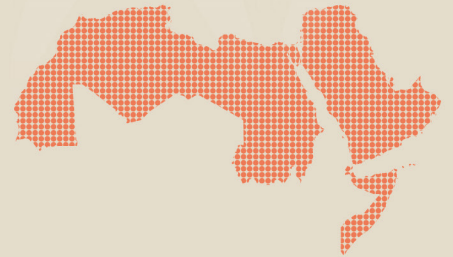




Advancing Equality: Assessing Women's Machineries in the Arab Region

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Background

The establishment of women's machineries has been prioritized since 1975 by the international community when the United Nations held the first World Conference on Women in Mexico. In 1995 the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) acknowledged that most member states established machinery for the advancement of women in their countries but noted that these machineries are "diverse in form and uneven in their effectiveness".

The Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD)'s think tank; The Renaissance Strategic Center (RSC) is undertaking this regional review, with a focus on women's machineries in the Arab world, as part of the review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) thirty years after its adoption.

Definition of Women's Machineries

The Beijing Platform for Action defines the Women's machineries in paragraph 201 as: "the central policy-coordinating unit inside government. Its main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas. The necessary conditions for the effective functioning of such national machineries include:

- (a) Location at the highest possible level in the Government, falling under the responsibility of a Cabinet minister;
- (b) Institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitate, as appropriate, decentralized planning, implementation, and monitoring to involve non-governmental organizations and community organizations from the grassroots upwards;
- (c) Sufficient resources in terms of budget and professional capacity;
- (d) Opportunity to influence the development of all government policies."

In paragraph 196, the Beijing Platform for Action adds: "National machineries are diverse in form and uneven in their effectiveness, and in some cases have declined. Often marginalized in national government structures, these mechanisms are frequently hampered by unclear mandates, lack of adequate staff, training, data and sufficient resources, and insufficient support from national political leadership."

Why Women's Machineries Matter?

The role of women's machineries in promoting gender justice and the empowerment of women and girls is crucial. These institutions can create impactful changes for women, girls, and the most vulnerable among them. They serve as the entry point for mainstreaming gender in public policies and legal frameworks. Efforts to establish national machineries for the advancement of women's and girls' rights in the Arab world began as early as the 1990s. However, the effectiveness of these women's machineries remains a significant question for the women's movement in the region.

In a Report¹ for the Beijing +20 review, UN-ESCWA writes: "National women's machineries in Arab States are usually situated within the highest executive branch of Government, in accordance with the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action.....However, only a careful examination of the human and financial resources allocated to such ministries, as well as their prerogatives and level of autonomy, can ascertain their actual ability to advocate for women's rights. Arab national women's machineries appear to be particularly vulnerable to shifts in priorities and budget reshuffles in comparison with other ministries. Almost all of them report significant funding constraints, which have driven some of these institutions to seek grants from international donors."

Considering the importance of these machineries for the advancement of women in the region ARDD takes the opportunity of the Beijing + 30 review to assess where they stand, how they dealt with the challenges identified in previous review processes, and develop a reflection that could frame and support women's movements advocacy in the region.

Methodology

The methodology was based on the review of the sections on women's machineries in the reports submitted by the Arab states for the Beijing + 30 reviews following the methodology designed by UN-Women. The latter used the following three questions that were deemed sufficient to assess the women's machineries capacity by UN Women during this review process.

¹ https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2283ESCWA_Women%20and%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region_Beijing20.pdf

- 1- Describe the current national bodies for women in your country and describe the measures your country has taken over the past five years to establish these bodies and/or enhance them.
- 2- What other mechanisms and tools has your country used in the past five years to mainstream gender equality? Gender-sensitive at the sector level? (For example, focal points in the executive or legislative authority or judicial, inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms, gender-sensitive institutional evaluation processes, and consultations with women's organizations)
- 3- If there is a national human rights institution in your country, what measures have you taken to address violations of women's rights and promote gender equality?

The countries that submitted reports when this report was drafted are Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and UAE.

In the second stage of the review if funding/capacity is available RSC would use the findings and recommendations to engage in a dialogue with civil on how to move and support the efficiency and efficacy of the women's machineries and or rethink their role.

Limitations and Challenges:

The report is based on the information that is provided by the women's machineries and will rely in this stage on their sole perspective.

Findings

National Machineries in the Arab States

1. Institutions Reportedly in Charge of Women's Affairs in the Arab States:

The Arab States established structures to promote women's rights, women's empowerment, and or the protection of women. Three countries established ministries (Algeria, Palestine, and Tunisia) in charge of women's affairs in association with family affairs, solidarity, children, and the elderly. The Palestinian Ministry is the only one focusing solely on women's affairs.

