

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/SDD/2007/Technical Material.2  
13 February 2007  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA (ESCWA)**

**POPULATION AGEING IN ARAB COUNTRIES**

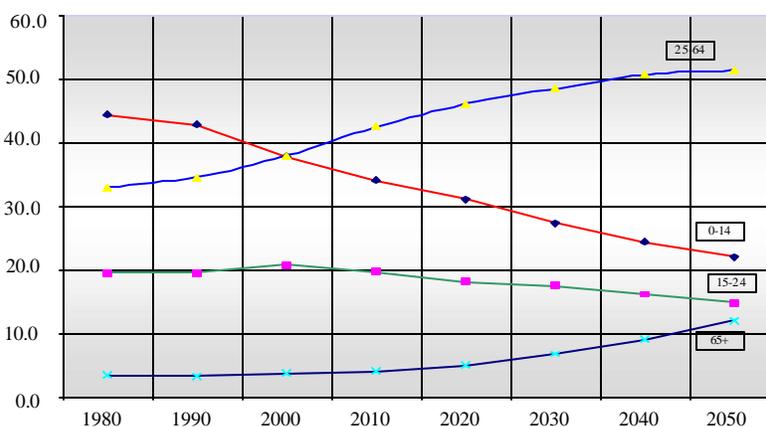
United Nations  
New York, 2007

07-0099

## Demographic change calls for action :

- The pattern of the traditional demographic balance in Arab countries has changed in recent decades . One of the consequences of the demographic transition from high to low fertility and high to low mortality has been the evolution in the age structure of population. In Arab countries, the declining fertility rates have caused important changes in the age structure of the population. These changes are depicted by a sharp increase in the proportion of the working-age population (aged 25-64), a decline in the young age group (aged 0-14), and a slow albeit gradual increase in the older persons as defined to be 65 and above in the Arab region.<sup>1</sup>

**Chart 1. Distribution of the Arab population by broad age groups, 1980-2050**

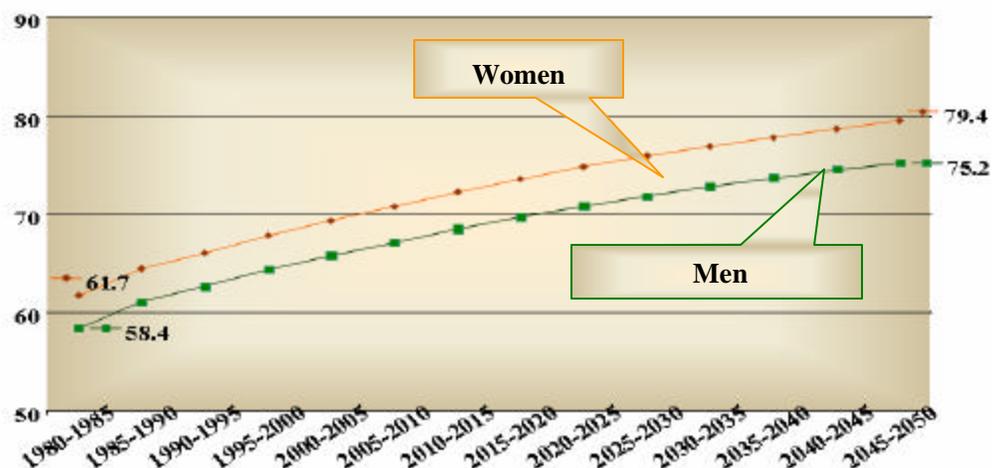


- In the Arab region, where the onset of fertility decline is a relatively recent trend, the process of ageing is also in its early stage. Nevertheless, in the wake of the rapidly changing demographic situation in the region, the need to meet the challenges with regard to the increase in the population of older persons cannot be underestimated, given that the absolute number of people aged 65 and above has already doubled from 5.7 million in 1980 to 10.4 million in 2000, and is expected to increase to 14 million by 2010 and 21.3 million by 2020.
- In most Arab countries, significant gains in life expectancy were achieved in the past two decades. In 1980-1985, the average life expectancy for the region was estimated at 58 years for men and 61.3 years for women. Currently, both women and men live 7 years longer than their counterparts did 20 years ago. Average life expectancy is expected to reach 73 by 2025 and 76 by 2050.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ESCWA, "Population and Development: the demographic window of opportunity in Arab countries" (November 2005).

