



UNITED NATIONS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME
**REGIONAL GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY
FOR THE ARAB STATES 2024-2026**

Resilience, Opportunities and Agency

رؤى

Foreword

The Arab States region has been slowly progressing toward higher levels of gender equality. However, on top of global crises and uncertainties that have engulfed economies and societies around the world, protracted and escalating conflicts and their repercussions across the region, further stifle sustainable development and gender equality.

In this context, the Regional Bureau for Arab States in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), developed this Regional Gender Equality Strategy 2024-2026, which is guided by the UNDP Global Strategic Plan 2022-2025 and the Global Gender Equality Strategy 2022-2025.

Grounded in the UNDP Arab States regional programming vision, this Regional Gender Equality Strategy defines the focus areas for UNDP's gender equality programming in the Arab Region that are considered critical to push forward positive systemic change.

The Strategy posits that supporting gender equality policies and institutional environments; increasing equal access to and control over resources; and addressing harmful, discriminatory and violent norms and behaviors within UNDP programming areas will advance equal opportunities in the green economic transition, enhance community resilience in contexts of crisis and vulnerability, while strengthening women's individual and collective agency.

The strategy also guides institutional change within UNDP across the region, as it strives to equip us with the skills, tools and resources to lead gender equality programmes and policies effectively. It further institutionalizes gender equality work in our

processes and helps us meet our commitments toward our organizational policies and towards men and women in the region.

The strategy was developed in a consultative process with input from our country offices and regional teams, as well as our partners and stakeholders across the region. We are grateful for their contributions and insights. The strategy will also be implemented in a collaborative manner across our thematic teams at regional and country level and with our partners from government, private sector, civil society organizations, international financial institutions, regional and international organizations and UN agencies and others.

This strategy is an invitation to all interested stakeholders to learn about UNDP's priorities in the coming period so that we can work together through joint platforms to advance gender equality in the region.

The time was never as critical as it is now to put all efforts together not only to safeguard the gains that we have achieved thus far, but to advance gender equality with the recognition that the development agenda in the region will never be achieved without it.



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Table of Contents

01 INTRODUCTION..... 04

02 METHODOLOGY..... 06

03 GENDER EQUALITY CONTEXT..... 08

04 PURPOSE & OBJECTIVES..... 13

05 DIRECTIONS OF CHANGE..... 15

06 GUIDING PRINCIPLES..... 17

07 PROGRAMMING PRIORITIES..... 19

08 THEORY OF CHANGE..... 24

09 INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION..... 28

10 PARTNERSHIPS..... 30

11 MONITORING AND REVIEWS..... 32

12 REFERENCES..... 34

01

Introduction



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Conceptually, gender is a culturally determined set of social relations that differentiate the roles of men and women in society and their access to, and control over, resources. These relations are often determined by unequal power relations that lead to inequalities. Gender roles and differentiations are not immutable, but vary, evolve, change, and can be changed. Gender roles stifle the fulfilment of human potential and the indivisibility of human rights. If the goal of human development and achievement of Agenda 2030, which is UNDP's overarching development priority, is to be achieved and sustained, these roles must be changed.

UNDP developed its global Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2022–2025, as the key framework guiding its work on gender equality. The GES 2022–2025 defines gender equality priorities across the five signature solutions of UNDP's Strategic Plan 2022–2025, and further articulates the sixth signature solution dedicated to gender equality. The GES 2022–2025 emphasizes the necessity of transforming power relations and dedicating human

and financial resources to achieving gender equality. It also calls for diversification of partners, working in addition to governments with civil society organizations (CSOs), feminist organizations, the private sector and unconventional partners. GES 2022–2025 also calls for the development of regional strategies or action plans.

Aligned with the GES 2022–2025 and based on its overall vision, the Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) developed the RBAS Regional Gender Equality Strategy (RBAS GES) for 2024–2026. The RBAS GES 2024–2026 identifies priorities for gender equality programming in the region and for institutional strengthening for achieving gender results and implementation of the commitments in the UNDP GES 2022–2025. It also provides an Action Plan to be implemented at the regional level for the duration of the strategy. As Country Offices (COs) are required to align their country gender strategies with the UNDP GES 2022–2025, the regional strategy's purpose is to provide further focus and identify areas where investments will be directed to strengthen the UNDP's gender equality policy and programming offer and results at regional and CO levels.

02

Methodology



Image: Egypt ©Claudia Wiens

The RBAS GES was developed in a phased process. The first consultation event was the RBAS Gender Community of Practice Retreat in November 2022, which brought together all COs gender staff and selected programme colleagues, members of the global gender team, the regional thematic team leaders as well as regional external stakeholders¹. Trends, opportunities, challenges and priorities for UNDP's work on gender equality in the region were identified, in line with the GES. This resulted in developing the building blocks for the regional strategy which were further refined through

various programming discussions that took place during 2023, and aligned with RBAS' vision for its work across the region that prioritizes the three thematic areas: poverty and inequality; energy and environment and governance and resilience and planned to be implemented through four emerging portfolios. Following validation of the draft with various teams across the region, the strategy also benefited from consultations with regional and international stakeholders which took place in April and May 2024 as part of socializing of the strategy.

