting the state of occupation as long term with no development being possible in this context which makes one wonder where the 17 SDGs fit in. How could we in a state of occupation implement and achieve such goals?

We have no control over our resources including access to water resources and access to clean water, with exacerbated implications on women. By 2020, Gaza would be unliveable due to pollution from ongoing conflict in addition to the increasing number of inhabitants and rising unemployment. Criminalisation of the efforts of national liberation of Palestine and related incarceration and killings cannot be ignored. In the case

of incarceration, how are these people going to integrate into the community after being imprisoned? Such challenges that are unique to occupation and straddle extraterritorial obligations must be seen and recognized if we are to talk about sustainable development in a context of occupation.

To this end, in July 2018 the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), the Non-Governmental Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine and IWRAW Asia Pacific submitted a report¹ to the inaugural CEDAW and SDGs reviews of Palestine. The report aimed to ensure that human rights are at the centre of the implementation of the SDGs and that gender equality cuts across the entire agenda, and interrogated what development in a state of occupation looks like. The report was used by CEDAW committee members to integrate state commitments under the SDGs beyond goal 5 on gender equality to the constructive dialogue with the state.

The SDGs are not going to bring about transformational change in Palestine unless the occupation is challenged collectively by UN member states. During the 2018 HLPF, the state delegation from Palestine were not granted visas to enter the USA to present their first Voluntary National Report to the HLPF and this shows that the 2030 Agenda is not challenging the status quo of geopolitics in any real way.

¹ Leaving No One Behind: The Imperative of Inclusive Development in Palestine <http://bit.ly/sdgpalestine>

WOMEN'S RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS:

A Snapshot of Our Discussions

We recognize that the MENA region is not homogenous whether in terms of income level, political situation, natural resources, development, culture, socio-economic indicators and other factors that illustrate both the diversity and the inequalities of the region.

Recognizing this is key towards ensuring that a regional overview of priority issues pertaining to women's human rights does not perpetuate the misconceptions in global geopolitics that often paint the region as one uniform whole.

Our analysis also takes into account forces that work against women's rights and gender equality. How do macro level policies and decisions impact our issues and work at local level? Neoliberal economic policies, whether within the region or outside, have dire impacts on the protection of human rights with the latter being used as a bargaining chip to give priority to economic and trade interests. There are instances in which states join hands in invisible forums and fraternities that we are not privy to. Or

states claiming positions of power within international human rights bodies while human rights violations at home go unaddressed.

Therefore as we share some of our priority issues in this section, we emphasize that these issues are interlinked and interdependent.



Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (WESCR)

SOME RELEVANT AND CROSSCUTTING SDGs



Women's economic, social and cultural rights are consistently challenged by patriarchal practices, structural inequalities and multiple forms of discrimination in laws and in practice which means women still do not enjoy these rights on an equal basis with men. This situation is further exacerbated by the increasing power and stronghold of the private sector which we experience in our region vis a vis infrastructural and technology-driven national development.

Women Workers

In the MENA region, as with the rest of the world, women are making more contributions to the economy and the labour market through both paid and unpaid work in public and private spheres. However the increased participation of women in the labour market is strongly linked to neoliberal ideology that views women as a largely untapped workforce that can bring in high productivity and more profit. This means the inequality and unequal power relations women face in the sphere of economic, social and cultural rights are further exploited to devalue women's work, and place women at the bottom of the global value chains and not recognise unpaid care work as legitimate work. We need to move beyond the framing of women's empowerment because "the realisation of women's economic, social and cultural rights can itself be transformative, not only in ensuring that women's immediate material needs are met, but also in fundamentally reshaping unequal power relationships."¹ Our discussions included how:

Women's labour force participation in the MENA region remains the lowest in the world but attempts to increase this are not taking into account the unpaid care work done by women on a daily basis. As more women go into the paid labour force, the gendered division of unpaid work remains unchanged thus placing an additional burden on women to take on both paid and unpaid workloads.

Human rights of domestic workers and migrant workers remains a challenge in the region. Women migrate for work in MENA countries from outside the region as well as from within the region, the latter mostly being from lower income countries and conflict-affected countries in the region. There is a "dire need to reinvestigate, deconstruct, and gender migration as a phenomenon that is not modern, although complicated by the neoliberal age"². We also discussed the colonial legacy of borders that were created in the region and how those affect relationships and mobility across countries.