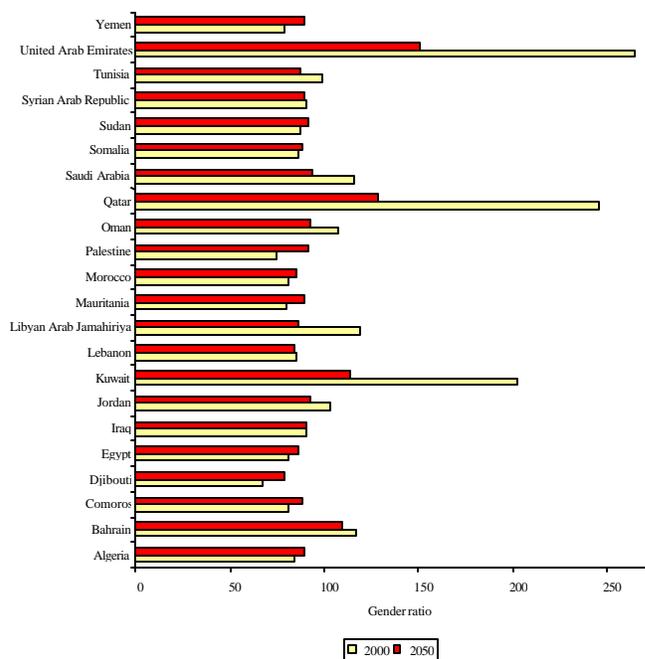
<sup>2</sup> ESCWA, "Population and Development: The demographic profile of the Arab countries" (ESCWA/SDD/2003/BOOKLET.2).

**Chart 2. Life expectancy at birth in the Arab region**



- According to figures for life expectancy at birth for the period 2000-2005, women outlive men by 3.3 years on average. In 2000, the percentage of women aged 65 and above in the Arab region was reported at 3.99 per cent, while the percentage for men aged 65 and above was at 3.24 per cent. This percentage is estimated to rise to 6.53 per cent for women and 5.63 per cent for men in 2025.<sup>3</sup>

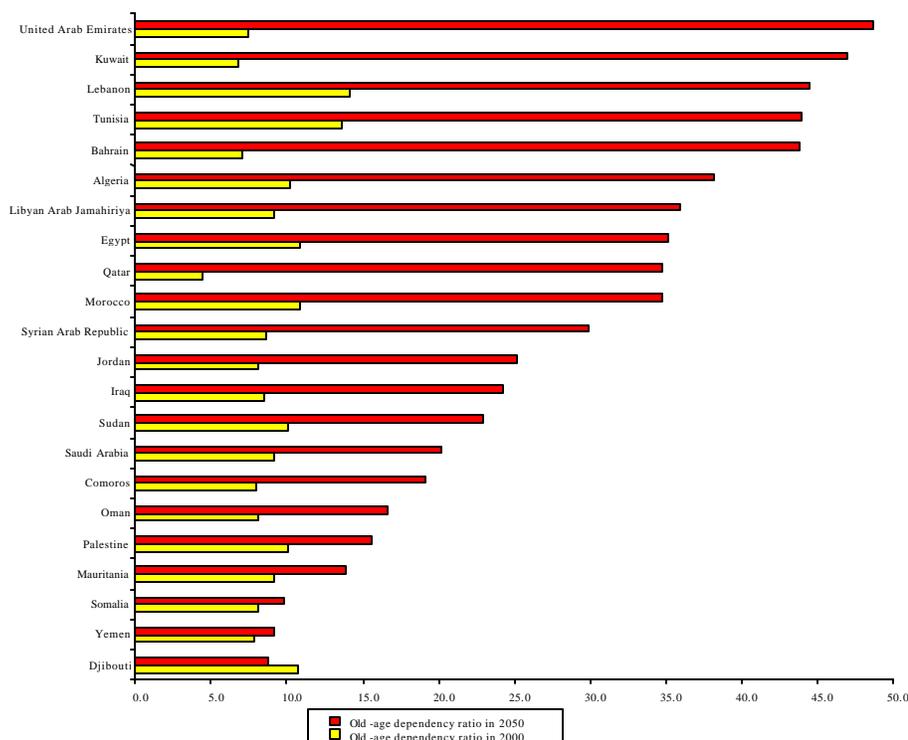
**Chart 3. Sex ratios of the population aged 65 years and older in Arab countries in 2000 and 2025**



<sup>3</sup> ESCWA, "Demographic trends of ageing in the Arab countries" (E/ESCWA/SD/2002/WG.1-1/3), p. 26.