03

Gender equality context

Gender inequality is a key development challenge in the Arab region and remains an impediment to achieving Agenda 2030. Despite that countries in the region vary greatly in terms of GDP and Human Development, women continue to face legal, economic, political, social, cultural and institutional barriers that undermine their full participation in society, albeit to varying degrees among and within countries. Women who are at intersections of disadvantages such as poor women, women with disabilities or migrants² are the most vulnerable. The interlinked challenges of governance deficits, economic constraints and environmental degradation, compounded by natural disasters and conflict hinder progress toward egalitarian societies. Discriminatory social norms and practices prevail in societies and institutions, and stand in the way of women's participation, personal freedoms and legal reforms.



Image: ©UNDP Jordan

Several trends in the region challenge advancement of gender equality: **the lack of economic diversification, weak private sector in most countries as well as debt and fiscal constraints** in Middle-income countries (MICs) and fragile and crisis countries (FCCs) strain social expenditures and limit growth and economic opportunities for women. The multiple crises and price hikes raise poverty levels and thus exposure to gender differentiated vulnerabilities and risks of exploitation and violence especially in fragile and middle-income countries. **Governance challenges and restrictions on civic space** hinder women's ability to effectively participate in politics at all levels and limit the influence of women civil society. Legal inequality is still prevalent despite some progress and women's access to justice is restricted. **The region is also one of the most water stressed regions, and one of the most heavily affected by climate change**, leading to drought, food scarcity and climate displacement particularly limiting rural women's³ access to resources, increasing their care responsibility while displacement increases risks gender-based violence and trafficking.⁴ Women develop their own adaptive strat-

egies yet insufficiently benefit from climate action⁵. The region is also prone to disasters, yet lacks preparedness, as recently witnessed the earthquakes in Syria and Morocco and the flood in Libya. **Conflict has been escalating in the region for the past decade, compounding the above trends, and remains the key deterrent of progress and gender equality.** Half of the countries: Iraq, Libya, Lebanon, the State of Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen are in conflict or fragility. The Syrian refugee crisis remains the largest in the world. The occupied Palestinian territory is undergoing massive escalation of atrocities since October 2023. Sudan is experiencing a wider conflict with severe consequences since April 2023. Forced displacement and conflict erode services and protection, destroys livelihoods and economic opportunities, cuts off social support systems and exposes women to increased gender-based discrimination and sexual and gender-based violence. With the continuation of conflict and its negative repercussions, **there is rising backlash against the human rights and gender equality agendas.** Women CSOs and human rights defenders are bearing the brunt of this backlash.

On the other hand, opportunities exist that can be leveraged for advancement in gender equality. **The rise in education especially among young women**, including in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and the gradual diversification of specializations, if leveraged, can increase the opportunities for women in the productive economy. **The green and renewable energy transition** is also gaining momentum in the region offering new avenues for increasing the participation of women in sectors where they have previously been excluded. **The expansion of digital technologies** and the potential growth in digital production and digitally enabled business processes, with the right investments and suitable policies and bridging the gender digital divide can contribute to advancing women's participation and gender equality. **The region witnessed positive legal reforms in the past decades** granting women more rights in some areas such as in legal entitlements and labor laws where momentum can be utilized. Another opportunity is the **presence and role of women machineries and women CSOs** leading advocacy for gender equality and response to crises with new forms of young feminist activism following the waves of the Arab uprisings and COVID-19 pandemic emerging⁶. Finally, regional frameworks such as the UNSCR 1325 Regional Action Plan, the Youth, Peace and Security Strategy, and international processes such as the SDG Review, the Beijing +30, the Climate and environment COP mechanisms can also be leveraged to advocate for advancement of gender equality policies and women's participation.

Gender equality trends in data

The available data attests to the overall lag in progress towards gender equality in the region. The UNDP's Gender Development Index stood at 0.877 in 2022, and the Gender Inequality Index at 0.523, placing the region as the second worst performing region in the world.⁷ The reality, however, is more nuanced than av-

erages show. There are large variations among countries in the region and they include those with very high, and very low human development. Variations also exist within countries, where various groups of women are at the intersection of multiple disadvantages related to migration status, disability, geography, socioeconomic status and other factors of exclusion and marginalization. Gender and intersectional disaggregated data is uneven across the different sectors and mostly scarce, which limits the analysis and hinders evidence-based policymaking and monitoring of progress.

Nevertheless, based on the data available the **key trends are outlined below**.