Five Arab states established high, supreme, or national councils for women's affairs these countries are (Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia). Three countries established a National Commission for Women in (Jordan and Lebanon and for Family Affairs in Syria). The (UAE) founded the General Women's Union, while in (Morocco, Oman, and Sudan) a women's directorate or unit is under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Solidarity, or Welfare.

As seen above the machineries established by Arab states in their majority associate women's affairs with family affairs, solidarity, social development, welfare, and social protection of vulnerable groups.

2. The Reported Areas of Focus of these National Machineries and the Perceived Vision for Women's Affairs

While they might have similar names the objectives of the machineries vary and are rather linked to the specificities of the region and the national political regime. A Ministry of Women Affairs can be concerned with the social protection of women and girls while a Women's Directorate in the Social Affairs Ministry focuses on women's empowerment and gender equality. Some of the machineries objectives are at the level of the policies, others are very focused. The focus is not always on women's rights or equality but protection, including protection from GBV, social protection, and economic empowerment emerge as core key issues for a majority of countries.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs in Algeria is concerned with the social protection of vulnerable groups, the protection of the family, and its integration into the development processes. The Palestinian Ministry works with others to support the development of gender-sensitive policies and strategies. In Tunisia, the Ministry focuses on women's economic empowerment and ending gender-based violence.

In Bahrain the High Council for Women aims at including women in sustainable development. In Egypt the High Council focuses on women's leadership, economic empowerment, and on building women's capacities. In Iraq the Council focuses on women's rights, coordination, and on social development. In Kuwait the mandate of the Council is the protection of women and girls with specific focus on economic empowerment. The Council in Saudi Arabia drafts strategies and policies for gender equality. It promotes women, raises awareness of their rights, and ensures that the other structures promoting women's rights are achieving results.

The Jordanian and the Lebanese National Commissions have a mandate to integrate women's issues in all national strategies and policies. In Syria the commission is concerned with the advancement and empowerment of Syrian women.

In Morocco the structure in the Ministry of Social Development leads the coordination for the implementation of the strategy for equality and equity and ending GBV. In Oman the main machinery coordinates and monitors all the policies related to women's development. In Sudan it works on equality and women's empowerment with a specific focus on economic empowerment and social protection.

In the UAE the General Union works on the promotion of women and their empowerment.

Oman and Saudi Arabia refer to Islam in their framing of gender equality. Saudi Arabia states in its report that the work on women's affairs is aligned with human rights as framed by Sharia.

3. Location of the Machineries and Reporting Lines

The Beijing Platform of Action recommends that the national machinery be placed at the highest level of the administration. This is reflected in various forms by the Arab states. Most of them have the structure of participating in the Council of Ministers if not reporting to the Prime Minister/Head of the Government Office.

In Iraq, the High Council is headed by the Prime Minister. In Lebanon, it has an advisory role to the prime minister. In Kuwait, the machinery participates in the Council of Ministers, and in Saudi Arabia the Council reports to the Executive. In Tunisia, the ministry coordinates with the prime minister's office. In the UAE the Council of Ministers has a unit that coordinates with the Women's Union. In the Kingdom of Bahrain, a Princess, the wife of the King, heads the Council.

The Jordanian National Commission for Women works under the guidance of the Prime Minister while the Ministerial Committee for the Empowerment of Women is under the patronage of a member of the Royal Family. In Morocco, another institution that is not the official machinery was established by the Head of the Government Office.

4. Multiplying Structures

In many Arab States, there is a tendency to multiply and create more institutions, but it is reportedly clear how these institutions interact and support each other or where the leadership sits. The list institutions mentioned below does not include independent structures or institutions with specific mandate nor units that promote gender mainstreaming in their departments.

In Algeria, the Ministry of Solidarity, Family, and Women's Affairs has established a National Council for Women and the Family. In Bahrain, there is a national commission in charge of monitoring the plan for "the balance between women and men". In Iraq, the High Council is supported by the National Department for Iraqi Women (this replaced a ministry), there are further structures like the Commission of Women, Children, and Families in the Parliament; A High Council for Women's Affairs; a Section for Social Protection for Women; and the department for Family and Child Protection and the Society Police.

In Jordan, there is a Ministerial Committee for the Empowerment of Women institutionalized within the permanent committees in the prime minister's office that supports the implementation of the national women's strategy under the guidance of the Prime Minister. In Kuwait, there is an additional directorate for Women and Children in the Ministry of Social Affairs in charge of the Protection of Women and Girls and a Women and Business Commission in the High Council for Planning. Morocco established in 2022 a national commission for gender equality and women's empowerment in the Office of the Head of the Government.