- Compared to the world average, the Arab region enjoys the lowest old age dependency ratio (ODR), which is currently an estimated 5 per cent.<sup>4</sup> This ratio is expected to rise to 8 per cent in 2025 and 13 per cent by 2050. This will affect the total dependency rate (young and old dependants) in the region where the responsibility of the workforce shifts from the support of children to the support of older persons.<sup>5</sup>

**Chart 4. Old age dependency ratio in Arab countries, 2000 and 2050**  
(Percentages)



- In the Arab region, the ageing index is expected to increase substantially by 2050, particularly in countries that are advanced in their demographic transitions, including, by order of magnitude, Lebanon, at 145.2; United Arab Emirates, at 143.7; Bahrain, at 137.2; Kuwait, at 130.4; and Tunisia, at 125.6.<sup>6</sup>
- There are significant differences among Arab countries regarding population size and growth rate. However, the population annual growth rate in the Arab region is predicted to decline from 2.6 per cent in 2000, to 1.99 in 2025, and to 1.67 in 2050. While the rate of growth of population aged 65 and older has been projected at 4-5 per cent in Arab countries over the period 2000-2050, the

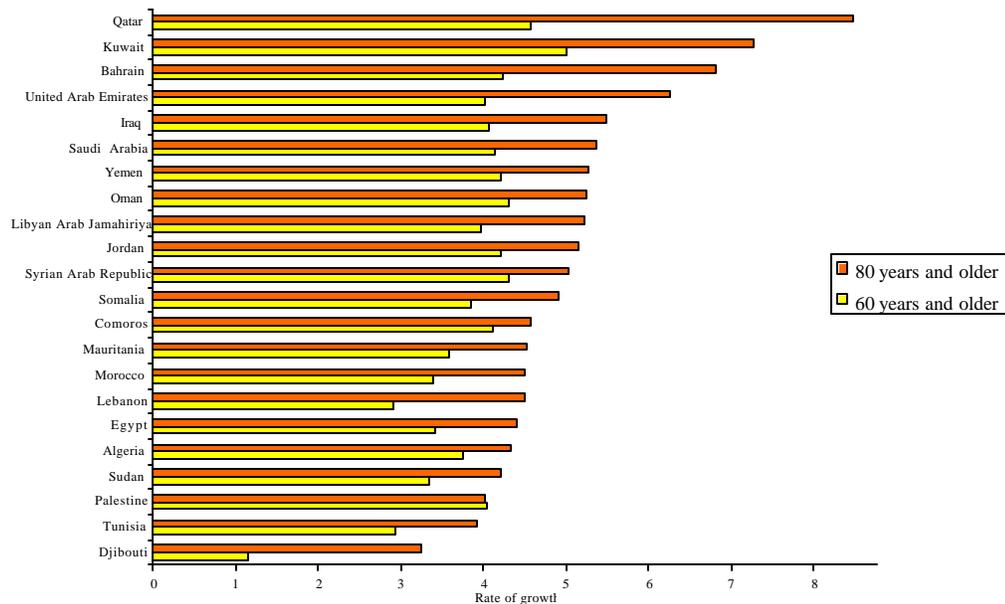
<sup>4</sup> The old age dependency ratio (ODR) is defined as the ratio of older persons to the working-age population and is calculated as the ratio of persons aged 65 and above to persons aged 15-64 years. It is a measure of the portion of a population that is composed of dependants who are either too young or too old to work. Ibid., p. 11; and ESCWA, "Ageing in the Arab countries: regional variations, policies and programmes" (E/ESCWA/SDD/2004/WG.1/2), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> ESCWA, "Demographic trends of ageing in the Arab countries" (E/ESCWA/SD/2002/WG.1-1/3), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> The ageing index is a tool to evaluate the ageing of population. It is defined as the number of individuals aged 60 years and older divided by the number of children aged 14 years and younger. ESCWA, "Ageing in the Arab countries: regional variations, policies and programmes" (E/ESCWA/SDD/2004/WG.1/2), p. 19.

average annual rate of growth of the oldest old (aged 80 years and older) is estimated to exceed 5 per cent in 11 Arab countries over the same period, including Kuwait and Qatar both at rates of more than 7 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