Legal reform. All countries in the region, with the exception of Somalia and Sudan, have ratified the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, albeit with reservations in most countries,⁸ and progress in legal reform has been patchy.⁹ Out of 74 indicators on the status of gender equality in the law, countries with the most progress meet no more than 54 percent of these indicators.¹⁰ Stagnation is observed particularly in personal status codes, citizenship rights and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Women and girls still do not have adequate access to justice due to awareness and capacity deficits, high costs, social norms and low participation of women in the sector.¹¹

Education and health care. Although literacy rates among women are lower than men in the region, there has been progress in completion of secondary education, with 78.5% of girls and 76.6% of boys completing lower secondary school in Middle East & North Africa as of 2020.¹² Similarly, in many countries, young women outperform men in enrollment in tertiary education. However, girls in poor communities and rural areas, especially in FCCs and in contexts of displacement face significant barriers to access. In health care, there is disparity in access to quality services, as investment in primary health care is sub-optimal. Freedom in accessing sexual and reproductive health services in the region is still curtailed.



Image: ©UNDP Lebanon

STEM and digital skills. Although historically, there has been gender segregation in educational specializations, young women are entering new and more diversified disciplines. The number of women and girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) degrees is now higher than men in the region and higher than in developed economies, with 48.1 percent of STEM graduates in Arab countries being women.¹³ Although, progress in digital access among women in the region varies, the average gap is still high. In 2017, the average gender gap in internet users was at 17.3 percent, 50 percent higher than the global gap,¹⁴ however, averages do not reveal that in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the gap is almost closed.

Economic participation. The average rate of women's labour force participation is low, standing at 20 percent compared to 69 percent for men and to 47 percent at the global level, albeit with huge variation ranging from 6 percent in Yemen, to 60 percent in Qatar.¹⁵ It is worth noting that while this indicator is highest among GCC countries, the gender gap is similar across sub-regional groups (GCCs, middle-in-

come countries and crisis countries). There is also high unemployment among economically active women in the region. The average unemployment rate is higher among women than among men (21 percent versus 9 percent) and especially among youth (43 percent versus 22 percent).¹⁶ The gender gap in unemployment is highest in crisis countries. Unemployment has increased, especially among young women,¹⁷ and women with tertiary degrees are twice as likely to be unemployed than men, in almost all the countries in the region.¹⁸ There is still a gender wage gap for similar work which ranges from 0.6 in Lebanon to 0.8 in Algeria,¹⁹ and women are underrepresented in managerial positions.²⁰ According to the 2021–2022 Human Development Report the gross national income per capita for women in the Arab States was estimated at 21.9 percent of men's (approximately one fifth), compared to 57.7 percent of men's globally.²¹ Women are also under-represented among business owners. Available data shows that the range is from 7 percent in Algeria to 21 percent in Bahrain.²² There is improvement in parity in entrepreneurship, with one out of three start-ups in the Arab region founded or led by women.²³

Poverty, informality and social protection. Poverty in the region has been on the rise, especially following the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the COVID-19 crisis and the Ukraine war. Poverty is expected to increase further with the war in Sudan and Gaza. Women in poverty are at an increased disadvantage and bear the brunt of food insecurity. Data and analysis on feminization of poverty in the region, however, remain insufficient. In countries where data is available, informality among women stands at 62 percent (lower than among men at 69%), and 44 percent of their employment in non-agricultural sectors is informal.²⁴ Informality among women is higher than among men in some FCCs, especially among youth (Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen) and Djibouti, but it is low in GCCs.²⁵ Additionally, social protection of women in the region is low, especially social security. In countries in western Asia, only 8.6 percent of working age women are legally covered by comprehensive social security systems, compared with 36.1 percent of men; this 27.5 percent gap is the highest in the world, compared to the global average of 7.8 percentage points.²⁶ Women in the region are highly engaged in unpaid care work and devote 5 to 6 times more time to it than men do, which is higher than the world average of 3.2 times,²⁷ with implications on their public participation.

Gender-based violence. Systematic data on gender-based violence is scarce, however, estimates place lifetime intimate partner violence at 31 percent,²⁸ which is higher than the average

global estimate of 27 percent.²⁹ In addition to domestic violence, there are other forms of GBV in the region, especially among displaced women, including sexual harassment, child marriage, forced marriage, and in some countries, female genital mutilation. Violent conflict directly increases sexual and gender-based violence which is used as a weapon of war. Institutionalized militarized masculinity; proliferation of arms and the lack of accountability and rule of law provides an enabling environment for the increase in all forms of violence, and for sexual, and other types of, exploitation deepening multiple risks for women.

Political participation. Women's average participation in lower houses of parliaments and consultative "Shoura" councils is 18.1 percent in 2023 compared to the global average of 26.5 percent, with rates highest in GCC at 26.2 percent,³⁰ followed by middle-income countries at 19.9 percent, then crisis countries at 15 percent.³¹ All countries are below the 30 percent minimum standard for the region, except for the United Arab Emirates where women constitute 50 percent in the Shoura council. Women's share in top leadership in the public sector is also low, estimated at 12 percent in countries where data is available.³² Women in the region are also under-represented in ministerial cabinets (13.7 percent),³³ local municipal councils, and are not adequately included in climate change or peace negotiations. While participation rates are already low, the degree to which participation has been effective is another matter for consideration.