Culture and Religion

Women have a right to have access to, participate in and contribute to all aspects of cultural life including our right to "actively engage in identifying and interpreting cultural heritage and to decide which cultural traditions, values or practices are to be kept, reoriented, modified or discarded"³. The other aspect to consider when discussing women's rights, culture and religion is that, as the earlier mapping of reservations to CEDAW by countries in the region showed, there is often a tendency to claim "immunity from gender equality provisions on the grounds of cultural and religious freedom"⁴. Following are some of the issues of concern for us.

The freedom to exercise innovation and creativity is essential for women and girls. While the focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education remains important, the rise of STEM should not result in a lack of focus on arts education. We must have the right to choose and learn skills and knowledge that we would like to excel at.

Preservation and documentation of indigenous knowledge and practices, especially those of women, is important. Discrimination on the basis of religion or tribe must end including discrimination and violence against religious minorities.

Do women in our communities have the power or positioning to define our communal and collective identity or is it always men who do so?

Rights to property and inheritance must also be discussed within women's economic, social and cultural rights and this is particularly pertinent for our region

Governments should stop making family-oriented policies, which address women as unequal citizens, and value them only if they are mothers and the caregivers of the family. Governments should stop legitimizing their sexist and discriminatory policies against women in the name of culture and religion. Governments should also stop duplicating independent civil society space to disseminate patriarchal and discriminatory policies against women through government organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs).

¹ <https://www.eswr-net.org/resources/primer-womens-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>

² <http://kohljournal.press/radical-dissent-feminist-survival/>

³ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N12/459/30/PDF/N1245930.pdf?OpenElement>

⁴ <http://www.musawah.org/sites/default/files/Culture%20and%20Religion%20and%20Gender.pdf>

Peace, Conflict and Security

SOME RELEVANT AND CROSSCUTTING SDGs



While it is important to consider all aspects of how women and girls are affected by armed conflict, challenges around women's participation in peace processes and role in decision making with regard to conflict prevention and resolution are not discussed enough. While international legal instruments reaffirm these, many of us see the actual implementation as cosmetic and as a box to tick. Women's participation has been made tokenistic with sometimes just one woman at the negotiation table and even in cases where the quota of women has been met, they are not given a say because of patriarchal attitudes and existing power imbalances between women and men.

There is the added frustration that when UN agencies are monitoring the participation of women, it is reduced to numbers and there is no closer analysis to consider whether the participation was meaningful. There was consensus among us that there is a need to push beyond reports and to challenge what women's participation has been reduced to.

While UNSCR 1325, particularly in Article 8, refers to the need to set up measure that "support local women's peace initiatives and indigenous processes for conflict resolution", our experience is that the important work being done by women in villages and at grassroots level are not receiving due recognition or support.

Many of us live and work in contexts of ongoing conflict or occupation or post-conflict situations and the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls their needs during conflict, repatriation and resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction are issues we continue to grapple with. While the introduction of international legal instruments such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) and CEDAW General Recommendations No. 30 on women in conflict prevention, conflict and post-conflict situations were encouraging and welcomed, we are disappointed and dissatisfied with how ineffective the implementation has been. Only Iraq, Jordan and Palestine have adopted a National Action Plan in support of UNSCR 1325 and even in these countries there is a sense that the commitment to the resolution and to addressing the impact of armed conflict on women and girls in general, remains restricted to paper. Some issues of concern that were discussed are as follows:

Even in countries where conflict has ended in a formal sense, the structural causes of conflict and violence are far from resolved. Issues such as forced disappearances, restricting the work of truth and reconciliation committees still remain and must be addressed.

The gendered implications of conflict induced forced displacement should also be addressed. Because of internal armed conflicts in some of the countries in the region, women who have lost their homes, and homelands had to move to the city centres where they face poverty and discrimination in most cases.

We also considered how decisions made in and by the Global North are impacting our region such as the example of the imperialism exercised by the United States of America in defining terrorism as it suits them or in forming policies around immigration and refugees. How do we hold countries accountable for extraterritorial impact? While CEDAW GR 30 specifies territorial and extraterritorial obligations of states, we are also cognizant of the fact that many countries in the region have stated a reservation on article 29(1) on resolution of disputes between states parties.

