ESCWA Centre for Women Newsletter
United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

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Gender Equality – Part Three

Political and Economic Participation

Centre for Women
UN- ESCWA
A monthly ECW issuance aiming at raising the gender awareness and responsiveness through highlighting the gender dimensions in various fields.

Gender inequality is measured by composite indicators comparing women and men's opportunities and capabilities in the realms of health, education, politics and the economy. While ESCWA countries have made significant gains in bridging the gender gap with regard to heath and education indicators, all lag far behind global trends with regards to women's economic and political participation.

Political

The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) examines women's political participation by looking at women's representation in national parliaments and senior positions within national governments. Across the ESCWA region, women constitute only 3% of seats held in national parliaments. This figure is far behind the world average (11.4%) and lower than that of any other region of the world. While women have voted and served parliament for decades in Syria and Egypt, in several ESCWA countries, women are not yet permitted to serve in parliament or even to vote in national elections. The Gulf States, with the exception of Bahrain and Yemen, have been among the last countries in the world to grant women the right to vote.

	Year Women Received the Right to Vote[1]	Year First Woman Elected or Appointed to National Parliament
World Average	1948	1962
World Median	1945	1963
First	New Zealand (1893)	Finland (1907)
Most Recent	Kuwait	Kuwait
Bahrain	1973; 2002	2002
Egypt	1956	1957
Jordan	1974	1989
Kuwait	2005	2005
Lebanon	1952	1991
Qatar	NA	NA
Syria	1949	1973
Oman	1994; 2003	NA
KSA	NA	NA
UAE	NA	NA
Yemen	1967; 1970	1990

UN-DESA, United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators http://unstats.un.org

[1] First year refers to partial recognition of women's right to vote or stand for election

Special events in the ESCWA Centre for Women

- ***ECW is organizing in collaboration with UNIFEM, a regional workshop on Gender Budgeting in Amman, Jordan on November 27 and 28 2007.***
- ***ECW will undertake an advisory mission to Qatar to train members of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs on the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), from 11 to 12 December 2007.***

Highlights:

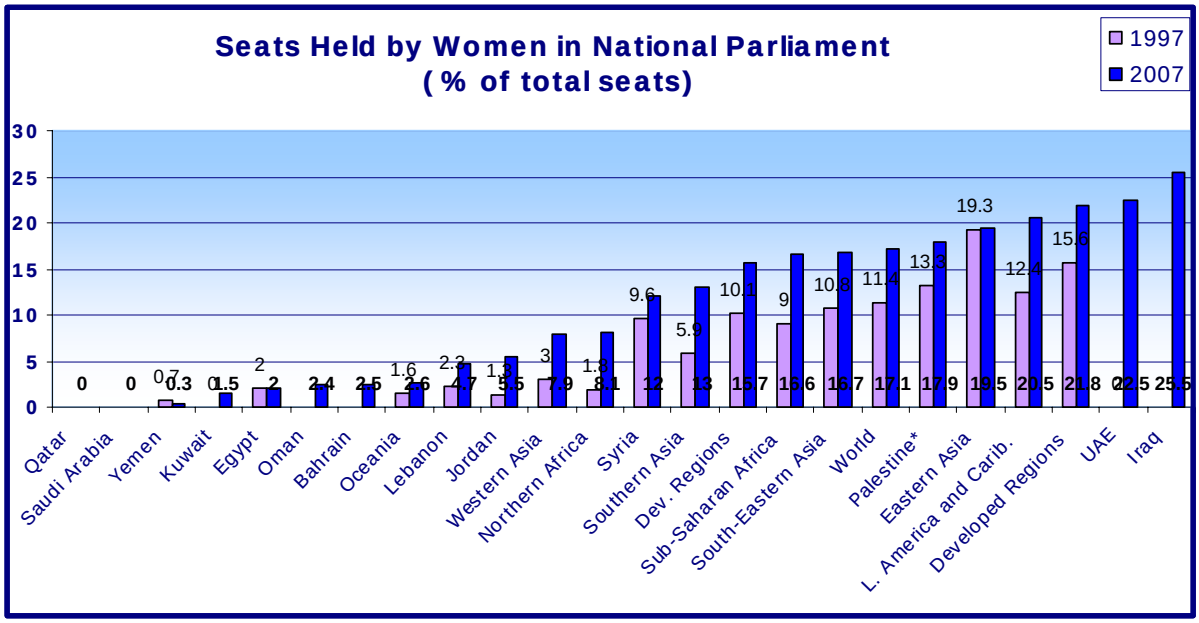
1- Economic

2- Possible Causes of MENA's Gender Paradox

3- Impact

There has, however, been significant progress and women's representation has increased in the past decade. Women are now eligible to serve for the first time in the parliaments of Kuwait and Bahrain. Women constitute 13.3% of parliamentarians in Palestine. The post-conflict constitution in Iraq has included measures for women's representation, and 25.5% of parliamentary seat are now held by women.

"Across the ESCWA region, women constitute only 3% of seats held in national parliaments"



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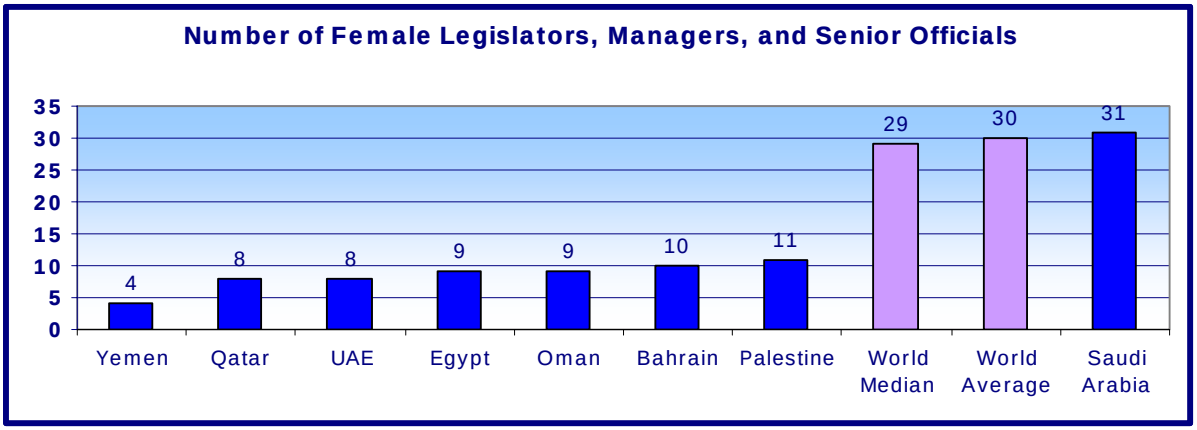
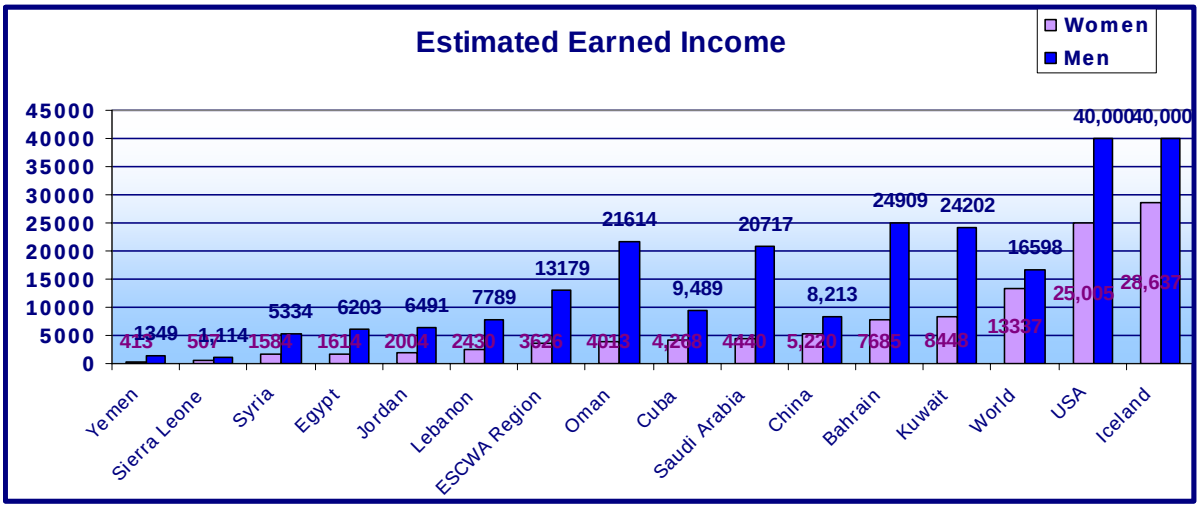