Image: Egypt ©Claudia Wiens

04

Purpose & Objectives

The Regional Gender Equality Strategy is a requirement of the global Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025. The aims of the RBAS Regional Gender Equality Strategy are the following:

- **Define the focus areas for gender equality programming** in the Arab Region based on UNDP's emerging priority areas of work/portfolios. The focus areas will be implemented at regional and country levels.
- **Define a theory of change for advancing gender equality in the region.** The regional gender strategy provides guidance on the pillars of intervention that are required to advance gender equality across programmes/portfolios.
- **Define concrete commitments for institutional change** informed by the gender equality seal for development.
- **Facilitate engagement with internal and external stakeholders** in an ongoing process and open-up opportunities for partnerships and collaboration.
- **Strengthen accountability:** Meet the commitments under the global Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025 and the UN Gender SWAP.

Programmatic objectives

In response to the above context, UNDP will seek to achieve the following objectives through this strategy:

- To support regional and national stakeholders to enhance gender equality in **resilience** against multiple risks, especially among disadvantaged groups, given the exposure of the region to multiple crises at macro level and the individual micro risks.
- To support regional and national stakeholders in achieving equal **opportunities** in future economies and societies, across various social groups, by minimizing barriers, providing incentives and affirmative action to enable equal benefit from the transformation toward green and digital economies and be included in decision-making spaces
- To strengthen and leverage women's **agency** in multiple sectors, and at all levels, recognizing the role various women groups and their organizations play in advancing gender equality, social justice, and resilience of communities and societies.



05

Directions of Change

In line with UNDP's Strategic Plan and the global Gender Equality Strategy (2022–2025), the regional strategy aims for the following three directions of change:³⁴

- **Structural transformation.** As long as violent conflicts are prevalent, structural transformation for gender equality cannot fully occur. As such, UNDP will explore new approaches and solutions to affect change in this context, and to tackle the resistance and “invisible” causes of persistence of gender inequalities, with the participation of stakeholders in the region. It will seek to support shifts in systems, policies, laws, institutions and resources in favor of gender equality.
- **Leaving no one behind.** UNDP recognizes that populations are not homogeneous, and that inequalities exist among them. As such

UNDP will define its response based on gender and intersectional analysis that uncovers factors of disadvantage, discrimination and deprivation and highlights experiences of various social groups. In the region, UNDP will focus on young women, women in poverty, in rural areas, informal workers, survivors of SGBV, mobile women and women with disabilities.

- **Building resilience.** As countries are affected by one or more macro-level crisis: conflict, climate change, and disasters, and micro-level risks, such as poverty, informality and unemployment, UNDP will place gender equality at the heart of its risk and crisis prevention, mitigation, protection and preparedness through gender-responsive analysis and women's participation in decision-making.



Image: ©UNDP Yemen

06

Guiding principles

The RBAS GES will be guided by the following principles that reinforce each other:

Gender responsiveness³⁵ [Figure 1]: At minimum UNDP will address in all its projects and programmes the differential needs of men, women and marginalized populations and advance equitable distribution of resources, status, benefits and rights. UNDP will balance the transformation of social norms, negative cultural values and power structures with the “do no harm” principle.

Do no harm: Recognizing that no development intervention is gender-neutral, UNDP will undertake gender risk analysis and implement mitigation measures to ensure that, at minimum, projects/programmes do not perpetuate or exacerbate gender inequalities, do not lead to or exacerbate gender-based violence, or compromise the safety of participants and partners.

Engaging men and boys: UNDP will promote

engagement of men at household/community or national levels in its country and regional programming and strengthen the use of masculinity approaches to garner male support for advancing gender equality, raise awareness around toxic masculinity and reduce resistance to gender equality and liberate both men and women from harmful gender norms.

Inclusion and participation: UNDP will facilitate safe and inclusive spaces for women, women-led organizations, gender equality advocates and organizations, including those led by young women, in its programmes and projects and in devising forward-looking solutions for gender equality in the region.

Integrated solutions: Responding to the complexity of gender inequality as a development challenge, UNDP will respond through integrated solutions across thematic areas of UNDP’s work.