Women's Access to Justice

SOME RELEVANT AND CROSSCUTTING SDGs



Customary laws, especially those pertaining to Muslim family law, continue to hold primacy in many countries in the region even in instances where they violate the constitution and/or human rights principles. This is illustrated by the reservations by most countries in the region to CEDAW Article 16 on the elimination of discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations. Some of us challenge this through the call for secularism and the separation of religion and the state while others use a human rights and feminist approach to discuss gender equality in Muslim family law.

A multipronged approach is needed to ensure access for justice for women that goes beyond introduction and reform of laws. For example, in Turkey there are adult education programmes developed by independent women's rights organizations that use peer learning to create awareness among women about their rights and related laws. This training model was applied for years in collaboration with state institutions until 2011. Since government policies on gender equality and women's rights have changed significantly over the past decade, this model can no longer be applied in collaboration with state institutions.

Access to justice, or the lack thereof, manifests in various ways in our countries and often there are commonalities across the region. Issues relating to access to justice range from the need for legislative reform, customary laws superseding national laws and human rights standards, patriarchal attitudes of judicial actors, the need for more women judicial actors, lack of awareness on laws and legal system, and economic barriers to access of justice. Some of our discussions included:

Awareness raising should also extend to the procedural aspects of laws, not just the substantive. How do we ensure that women with low or no income also have access to justice given the high costs in retaining lawyers, costs of attending legal procedures that go on for years, etc.?

Strengthening the judicial system and judicial actors is also needed in order to enable women's access to justice. The role and responsibility of all judicial officers and those involved with the judicial system to be aware of and implement relevant internationally, regionally and nationally guaranteed human rights norms must be highlighted.

Women's representation at all levels of the judiciary must be increased with a view to achieving gender balance

While many countries of the region have ratified CEDAW, there is little political will to ensure that national laws are CEDAW compliant. There is fear that this will be the case with the SDGs as well.



Environment and Climate Change

SOME RELEVANT AND CROSSCUTTING SDGs



We recognize the indivisibility and interdependency of human rights. Women's human rights cannot be achieved unless we are acknowledging and supporting the struggle for environmental justice including the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation, climate change and disasters on women and girls. The links between the three pillars of sustainable development present an opportunity to further strengthen an interlinkages approach on women's rights and the environment and to do cross-movement building. Following are some of the key points we discussed with regard to this:

Depletion of natural resources is a major concern in the MENA region and underlying causes range from unsustainable development to climate change to conflict to geo politics related to Israeli occupation of Palestine. Jordan's water crisis is just one example of the latter including the breakdown of the Red-Dead project. The region has taken contentious positions in climate change negotiations with states being influenced by private companies who refuse to transition from fossil fuels and non-renewable energy. The links between economic and environmental concerns and policies must be further explored.

Achieving the SDGs in a context of occupation remains a challenge and this is especially true in the case of the environment. We have no control over our natural resources whatsoever, starting with access to water resources and clean water. Access to and control over water is a key issue. The Occupying State has fought for the full control of the water resources in Palestine since 1967 up to now. The state of occupation has maintained control of water resources through a series of laws and military orders, the provisions of the Oslo Agreement and

the confiscation of land. By integrating the water resources of the occupied Palestinian territory into the Israeli regime, whether through the apartheid wall erected on important artesian sites or through Israeli settlements on Palestinian land, Israel has diverted water resources to its Israeli citizens and settlers at the expense of the Palestinians.

We recognize that links between conflict, occupation and the environment go beyond access to resources. Sustainable development and the emphasis on environmental conservation through individual action as opposed to addressing the effects of structural issues and neoliberal economic policies on the environment keep feeding the same rhetoric of further oppressing oppressed people. For an example, similar to Israel's pinkwashing that promotes the country as friendly to sexual minorities, there is also greenwashing of Israel military operations by encouraging and promoting veganism which in turn gets praised by the likes of PETA. We have to be cognizant of the political currency of sustainable development and protecting the environment.

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US:

Implementing the SDGs with Women's Human Rights at the Centre

Accountability

Accountability is the word that shall not be invoked when it comes to the 2030 Agenda, with many member states challenging the inclusion of the word in the final text of the agenda and instead opting for "follow up and review". However the 2030 Agenda reaffirms the commitments made under the human rights framework and it is imperative that the state legal obligations under CEDAW and other human rights instruments cannot be forgotten in the implementation and review of the SDGs.