In Oman, there are further commissions in the Ministry of Social Development one working on the implementation of the CEDAW and the second focusing on family affairs. In Saudi Arabia, there is a directorate for women's empowerment in the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development and a Unit for Women, Children, and Families in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that participates in international conferences. In the UAE, besides the Unit in the Council of Ministers, there is also a Council for Gender Balance.

5. Financial and Legal Independence

While financial and legal independence is recommended by the Beijing Platform for Action and identified as the main challenge for women's machineries, it is not reported systematically. Some reports mentioned the machinery's budget but did not report the existence of a specific line of the budget, its increase in one case, or that they actively fundraise for their activities.

The Bahrain High Council for Women has its budget and its legislative framework. In Kuwait, the report mentions that the Ministry of Social Affairs has the human and financial resources for its mandate but resources for the High Council are not mentioned. In Lebanon, the Commission has a budget under the prime ministry's budget while in Palestine the Ministry fundraises for the implementation of the gender-related strategy. In Saudi Arabia, the budget for the various institutions is said to have increased.

Strategies, Policies, and Other Mechanisms to Promote Gender Equality

1. National Strategy for Gender Equality

Many Arab states adopted a vision for 2030, this vision has various objectives for some of them it aims to achieve the targets of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and as part of this vision develop a national strategy to promote women and achieve targets related to SDG 5 on gender equality.

The countries that have a vision for 2030 include Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. In this context, Bahrain established a national strategy to promote Bahraini women (reflecting the will of the King). Their vision for 2030 includes a strong component for women's economic empowerment and women's economic participation and a "national framework for gender balance" was established. Egypt's vision for 2030 aims to achieve sustainable development goals and includes a national strategy for women's empowerment till 2030 and a strategy for gender balance as well. Kuwait aims to reach the SDGs targets through its Vision 2030 including SDG 5. For that purpose, it established an initiative to end GBV and another one for women's economic empowerment. Oman does not report on a national strategy but stipulates that around 35% of Omani women participated in defining the country's vision for 2030.

Other countries established a national strategy for women with various timeframes and focus. Iraq established a national strategy for women (2023-2030) and the National Iraqi Plan has a section (article 18) about women's empowerment, protection, and work opportunities for divorcees and widows. Jordan adopted a national women's strategy that focuses on mainstreaming gender in the public sector. Lebanon also adopted a women's strategy for 2022-2030 and has reported a strategy to end GBV.

Morocco has a national strategy to promote gender equality and created an observatory for ensuring gender mainstreaming in all policies and another observatory for gender-sensitive justice. There is also a commission working on the reform of the Moudawana (Family Code) ordered by the King that is expected to reinforce women's rights. Palestine has a national cross-sectoral strategy for gender equality (2024-2029) and established an observatory of the state of violence against women. Sudan has a National Strategy for women's empowerment and participation in the labor force.

Syria has a national strategy for gender justice 2023-2030. Tunisia has a national strategy to institutionalize gender mainstreaming into planning, monitoring, and budgeting in the public sector. Finally, the UAE has a strategy for gender balance till 2026 and established a council for gender balance.

2. Other Mechanisms to Promote Gender Equality

Besides the mechanisms mentioned above and that accompany the strategy the Arab states defined for women's promotion and that show their areas of focus, few countries established a reward for distinguished women. These countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, and Palestine. The award recognizes distinguished women in Kuwait and Palestine while for Bahrain it acknowledges efforts to promote women.

3. Coordination with Others and Other structures for Mainstreaming

One of the most important roles of the national machinery is coordination. It involves working with others to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in public policies and in the services provided by the administration at the various levels and that the various commitments made under the national gender strategy are followed up and upon. Additional structures are created to support mainstreaming or reporting.

In Algeria, the Ministry coordinates with other administrations and other institutions mentioned in the report are the Centre for Research, Communication, and Documentation and the Republic Mediator both deemed relevant institutions for women's promotion.

In Bahrain where the focus is on access to equal opportunities, there are 63 commissions in the public sector supporting gender balance and the High Council coordinates with all stakeholders for gender balance including the private sector. Egypt established as well 32 units in the public sector for ensuring gender balance while in Iraq there are 76 sections in the public sector for women's affairs (تشكيلات شؤون المرأة).

In Jordan, it is the Inter-Ministerial Committee plays a coordination role with other governmental institutions and there are 14 women's related units created in the public sector and a unit in each of the Kingdom's municipalities. Lebanon established a gender focal point system and established processes to build capacity in the various public sector administrations.