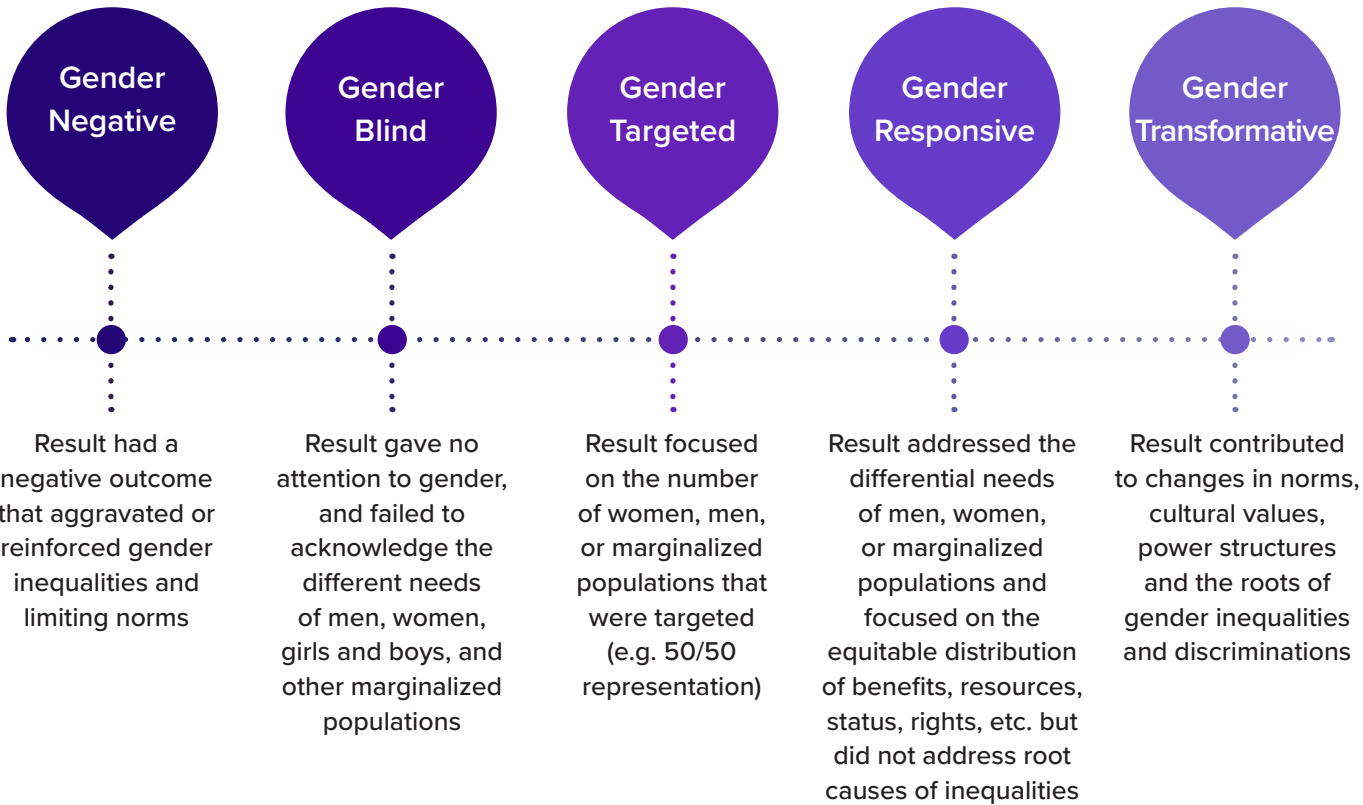


Figure 1: the Gender Results Effectiveness Scale

07

Programming Priorities

The section below identifies gender equality priorities in UNDP's emerging programme portfolios in the region, which will focus our offer at regional and country levels. As per UNDP's Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2025, gender mainstreaming or integration is a requirement for all UNDP programme and project activities. UNDP is also required to develop interventions that specifically address gender equality as a primary objective, in fulfilment of signature solution 6 of the Strategic Plan 2022–2025. As such implementation of these priorities will be through this twin-track approach.

PRIORITY 1

Future economies are gender-inclusive and transformative

Emerging Portfolio One: Support to green and digital socio-economic transformation [Contribution to Signature solutions 1 and 3]

1.1 Gender equality in jobs, entrepreneurship and MSMEs especially in green and digital sectors.

Building on UNDP's good practices and lessons identified for women's economic empowerment, UNDP will support governments to improve the enabling environment to facilitate women's economic empowerment, such as through research and policy analysis from a gender perspective and with a focus future of work policies. UNDP will also strengthen gender responsive market system and value chain approaches to support women's entrepreneurship and MSMEs, and ensure gender responsive, do-no harm approaches in employment and cash for work projects. UNDP will complement this work with interventions to increase women's access to "green" digital, water and energy services in local communities [In connection with priority 3.1 below]. UNDP will also work with private sector employers, using the Gender Equality Seal for the Private Sector methodology, for more equal employment opportunities, ca-

reer progression in safe environments and higher inclusion of women MSE's in larger companies' value chains.

1.2 Advancing the care economy.

UNDP will engage in processes with multiple stakeholders for advancing the care economy by looking at policies, services, data, and norms. This will potentially include regional tracking of care policies, developing and implementing a methodology for strengthening the integration of care work concerns in social protection systems, and exploring innovative methods for data collection on unpaid care work. UNDP will support national and local stakeholders in implementation of initiatives to tackle the care service gap and related negative social norms that cement women's role as exclusive care providers.



Image: ©UNDP Somalia



1.3 Increasing financing for gender equality.

UNDP will advance the sustainable financing agenda to harness private and public financing for gender equality. As such, UNDP will advocate with governments for gender responsive taxation and expenditures, potentially through policy diagnosis, gender data production, capacity development and dialogues. UNDP will also support institutional reforms using the Gender Equality Seal for Public Institutions (GESPI) methodology and explore partnerships to pilot gender responsive impact investments that target disadvantaged women groups. Finally, UNDP will advance gender inclusive (digital) finance and address financial and digital illiteracy and other barriers that women face.