**Chart 5. The rate of growth of the old populations in Arab countries, 2000-2050**  
(Percentages)



#### United Nations mandates:

- **ICPD 1994:** The objectives of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action are based on the principle that elderly people constitute a valuable and important component of a society's human resources. ICPD adopts a gender perspective in programmes and policies. Specifically, objective (b) within article (C) seeks to "develop systems of health care as well as systems of economic and social security in old age, paying special attention to the needs of women".<sup>8</sup>
- **The Second World Assembly on Ageing:** The Second World Assembly on Ageing (Madrid, 8-12 April 2002) adopted the Political Declaration and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA). MIPAA has set priority directions and objectives towards improving the quality of life of older persons, and gender-specific recommendations that include the following objectives: (a) to eliminate "social and economic inequalities based on age, gender or any other ground, to ensure that older persons have universal and equal access to health care"; and (b) to "support the caregiving role of older persons, particularly older women".<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3 and p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, UNFPA Programme of Action, which was adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, September 2004, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations, Second World Assembly on Ageing, Political Declaration and Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (New York, February 2003), pp. 32 and 43.

- ***The Arab Plan of Action on Ageing to the Year 2012 (APAA)***: The Plan calls on member countries to implement MIPAA at the regional level.<sup>10</sup> The stipulations and recommendations of the Plan centre on three priority areas, namely: (a) older persons and development; (b) advancing health and well-being into old age; and (c) fostering enabling and supportive environments. Moreover, the Plan highlights, among others, the following issues and objectives: (a) active participation in society and development; (b) income security and a decent life for older women and men; and (c) ensuring that all older women and men have equitable access to health care without discrimination. Furthermore, the Plan highlights issues related to older women, including “mainstreaming older women’s issues into social development programmes” and “formulation of special older women-related programmes to ensure they are able to live a life of dignity”.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Establishing national committees:**

- Many ESCWA countries have set up national committees for ageing including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. In most cases, these national committees comprise representatives from the private and public sectors, and are usually headed by the minister of social affairs of member countries. However, in the Syrian Arab Republic it is headed by the Minister of Health.
- In Qatar, the National Committee for Ageing functions within the Supreme Council for the Family; and in Saudi Arabia, the National Committee on Ageing has been involved in drawing the General Policy for the Elderly, and in formulating relevant plans, programmes and projects.
- Some ESCWA member countries have recently established specialized departments within the respective ministries, including Jordan and Lebanon. Within the context of the latter, Lebanon established a dedicated homepage on ageing within the website of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

#### **What is being done at the policy level?**

- Many ESCWA member countries have been involved in translating the global objectives of MIPAA into actions that are appropriate to the socio-cultural situation of older persons in the region. In general, providing care for older persons continues to adopt a welfare-based and service-oriented approach rather than a developmental, human rights and/or participatory approach. It is worth mentioning that all directors of governmental institutions and civil society organizations are usually selected from older age groups in order to benefit from their experiences.
- There has been little progress made in formulating national policy for older people. In many member countries, existing general policies and programmes often cover uncoordinated plans, activities and projects that target old age. According to the views expressed by Arab countries in the United Nations report, entitled “World Population Policies 2005”, most countries determined their level of concern about population ageing policies to be “minor”, with the exception of Iraq where this concern was deemed “major”.<sup>12</sup>