Experiences from our countries show that accountability under the human rights framework is not so clear cut either. Some of our countries such as Sudan and Iran have not signed or ratified CEDAW. Even when our countries have signed and ratified CEDAW along with the reservations mapped earlier, there is sometimes little compulsion for them to report. Egypt for an example has missed two consecutive CEDAW reporting cycles and yet there is no one holding the state accountable for this. And this cannot be for a lack of capacity or time to report since Egypt has now reported twice on the SDGs at the HLPF within three years. In situations like this we need to ensure that civil society is able to make a strong link between the SDGs, targets and indicators, and related human rights obligations.

While shadow reports have proven to be an effective way for civil society to engage with and call for state accountability in the human rights framework, it is not clear if such reports have a role to play in a voluntary agenda in which the state report is not accessible to civil society until less than a month before the review. Reports from the Voluntary National Reviews are envisaged as reports to which all relevant stakeholders can provide input but we know from experience that in many of our countries stakeholder consultations are merely cosmetic or non-existent for civil society given the restrictions on us. It is a positive development that now civil society can submit reports to the HLPF which will be published on the HLPF website but they do not perform the same function as shadow reports.

The upcoming discussions and negotiations on reforming the modalities of the HLPF are one opportunity for us to engage with our states at national and regional level and make recommendations on how civil society can participate more meaningfully in the review of the SDGs. Our discussions also made it clear that it is equally important that the SDGs are better integrated into CEDAW reviews and other binding frameworks and this year the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), the Non-Governmental Women Coalition for the Implementation of CEDAW in the Occupied State of Palestine, with support from the International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP AP) piloted this with a report linking the human rights obligations of the state of Palestine on priority issues for women's human rights with relevant SDGs¹.

HLPF and VNRs

High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) and Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)

Participants from some of the countries that had already done their VNRs shared their experiences of civil society engagement.

Activists from **Egypt** shared that when their country reported to HLPF in 2016, some of them contributed to a report by the Ministry of International Cooperation but the final report was lacking any gender perspectives. The report also focused on just achievements and didn't raise some of the challenges that exist in properly implementing the SDGs. As Egypt reports again in 2018, one of the key gaps that remain is on gender disaggregated data. Women's rights organizations usually do not engage with the Ministry of International Cooperation or the national development plans so these are some opportunities we can identify as we try to harmonize the human rights framework and the sustainable development framework. We must also push for more consultations at national level and ask for human rights organizations to be included in the drafting and stakeholder consultation processes.

¹ Leaving No One Behind: The Imperative of Inclusive Development in Palestine <http://bit.ly/sdgpalestine>

Experiences from **Turkey** were similar and while it was difficult to get involved in the VNR process at national level, a women's rights organization published a spotlight report and attended HLPF with it. At that point it was impossible for the government to ignore the activists anymore and they were invited to the drafting meeting of the subsequent development plan (11th Development Plan). This gave the activists an opportunity to share the concept of a purple economy² which proposes a universal social care infrastructure which in the context of the SDGs will create opportunities for better economic growth, job creation and sustainable development while accelerating the realization of gender equality.

When **Jordan** did the VNR in 2017, civil society was able to participate in the national process though only at a minimal level. There were preparatory workshops held that were organized by civil society to strengthen capacity of activists to monitor the SDGs and to decide on development priorities for civil society. They were also able to participate in a multistakeholder national dialogue organized by the government.

Financing

As mentioned before there are widening inequalities between countries in the region and financing the implementation of the SDGs will be affected by these inequalities. These are some of the questions women's rights organizations are asking around financing.

Where is the budgeting for SDG 5 on gender equality?

Does budgeting for the SDGs take into account gender as cross-cutting across the agenda? For an example, does the budgeting for commitments around climate change take into account the issues and participation of women including rural women?

Neoliberal economic policies result in increased public-private partnerships and less focus on state obligation related to public services. Do the SDGs challenge such policies at all?

Are developed countries within and outside the region fulfilling their Official Development Assistance (ODA) obligations as a means of implementing the SDGs? How can there be better regional cooperation around this?