PRIORITY 2

Equal rights and opportunities for participation of all women in building cohesive societies

Emerging Portfolio Two: Reimagining the social contract [Contribution to Signature solutions 2 and 3]

2.1 Advancing gender justice.

UNDP will continue to prioritize gender justice, by tracking reforms in laws on gender equality and discrimination to support reporting on SDG 5.1.1 and 5.6.2 and advocating for further reforms at regional and country levels. UNDP will also support women's access to justice, and prevention and response to gender-based violence through legal support and literacy with a focus on personal status and gender-based violence issues, security and justice sector reforms for gender equality benefiting from the GESPI methodology, and behavioral initiatives to affect norms and practice. Implementation would take into account disadvantaged groups [youth, migrants, PWDs, Women in Conflict with the law].

2.2 Strengthening women's role and participation in prevention of conflict, climate action and green recovery/reconstruction.

UNDP will continue to facilitate spaces for advocacy on Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) and for capacity building on leadership for gender equality at regional, national and local levels. Furthermore, building on its existing work on the Women, Peace and Security agenda, UNDP will support women's participation in mediation, peacebuilding, recovery and reconstruction. This will support having a gender perspective in economic recovery, stabilization, service delivery as well as climate action, sustainable consumption and management of household and community resources [In connection with priorities 1.1 and 3.1]). For this purpose, to inform regional and national initiatives, UNDP will document case studies to identify the critical factors for women's success as leaders at the local level. The focus will be on women in conflict and climate affected zones and displaced women. UNDP will also develop and implement approaches to address societal resistance and violence against women in politics and public life and will pilot the Gender-Responsive Crisis Analysis in two countries to finalize the

methodology. This will help strengthen gender responsiveness in crisis prevention and response and in climate action in both stable and fragile countries.

PRIORITY 3

Gender equality is advanced in the food, water and energy nexus and climate security

Emerging Portfolio Three: The nexus of food-water-energy [Contribution to Signature solutions 1, 3, 4 and 5]

3.1 Increasing women's access to and role in food, water and energy security.

UNDP will focus on support to rural women and women small-scale farmers to increase their productivity in agriculture and agri-food industry through sustainable technologies and practices in agriculture, their inclusion in higher value chains and enhancing their access to climate finance, land and other assets [In connection with priority 1.1]. UNDP will also ensure that its initiatives support women in their role in land, water and energy management especially in climate affected areas: as users for higher access; as decision-makers; and as contributors to environmental sustainability [in connection with priority 2.2]. UNDP will also facilitate data collection and research on the gender-differentiated access to food, land, water and/or energy and its impact, and engage in policy spaces for inclusion of gender equality concerns and rural women in climate, water, energy and land policies and in decision-making at local, national and global levels. This focus area will be linked to the preparation for and follow-up to the UN Convention on Combating Desertification (COP16) to be held in Riyadh in December 2024 and Climate COPs during the period of implementation.

Emerging Portfolio Four: Local development

The local development approach is viable

in the region in crisis and fragile countries, where national processes are disrupted, and also relevant across countries in the region where decentralization or deconcentration policies have been adopted and regional disparities are significant. Interventions at sub-national, local levels are closer to the communities, and as such provide an opportunity to advance gender equality, women's participation and resilience. The focus areas articulated above require interventions at national and local levels and will thus constitute the focus areas within this portfolio coined to the extent possible in local planning and budgeting processes. In addition, UNDP will integrate gender equality in its regional approach for local (economic) development.

The enablers for gender equality

Data for gender equality: Given the absence of gender-disaggregated data and analysis, despite their necessity for design of evidence-based policies, UNDP will ensure that gender is mainstreamed in its research, will enhance the use of qualitative methodologies and explore big data methodologies and the use of AI. Given its role in the Voluntary National Reviews, UNDP will support discussions about gender data collection and analysis at the regional and country levels in collaboration with multiple stakeholders. UNDP will also support gender or women MPIs in countries in the region where feasible.

Innovation for gender equality: Innovation is a powerful catalyst that supports the transformative agenda required to address gender inequality effectively. Systems and portfolio approaches can provide UNDP with a holistic view of the challenges women encounter at various levels and guide us in formulating comprehensive solutions. As such UNDP will integrate the gender perspective into innovative frameworks and portfolio approaches. UNDP will also explore innovative approaches for norms change and data improvement such

as behavioral insights (BI) to address negative norms; the potential of artificial intelligence (AI), future trends and signals, insights and other methods for better data that will assist in pushing for transformative change at UNDP.

Digitalization for gender equality: to ensure equal benefit from various interventions that rely on digitalization, UNDP will support governments in bridging the gender digital divide

in terms of literacy and access especially in middle income and fragile countries and strengthen digital safety through better monitoring of and response to the backlash and gender-based violence in the cyberspace. Therefore, gender integration in digitalization assessments and response and digitalization programmes would help avoid women's exclusion and ensure they benefit from the digital transition.