http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/282.html

Economic

The Gender Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) compare income earned by men and by women in a country, by examining the estimated earned income of each gender in a country. The ratio of income earned by women to that used by men is one of the factors used in reaching the composite gender sensitive indicator. While a gender gap exists in all countries in the world, the gender gap in ESCWA region is far greater than the world average.

Earned income of women is not equal to that of men in any region of the world. All ESCWA member states, however, have a ratio well below the world average of 0.52. Globally, although the countries with the highest HDI rank also have relatively high ratio of female to male earned income, low income does not necessarily imply a high gender gap Sierra Leone, which has the lowest HDI rank in the world, has a higher degree of income equality between genders than does any ESCWA member state. Some ESCWA states with the highest income, such as Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have the greatest disparity of earned income by gender in the world (ratios of 0.35, 0.24, and 0.16 respectively).



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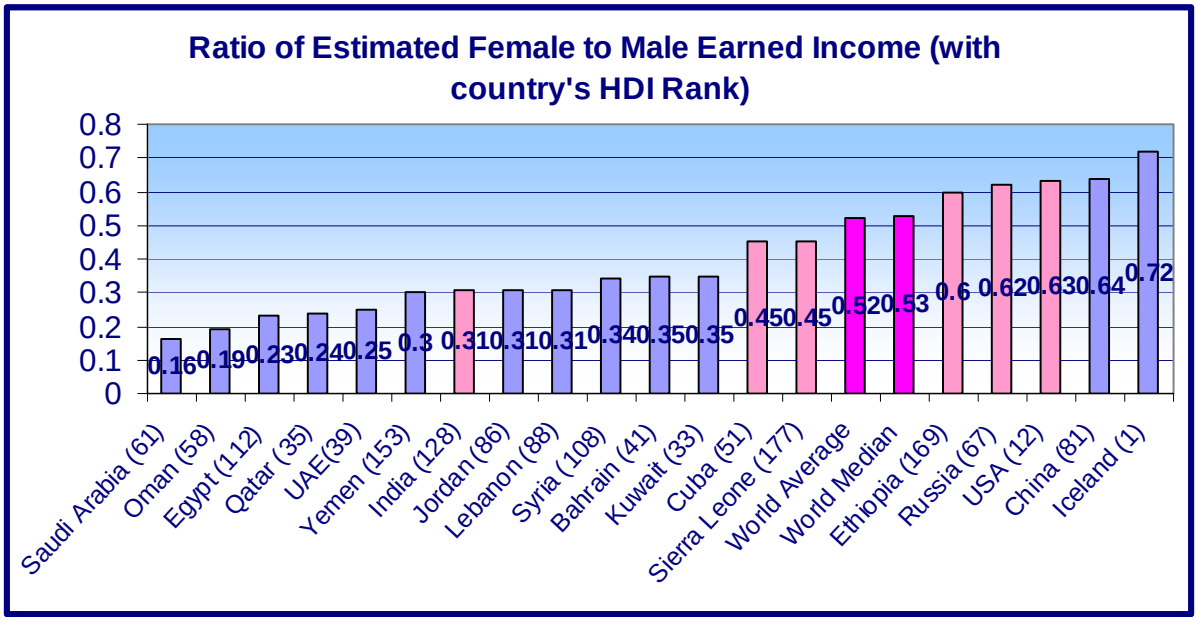

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Worldwide, factors which contribute to the gender gap in earned income are: "occupational segregation; gender based wage gaps; and women's disproportionate representation in informal employment, unpaid work and higher employment rates.[2]"The economic additional component indicators of the GEM both help to explain the large disparity between men and women's earned income in the ESCWA region, and provide a more comprehensive view of women's economic participation in the region.