In Morocco, the Women's Directorate under the Ministry of Solidarity and Inclusion coordinates with others in the public sector, in the private sector, and with civil society. In Palestine, the Ministry leads the coordination with others as needed.

The Saudi Council of Family Affairs and the Sudanese Ministry of Social Development coordinate with others as needed and the Sudanese Ministry of Social Development is the focal point for external stakeholders.

Morocco, Palestine, and Tunisia have taken a step further in gender mainstreaming, using gender-sensitive budgeting while Saudi Arabia is planning to start gender-sensitive budgeting soon.

4. Accountability

Few mechanisms are reported to ensure accountability and results in the reported complex network of mechanisms.

In Bahrain, there is a national commission that monitors the implementation of the national plan for gender balance and a national report is issued every 2 years. In Jordan, the Inter-Ministerial Committee ensures the adoption of gender-friendly policies and the allocation of resources, supporting the JNCW while the latter is establishing an observatory of women's issues to monitor advances in laws and policies and will gather data related to the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

In Lebanon, there is a project to establish an observatory of women's rights. While in Morocco, the National Commission works on the monitoring of the implementation of Morocco's international commitments on gender equality. In Tunisia, the strategy is monitored by the Council of peers which was created in 2022.

Human Rights Institutions and their Support of Gender Equality

In the reporting on the implementation of the BPA, member states were asked if they established human rights institutions and how these are supporting gender equality and the human rights of women.

Algeria has established the National Council for Human Rights which has an advisory role to the President of the Country. The Council has a commission (اللجنة الدائمة للمرأة والطفل والفئات الضعيفة) in charge of women, children and vulnerable groups. The commission works on women's promotion and gender equality and follows up on the complaints received by the public mediator.

Bahrain established the National Institution for Human Rights and the fourth objective of its strategic plan for 2022-2026 is related to gender equality. The focus in terms of rights is about socio-economic and cultural rights and there is specific mention of decent housing and equality in wages. The institution has a mechanism to respond to complaints from women and girls about discrimination, monitor discrimination against them, and provide legal aid for women and girls.

Egypt has a National Council for Human Rights. The council reports nationally about human rights in Egypt and monitor discrimination including against women's rights that are reported on regularly, including on GBV.

Jordan established the National Centre for Human Rights more than 20 years ago. The latter reports annually on the situation of civil, social, economic, and cultural rights in the Kingdom. The Centre regularly recommends aligning Jordanian laws and policies with Jordan's commitments under international law and international mechanisms. The Centre accepts complaints from individuals related to discrimination and monitors women's human rights violations in specific cases (political violence, women's in agricultural fields, etc.)

The National Council for Human Rights in Morocco is reportedly committed to promoting and the defense of women's rights. The Council drafts recommendations to reinforce gender justice and the defense and promotion of women's rights in the socio-economic, cultural, and political areas. There is a national organization for human rights in Oman that monitors the situation of human rights including women's rights and drafts the reports on the implementation of the CEDAW.

Palestine included the independent instance for human rights and its work on gender equality and women's empowerment. The instance monitors discrimination reviews the legal frameworks, and drafts Palestine report on international frameworks. The Sudanese National Commissariat for human rights monitors rights and freedoms and does receive complaints for discrimination. It monitors severe violence against women and makes recommendations for ensuring accountability.

Few countries mention the existence of a national institution for human rights but do not mention its contribution to gender equality or women's rights. This is the case in Iraq and Lebanon. The latter mentions limitations related to budget and internal challenges. The Instance of Human Rights in Saudi Arabia works on human rights that are aligned with Sharia. It is headed by a woman who has a minister title, an advisory role and is reporting to the executive. It ensures that the Kingdom aligns with its international commitments.

The UAE established a national commission for human rights. It is not mentioned if this commission works specifically on women's human rights or monitors them. However, it seems that the coordination with the various ministries on women's rights is undertaken by this commission.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Approach to Gender Equality: A Rights-Based Approach Versus Pragmatism

There is no doubt that women's machineries are key to gender equality, they have a central role in ensuring that national policies and legal frameworks support equality. The desk review showed that the recurring key questions and concerns raised by women's movements in the region are about their efficiency and factual capacity to promote change. Generally, the women's movements are not satisfied with the women's machineries in the region with variations depending on the context of each Arab country.