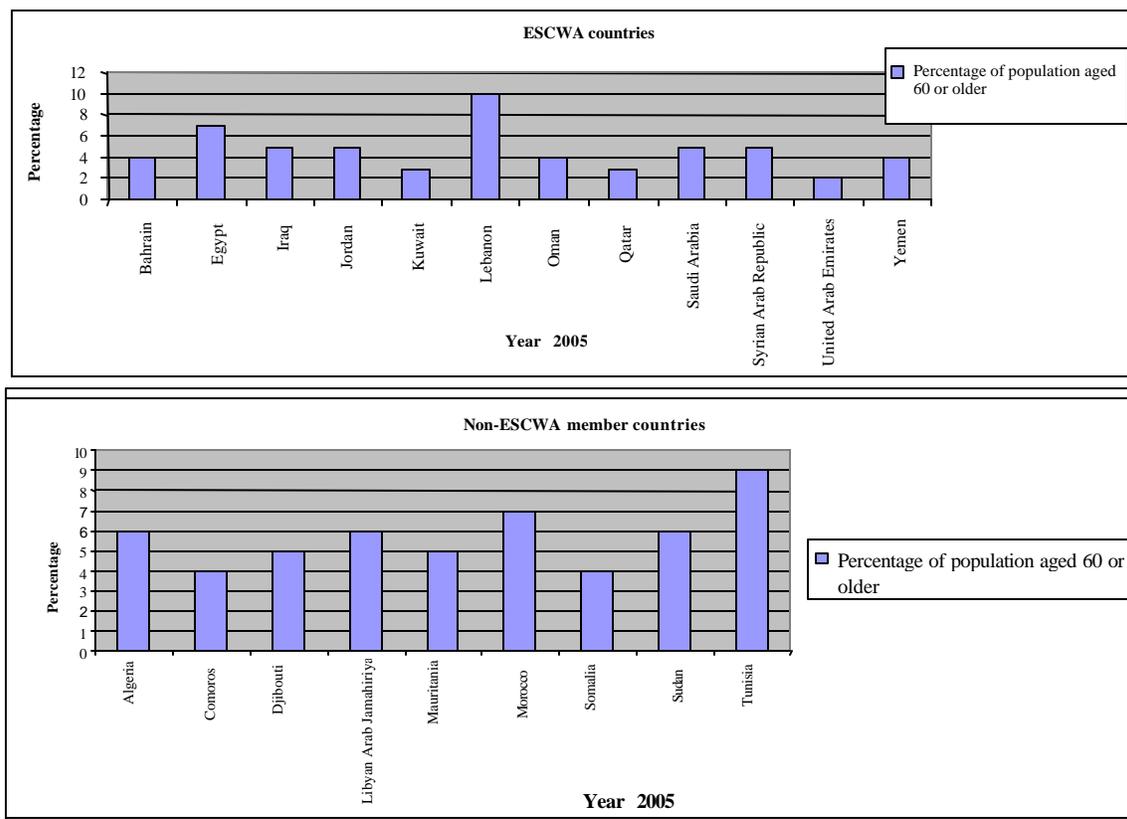
---

<sup>10</sup> ESCWA prepared the draft Arab Plan of Action on Ageing to the Year 2012, which was adopted by member countries during the Arab Preparatory Meeting for the Second World Assembly on Ageing (Beirut, 5-8 February 2002).

<sup>11</sup> ESCWA, “The Arab Plan of Action on Ageing to the Year 2012” (E/ESCWA/SD/2002/WG.1/8), pp. 32, 34, 42 and 45.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “World Population Policies 2005” (March 2006). (ST/ESA/SER.A/254).

**Chart 6. Percentage of aged population s in Arab countries \***



\* According to United Nations, "World Population Policies 2005".

#### **Arab countries are keen to formulate national plans of action:**

- The fundamental principles of MIPAA and APAA have prompted member countries to draw policy guidelines aimed at initiating and formulating national plans of action. Four countries have completed this exercise, namely, Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar and Syrian Arab Republic. Other countries are implementing plans or programmes that are based on existing provisions within general national policies. The Plan of Action on Ageing of the Syrian Arab Republic tackles mainly health-related issues, and is subject to annual modifications according to needs and priorities.
- Lebanon is in the process of elaborating its national plan of action. Qatar has completed guidelines for its national strategy for ageing, drafted a national plan of action on ageing, and is setting up a mechanism for cooperation regarding the implementation of MIPAA.

#### **Are member countries upgrading relevant legislation?**

- Some member countries are keen to formulate new or upgrade existing relevant legislation. Relevant activities cover the following:
  - (a) Issuing licences and tax directives regarding the establishment of homes and clubs for older persons, as in the case of Jordan;
  - (b) Initiating health insurance provisions that cover the needy elderly, as in the case of Egypt, Jordan and Oman;

- (c) Expanding welfare provisions to cover disability caused by ageing, as in the case of Kuwait;
- (d) Formulating projects to implement a new pension law, as in the case of Lebanon;
- (e) Upgrading pension funds and social security schemes, as in the case of Oman.

**Achievements are still welfare-based:**

- While most ESCWA member countries realize the importance of conducting training programmes aimed at enhancing and upgrading skills, few have initiated such programmes owing to existing financial constraints, including, for example Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.
- Egypt's general policy covers provisions that target old age and stipulates, among others, the preparation of a database and reports/studies on ageing related to health and socio-economic conditions. Qatar's draft national strategy on ageing stipulates establishing an updated database on ageing.
- Most ESCWA member countries continue to upgrade health services, are increasing the number of specialized centres and introducing mobile clinic services. Such mobile clinic services are operational in Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, a number of countries have established day centres for the aged, including Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.
- More work is still required in terms of the following: advocacy from a human rights perspective, collection of data, survey analysis, programme management, policy formulation and monitoring.