[2] UNFPA, *Gender Equality Fact sheet*, 2005

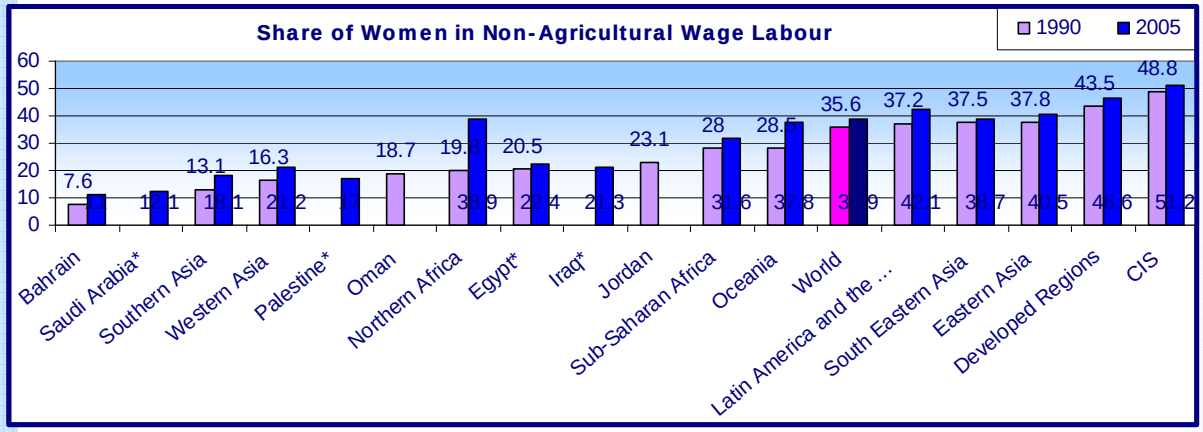
"Women's economic participation rates in MENA lag far behind all regions except South Asia"

The measure evaluates the causes of women's lower earned income by examining women's labor force participation and the inclusion of women in the technical and professional fields in a given country.

Starting at very low levels, women's participation in the labor force in MENA has increased by 50% since 1960[3]. Despite these gains, women's participation rates in MENA lag far behind all regions except South Asia. Furthermore, women's economic participation rate is significantly lower in the ESCWA region, than in North Africa. In Western Asia, women compose only 21.2% of the active workforce.

Representation of women in the professional and technical fields is also lower than the global average in all ESCWA member states, although the figures vary greatly. While women constitute only 6% of professional and technical workers in Saudi Arabia, 40% of this workforce is female in Syria.

[3] World Bank, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women and the Public Sphere*, 2005



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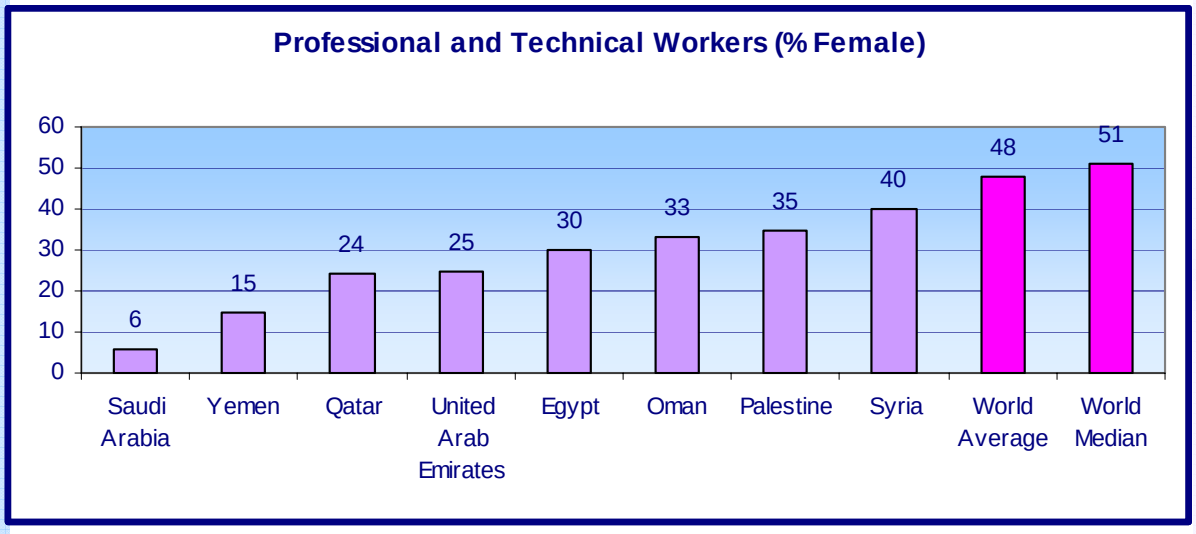