The first issue that affects the settings of these machineries is the importance and relevance of gender equality for the country and its administration. In many of the Arab countries, gender equality is becoming increasingly important when it comes to its external image. In a recent [article](#) Rola El Hussein writes: *"Inspired by both an international push for gender equality and changes in international gender norms, Arab regimes have adopted a specific form of state feminism. Their use of state bodies and policies to promote gender equality and reform the status of women has allowed them to present a modernized face to the world. They have thus instrumentalized gender equality policies for their own legitimizing purposes."* Despite this view and the push for gender equality at various times in the recent history of Arab countries, a close look at the prerogatives of the women's machinery in each country indicates the areas that are pushed and considered adequate to the context of the country and adequate to its population.

Arab states associate women's affairs with family affairs, solidarity, social development, welfare, and social protection of vulnerable groups, this is concordant with the additional languages used in defining the objectives, the areas of focus, and projects adopted by the machineries. These indicate limitations of the approach to women's affairs as language related to rights and addressing discrimination is barely used. We notice that when empowerment is used it is associated with economic empowerment. However, this approach might be the most appropriate in the context of countries where public opinion is not necessarily in favor of gender equality in terms of equality of rights when these could be understood as not aligned with Islamic laws and Sharia. The focus on concrete areas like protection from GBV, better gender balance, women's political participation, support for women's economic empowerment, and equal access to education would in the end lead to gender justice and change in the societies.

The Priorities of Women's Machineries and Donors' Interest

The findings about the multiplication of institutions provide some indication of the evolution of the areas of focus in the Arab states when it comes to women's affairs. Some of these areas are aligned on donors' interest as the women's machineries have little budget. The report of the state of Palestine is a case in point as it is stated that the Ministry in charge of Women's Affairs is looking for funds to implement its strategy for gender equality. As also reported by the UN-ESCWA for the review of the Beijing + 20, the women's machineries do not have sufficient funds to be able to implement their strategies and rely in their majority on international aid.

The drama of women's rights is that it continues to be associated with religion and with foreign agendas and this is generating a growing backlash with the incapacity of the women's movement in the region to gain support to issues as blatant as feminicide. Women's affairs end up being used for various purposes without real support for women's rights, which is the reason why some scholars and women's organizations criticize state feminism. In this context, the women's machineries priorities might be the best way to improve pragmatically the situation of Arab women and girls without entering the sterile debate on women's rights and their alignment or not with religion, and state feminism might be the way forward for gender transformation.

Improving the Efficiency of Women's Machinery

Beyond the question of Arab states' agenda in pushing the women's promotion, clearly the reports indicate some issues that could be improved to make the women's machineries more efficient.

- Improving Coordination between the Multitude of Public Institutions Working on Gender Issues, Gender Mainstreaming, Women's Promotion, and Women's Human Rights

The multitude of institutions that work on various aspects of women's and gender issues need to be coordinated and the role of the women's machinery should be clarified, and their mandate (and legal framework if necessary) needs to be strengthened and shared with all other public institutions. They should have the mandate (and authority) to coordinate all work undertaken on gender equality and ensure actions are taken by all other institutions. It is not always clear why a new structure is created besides the existing machinery.

- Improving Accountability

Women's machinery should be responsible for the promotion of women's affairs when they are placed in the top of the hierarchy within the government and have the authority to do so with the needed resources. Some of the structures are located within the prime minister's cabinet, few advise the prime minister while one is being advised by the prime minister. This paradox shows the complexity of the politics around women's promotion in certain contexts. In some of cases, the creation of different structures might be motivated by a perception of lack of capacity, lack of effectiveness, or lack of power of the existing women's machinery.

- Budgeting for Gender Equality

The women's machinery does not always have the necessary budget for its functioning and relies on international funding, which generates an inconsistent implementation of the policies and strategies, with priorities set by the international aid strategic framework with no necessary ownership and no sustainability of the implemented interventions. Ensuring funding from the national budget for gender equality and ensuring that the women's machinery has adequate resources is the only way to ensure results.

As mentioned by JNCW in Jordan report and recommended by the Royal Commission to Modernize the Political Systems in Jordan in its Executive Plan, an efficient national mechanism and women's machinery will need a legal framework that guarantees their legal status and financial independence.

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This mechanism is still working https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=58072&lang=en&name=en_news

In 2022 the government adopted a strategy for gender mainstreaming in the public sector: <https://ogp.gov.jo/en/Pages/Milestones/1116>

There is also a Women's strategy in Jordan 2020-2025

[https://www.women.jo/sites/default/files/2022-09/The National Strategy for Women 2020 - 2025.pdf](https://www.women.jo/sites/default/files/2022-09/The%20National%20Strategy%20for%20Women%2020%20-%202025.pdf)