Image: ©UNDP Sudan

08

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) below draws on the “Gender at Work”³⁶ and John Hopkins gender analysis frameworks³⁷ and advises UNDP’s planned approach in the region to address the priorities mentioned above, i.e. the “how” (Figure 2). It suggests that:

If UNDP intervenes in the four pillars outlined below (the quadrants in the figure) across the priority areas above, these can collectively disrupt power imbalances and strengthen gender equality in resilience, opportunities and agency.

1. Policies, laws and institutions

Gender-blind policies and inequality in the law hinder the required progress on gender equality. Patriarchal institutional policies and norms are a key cause of economic and political exclusion. A key area of intervention that UNDP is well positioned for is addressing the systemic pillar of policies and formal institutions. UNDP in the region is particularly present in economic development, financing for the SDGs, gender justice, social protection, climate and environment policies and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans (3RP). UNDP in the region will collaborate with national governments and national women’s machineries and partners organizations on research and policies for higher gender and youth inclusion in: 1) green economic development/recovery and future of work policies, 2) laws impacting women’s economic resilience/ participation, 3) financing for gender equality including climate finance, 4) climate/environment and displacement 5)

care economy and social protection. UNDP will build on its existing relationships with Ministries of economies, finance, environment, water and justice to support gender-responsive service delivery as well as with Central Banks and the private sector.

2. Access to resources

UNDP will implement integrated initiatives at individual and community levels that facilitate women’s access to knowledge, tools and technologies; work opportunities and livelihoods; natural resources [water, land]; energy, finance and justice. UNDP will support care businesses or cooperatives in the same communities to reduce time poverty. UNDP will also facilitate spaces for networking and collaboration among women and seek to include young women, women in poor communities, rural areas, small-scale farmers, women in displacement and women with disabilities.

3. Beliefs, perceptions and practices

Discriminatory and harmful social norms and practices are systemic and are key contributors to gender inequalities and gender-based violence that limit women’s ability to benefit from favorable policies and available resources, especially in situations of conflict and displacement. UNDP will thus explore innovative ways to unpack these norms, strengthen and integrate approaches to prevent violence against women and address toxic masculinities and ensure engagement of men in its programmes. UNDP will also participate in UN and civil society stakeholders’ efforts to explore new effective tools for advocacy for gender equality in the region. The latter will be based on analysis and better understanding of the backlash (e.g. monitoring backlash, or analysis of current narratives), that responds to current realities in the region.

4. Agency:

Historical and systemic discrimination, as well as patriarchal up-bringing limits women’s in-

dividual self-esteem, their consciousness, choices, perceptions of their own capabilities. UNDP will invest in leadership of women by providing safe space for exchange, learning, alliance building or collaboration at national and local levels and across its thematic areas of work (community groups, cooperatives, group businesses, etc). Collaboration with formal and civil society organizations at national and local levels is key. UNDP will strengthen its gender approach in the Arab Academy for Leadership of Women that focuses on Women in Politics. UNDP will also connect women with existing regional and sub-regional business,

peacebuilding, mediation and other networks.

Power relations are inextricably linked to the four dimensions listed above. They determine and are determined by how equitable policies, laws and institutions, access to services and control of assets can be, and the extent to which an individual can draw on their agency. Invisible power is highly intertwined with and shapes beliefs, perceptions and practices and is the most difficult to tackle. Advancing equality in the 4 pillars is interdependent and change in one pillar would influence and be influenced by other pillars in the graph given the disrupt-



Theory of change for gender equality in RBAS

tion in the underlying power dynamics.

So far, UNDP in the region has focused more on the right side of the graph: formal institutions and resources, than the left side: informal institutions and consciousness. The [UNDP report lessons learnt report on women's economic empowerment in the Arab Region](#) also showed that UNDP's interventions often focus on the individual level, the top of the graph, while working at the policy and institutional levels, the bottom of the graph, are key. Interventions that tackle specific gender equality challenges at regional and country levels should therefore use this framework and explicitly plan interventions in the four dimensions.

Arab Human Development Reports and Knowledge Products

Since the seminal first series of Arab Human Development Reports (AHDRs) that started in

2002, UNDP in the Arab States has played a significant role in helping to place gender equality and women's empowerment on the national development agendas of the countries in the region. The fourth AHDR report published in 2005, 'Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World', was dedicated to the centrality of gender equality and women's empowerment for reducing poverty and promoting equitable and sustainable human development. It also recognized that advances towards gender equality and women's empowerment rested on the combined efforts of both national governments and CSOs. Since then, several AHDRs have been issued, the latest published in 2022. The AHDR 2022 highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality emphasizing the value of social care and solidarity in building future resilience and achieving the SDGs. UNDP will ensure a gender perspective is included in the selected themes of the AHDRs produced during the strategy period. UNDP will also integrate gender in key thought leadership and knowledge products produced in the region.