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Possible Causes of MENA's Gender Paradox

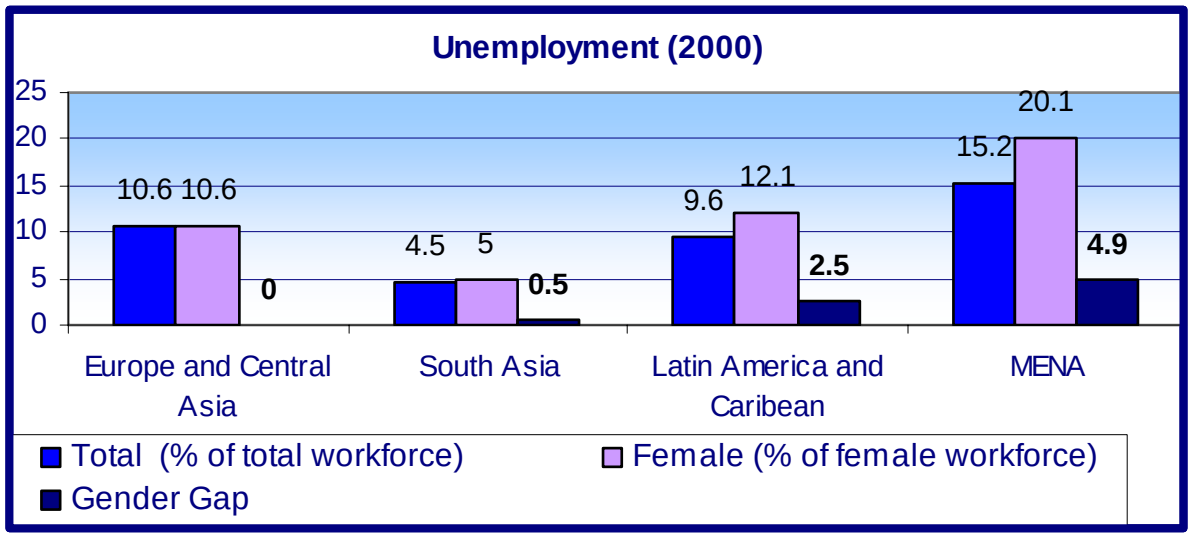
Women's gains in health and education in other parts of the world have been matched by gains in economic and political participation to a much greater degree than has been the case in the Arab states.

"There is a distinct gender paradox in MENA. . . by investing in education, MENA countries have increased aspirations and abilities to earn income; but the low levels of female participation in the labor force means that the region is not reaping the returns of this investment.[4]"

Possible contributing factors include women's more limited access to productive assets and credit, limits on women's freedom of movement, male bread winner bias, early marriage and high fertility[5]. In many areas of the world economic necessity forced societal changes which brought women into the workplace. In the natural resource rich economies of the Gulf, where participation rates are lowest, women were not brought into the workforce by economic necessity as they were in many other regions of the world.

While unemployment is higher for men than for women throughout the world, the gender gap for unemployment is highest in MENA. This implies that there is a problem of demand for women's labor who are actively seeking work. In some MENA countries women were traditionally concentrated in the public sector, which due to restructuring is a decreasingly important employer.[6] In addition to the factors above, investments in education may not be correctly structured to engender women's labor force participation and even those women studying in the professional fields may not be properly prepared for securing employment.