Partnerships for Sustainable Development

While the means of implementation of the SDGs puts emphasis on partnerships for sustainable development and goes on to identify civil society as an equal partner in implementing the agenda, this does not match up with the ground reality of many of our countries where space for civil society is being actively restricted by the state including through laws that penalize dissent, limit the independence of civil society and places strict regulations on funding for civil society. We see a role for semi government organizations like national women's commissions and national human rights commissions to advocate to the government to remove deterrents, both explicit and implicit, of free and independent civil society activism. We need democratic environments that allow NGOs to operate and to achieve their goals.

The growing role of and space for the private sector in our region also must be closely examined including their relationship with our governments. Financing for the implementation of the SDGs has the potential to depend heavily on the private sector and this will have definite implications of the growing power of the private sector in the region and across the world. Also the proliferation of GONGOS in most of our countries in the region is another issue that needs to be addressed. GONGOs are taking over the spaces of women's rights organizations in order to disseminate regressive and conservative state discourses on gender equality and women's rights.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO BETTER INTEGRATE HUMAN RIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

For Women's Rights Organizations and Civil Society Organizations

If we are to better engage with the SDGs, we need to expand our networks and coalitions. This would ensure that women's rights issues are raised beyond CEDAW and in spaces such as UPR, HLPF, the annual ILO meetings, etc. And also ensure that our reporting on women's human rights at various mechanisms integrate crosscutting and structural issues such as natural resources, illicit financial flows, impact of private sector on women's rights, extraterritorial obligations, etc.

Cross-movement building also means learning about each other's priorities and continuing our political education. We need peer learning at national level on human rights principles, sustainable development, financing for development, etc. to be able to make links between various processes and send the message to our states that they can't leave our issues behind in a selective manner.

We need to promote research that is focused on studying the economic, social and political impact of integrating women into sustainable development. There is a need for more qualitative research that will enable evidence-based policies that are informed by the nuances and interlinkages of issues faced by women.

Promote networking between CSOs for better exchange and learning from experiences and knowledges developed. We need to find out about the development of national level indicators for the SDGs and ensure that state obligations under the human rights framework are integrated into them. We need to continue to call for gender disaggregated data and also call on states to consider data from non-conventional sources and to go beyond quantitative data.

United Nations should acknowledge the barriers that exist in our countries with regard to civil society activism and engagement and create spaces and mechanisms that will better enable civil society, especially women human rights defenders to engage in national, regional and global processes.

² The concept of the purple economy is coined by the academic Ipek Ilkkaracan. Purple economy represents a feminist vision of a sustainable and egalitarian economic order complementing the green economy.

For States

If women's rights organizations are to be an equal partner in implementing the SDGs, restrictions on civil society have to be lifted.

National consultations and processes on the SDGs have to be in line with principles of governance practices such as transparency and participation.

If there is to be meaningful participation of civil society then consultations should not be held just in the capital, preparations for the VNR must begin more than a year before the actual review, calls for participation in the VNR must be shared publicly and shared with enough time, funding must be allocated to ensure civil society can participate in the consultations, and civil society must be included in the drafting of the VNRs.

There should be mainstreaming of the SDGs to national legislation as well as to commitments under international human rights commitments. This will not only pave the way for better institutional and policy cohesion in implementing the SDGs with human rights commitments at the centre but also influence the reviewing and reporting of progress on the SDGs.

Reporting through VNRs should happen first and foremost at national level with the participation of different stakeholders. And reporting on the SDGs cannot be siloed from reporting on human rights obligations and there must be proper coordination between line ministries and relevant agencies to make sure there is integration between the frameworks.

There should be active frameworks and instruments at regional level that take into consideration specific challenges and contexts of the region around implementing the 2030 Agenda with human rights at the centre. Processes that enable effective and meaningful civil society engagement need to be inbuilt to these at the outset itself.

States in the MENA region must collectively raise the fact that the transformative change envisaged by the 2030 Agenda and the rhetoric of leaving no one behind will not be realized unless specific challenges and contexts of the region, especially the Israeli occupation of Palestine, are acknowledged and addressed.





International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific (IWRAP Asia Pacific) is an independent, non-profit NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. IWRAP Asia Pacific has gained expertise, experience and credibility from over 20 years work of mobilizing and organizing women's groups and NGOs to support the work of the State in fulfilling its obligations to Respect, Protect and Fulfill women's human rights under CEDAW, through capacity building, advocacy and knowledge creation initiatives aimed toward development of effective national women's rights advocacy strategies.