Image: ©UNDP Syria

09

Institutional transformation

In addition to the programmatic areas identified above, UNDP will invest in institutional change to enhance the organizational effectiveness for gender equality. In line with the global Gender Equality Strategy and guided by the gender equality seal for development, UNDP will focus on the following areas:

Integration and specialization:

UNDP regional gender expertise remains with the gender hub team. UNDP will seek to complement regional capacities to the extent feasible to strengthen the team in line with the programmatic areas above to increase the specialization. In addition, the regional team will leverage capacities from the global GPN and/or solicit external consultants based on the need. UNDP will also aim to have a gender specialist in all crisis countries by 2025.

To help in integration of gender equality in the regional programme and within regional frameworks, UNDP will establish a regional gender focal team (RGFT) in the regional hub from across all thematic and operational teams, ensuring diversity. UNDP will invest in building and implementing a solid transformative training and capacity development plan for the RGFT for transforming attitudes, building understanding and skills on gender equality in all areas of their work. Furthermore, selected members of the RGFT who work on inclusive growth, youth, people with disabilities and displaced populations, will collaborate to elaborate a framework of analysis based on “leaving no one behind” and intersectionality to be used in programming.

An equal and inclusive culture:

UNDP will strengthen the mechanisms for a safer enabling environment. UNDP will continue to develop and implement the Regional Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Harassment (PSEA/SH) annual work plans and strengthen awareness among the staff in the region on the zero-tolerance policies, the designated focal points and reporting mechanisms. UNDP will also identify the gender-gap

areas in the work environment based on corporate or unit surveys (such as the engagement or inclusion surveys) and develop actions to address those gaps, including considering a women leadership programme for the region.

Matching ambition with financial resources:

UNDP will progressively commit the required budget from TRAC II core resources towards gender equality. It will also ensure that new programmes and projects at the regional and national level progressively incorporate the 15 percent minimum allocation. This commitment will ensure the ability to plan GEN3 outputs, to strengthen gender approaches in GEN2 programmes and potentially dedicate gender expertise toward implementation.

Accountability:

UNDP will continue to be guided by, and report to, the Gender Steering and Implementation Committee (GSIC), the principal mechanism for monitoring implementation of the global Gender Equality Strategy. A regional level mechanism will also be set up to support the implementation of the Strategy and regular monitoring of indicators related to gender parity, gender markers on a regular basis and advising on actions. UNDP will encourage the performance assessment criteria for all senior and middle managers to include gender equality commitments in line with this strategy. UNDP will also strengthen gender equality in results-based management (RBM) and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and ensure all evaluations are aligned with the human rights and gender equality principles in line with UNDP’s policies.

Communication for advocacy:

UNDP will strengthen advocacy and communication on gender equality work in the Arab region by strengthening regional reporting through newsletters and online to communicate results and develop key advocacy messages that will foster strategic dialogues on gender equality and tackle the backlash.

10

Partnerships



The RGES will be implemented through collaborations and partnerships with national, regional and global organizations working for gender equality in the areas identified in this strategy.

At national level, potential collaborations include women and their CSOs, national women machineries, ministries of economy and finance, justice, environment and energy among others. Partnerships are also envisioned with financial institutions, local authorities, the private sector and Telecom providers.

Partnership and collaborations with international and regional organizations will continue and new ones will be explored to drive forward gender equality outcomes. These include the League of Arab States (LAS) on their women empowerment programme, the Arab Women Organization on elections and other topics, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) and the European Institute for the Mediterranean on economic and climate policy, the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Islamic Development Bank (ISDB), and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on financial inclusion, the World Bank and other development banks and IFIs.

UNDP will continue to work with and seek further collaboration with think tanks on research studies such as the Economic Research Forum on the future of work for gender equality,

academia/universities in the region and globally for driving forward new research. UNDP will also expand its collaboration with global and regional CSOs and regional gender networks, in crisis-response, advocacy on gender-responsive policies and alliance building. As such UNDP will engage with them on a regular basis for exchange of experiences, sharing and networking during the implementation of this strategy.

UNDP will continue the collaboration on gender justice with UNESCWA, UNFPA and UN Women and expand to other agencies for specific issue-based advocacy at regional and country levels such as UNICEF, UNHCR and the global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights on advancing nationality rights. Collaboration with United Nations agencies working for gender equality more broadly will continue at the regional level through the Issue-Based Coalition on Care Economy and beyond, such as the Gender in Humanitarian Action Working Group (GiHA) in addition to collaborations during the Arab Forum for Sustainable Development, the Commission on the Status of Women, Climate and environment COPs, the 16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence, etc.

Finally, collaboration with partners in the donor community and with private sector philanthropies will be explored for networking and resource mobilization.

11

Monitoring and reviews

To ensure implementation of the strategy, a Regional Gender Action Plan will be developed and implemented on an annual basis during the three years, and a mechanism will be set-up at RBAS to advocate and support the implementa-

tion of the regional strategy, analyze progress and obstacles in the implementation and co-develop solutions. The strategy will be reviewed mid 2025 for considering any emerging areas, as needed.



Image: ©UNDP Iraq

12

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