[4] Mustapha Nabli, World Bank Chief Economist for MENA, as quoted in News Release No. 2003/89/MNA
[5] UNDP/DESA
[6] World Bank, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women and the Public Sphere*, 2005



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Impact

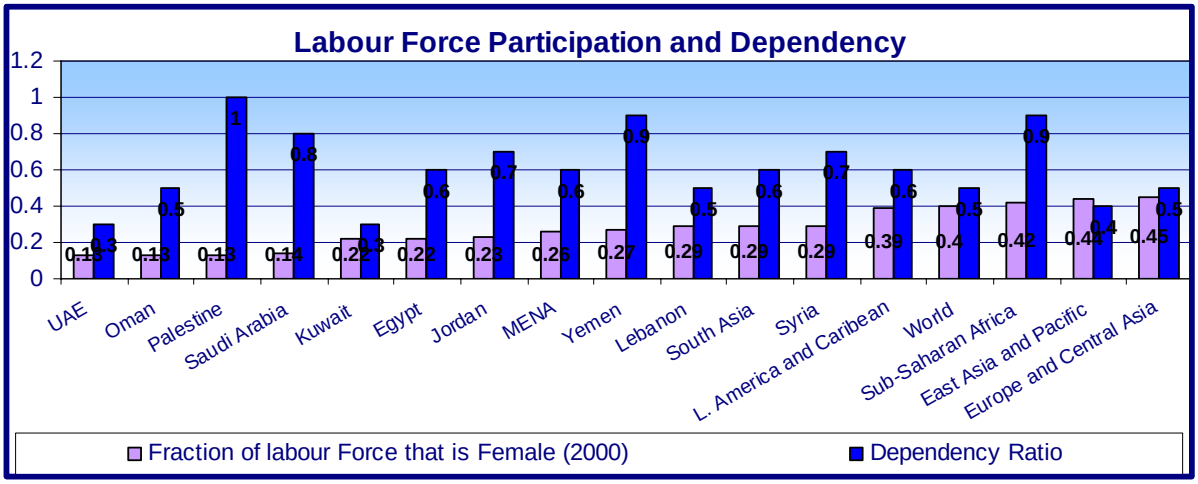
As a result of low women's participation rates, fewer workers are supporting more dependants in Western Asia than in any other region in the world. The dependency ratio represents the ratio of a country's population under 15 and over 64 to that of working age. The dependency ratio in MENA is higher than any other region in the world with the exception of Sub-Saharan Africa where the AIDS pandemic has caused a dramatic rise in the past decades. Low female economic participation in the ESCWA region in effect raises the dependency ratio. As more women join the labor force, the burden to each worker of supporting the dependent population will decrease.

"As a result of low women's participation rates, fewer workers are supporting more dependants in Western Asia than in any other region in the world"

In addition to increased household income and a decrease in the de facto dependency ratio, the participation of women in the economies of the Middle East could contribute to innovation and increased global competitiveness, particularly given the high investment made in human capital through education.

It is estimated that growth could have been as much as 0.7% higher in MENA in the 1990s, had women's labor force participation risen in line with global trends reflecting the declining fertility rates and rising educational achievement of women in the region.[7] "No country can raise the standard of living and improve the well-being of its people without the participation of half its population . . . experience in other countries has shown over and over again that that women are important actors in development – to hold them back is to hold back the potential for economic growth[8]

[7] World Bank, *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa: Women and the Public Sphere*, 2005
[8] Christian Poortman *(sic)*, World Bank Vice-President for Middle East and North Africa, as quoted in News Release No. 2003/89/MNA



We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.escwa.un.org

About Our Organization…

The ESCWA Centre for Women was established on October 1, 2003, following the Commission's adoption of Resolution 240(XXII). This resolution, recognizing that a fundamental part of development is the empowerment of women, called for the creation of a Committee on Women comprising the member countries, and for the establishment of a women's Centre at ESCWA. The Centre continues and expands on the work carried out by the Women Empowerment and Gender Mainstreaming Team, formerly a part of the Social Development Division at ESCWA.

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