**The International Day of Older Persons is a tool for advocacy, awareness and empowerment:**

- In most ESCWA member countries, there has been significant progress in raising public awareness towards addressing ageing issues at both the governmental and civil society levels. Most countries have implemented awareness-building activities by issuing brochures and other relevant publications. Additionally, social clubs for older persons, which are active in Egypt and Lebanon, form a positive component in this regard.
- Commemorating the annual International Day of Older Persons has become a major national venue for raising awareness of ageing issues. Three countries, namely, Bahrain, Egypt and Lebanon, have reported commemoration, which, in the case of Bahrain and Egypt, includes specialized training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, exhibits of handicrafts made by older persons and honouring their initiatives.

**Pilot projects and initiatives:**

- In order to promote productive ageing, some countries, principally Egypt and Qatar, have initiated projects with prizes for older persons who continue to work productively. Within that context, the Supreme Council for Family Affairs in Qatar is implementing a multi-purpose project for older people aiming at the following: (a) building the capacity of participating older persons; (b) creating opportunities for them to continue to be productive by training young students in relevant fields; (c) enhancing intergenerational interaction; and (d) securing financial benefits to participating older persons.
- A pilot project in Egypt consists of granting senior citizens a golden card that entitles the holder to benefit from a range of services and privileges. In Lebanon, legislation proposals aimed at tax and other financial exemptions for older people are being considered.
- Some countries have introduced the study of geriatrics and ageing issues within academic programmes at schools and universities, including Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Furthermore, Lebanon has established a national society for geriatrics; and the Syrian Arab Republic is in the process of setting up a national task force on geriatrics.

- Lebanon has initiated work towards publishing a manual covering information on existing specialized centres/institutions and services available for the aged at the country level.

**The Arab family maintains its culture-based practices regarding care-giving:**

- Owing to existing culture-specific reasons, the role of the family in caregiving for older people continues to provide social support in the countries of the region. This trend is promoted and strengthened by stakeholders whereby the family is acknowledged as the primary actor within the traditional social support system.
- In Arab countries, the majority of the ageing population lives within their families and relies on care and donations provided by their family members. However, the nuclear family unit is slowly taking over the expanded family role and threatens to weaken/diminish this support system.
- A number of countries, including Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia, have established mobile units to reach the elderly within their families in order to provide health and other services. Using such mobile units, social workers have direct contact with older persons at their own home or at the community centre.

**The majority of older women are vulnerable:**

- Owing to socio-economic conditions, older women in the Arab region suffer additional problems compared to men, namely, their lack of access to paid employment, lack of equal access to adequate health and social services, and social and financial dependency.<sup>13</sup>
- Given that women live longer than men, the proportion of women among the widowed elderly is higher than for men. This situation is exacerbated in countries and territories afflicted by wars, particularly Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine. In 1996, more than 84 per cent of widowed persons in Lebanon aged 60 and above were women, and 16 per cent were men. This is expected to raise the dependency ratio among elderly women and trigger a high proportion of households headed by elderly women who are poor and widowed.<sup>14</sup>

**Demographic ageing at the agendas of Arab countries:**

- The old and oldest old are projected to grow at alarming proportions by 2050 both in terms of absolute numbers and percentages of total populations. Consequently, there is an urgent need for demographic ageing to be at the agenda of all Arab countries.<sup>15</sup>

**The way forward:**

- Policymakers are called upon to focus on the socio-economic challenges of ageing, and to prioritize the formulation of relevant national policies aimed at the following:
  - (a) Promoting the quality of life of older persons;
  - (b) Enabling older people to remain active and to live independently in their own communities;
  - (c) Providing adequate health care and social security in old age relative to the working population;
  - (d) Upholding and facilitating a social support system, formal and informal, including enhancing the abilities of relatives to take care of the elderly within the family environment.

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> ESCWA, "Demographic trends of ageing in the Arab countries" (E/ESCWA/SD/2002/WG.1-1/3), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> ESCWA, "Ageing in the Arab countries: regional variations, policies and programmes" (E/ESCWA/SDD/2004/WG.1/2), pp. 25 and 27.