

**Contribution of the
Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA)
to the Secretary-General Report pursuant General Assembly Resolution 65/182.**

‘Ageing’ is one of the priority issues addressed by the Population and Social Development Section (PSDS) of the Social Development Division of ESCWA. The PSDS believes that the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms is essential for the creation of an inclusive society for all ages in which older persons participate fully, without discrimination and on the basis of equality.

In this regard, PSDS has recently assessed the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA) at the regional level. It has requested Member Countries to prepare national official follow-up reports and to fill out a monitoring questionnaire.

Furthermore, the Section is currently finalizing the Fourth Issue of its Social Policy Brief, entitled “Reinforcing Social Equity: Mainstreaming Ageing Issues in the Process of Development Planning in the ESCWA Region”. This Brief will be issued in the occasion of the second review and appraisal of MIPAA in 2012. It reiterates the importance of mainstreaming ageing into the broader policymaking discourse. In fact, the issues related to elderly, like those related to women and youth for example, should be an integral part in the formulation and implementation of development plans and programmes.

Below are the answers of PSDS to the questions and issues for contributions to the Secretary-General Report pursuant General Assembly Resolution 65/182.

Question 1: Please provide information on the current situation of the human rights of older persons, including particular challenges and threats that may prevent the full realization of their rights.

A number of ESCWA countries still tend to adopt a welfare-based and service-oriented approach to ageing, by targeting the poor, needy and disabled elderly. More work is still required in terms of advocating for a human rights perspective.

ESCWA countries are generally committed to the implementation of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing. However, these countries face a number of challenges, as follows:

1. **On the cultural level**, the still persisting traditional role of the family as providing care for older persons is threatened by the factors of social change. The gradual dwindling of the extended family as the nuclear family takes over, has created difficulties in elderly care. Moreover, the increasing mobility of the youth in search of better opportunities, especially outside their home countries, has left the older persons behind.
2. **Budgetary problems** in many countries — excluding the Gulf States — interfere with the availability of funds for public expenditure on ageing to cover required services of different types, not restricted to the area of health.
3. **The high unemployment rate**, especially among the youth, in most countries makes it difficult to provide employment for older persons.
4. **The shortage of qualified personnel** that can care for the older persons is a major obstacle.
5. **Situations of armed conflict** aggravate the problems for the elderly since in these situations, ageing does not occupy a position of priority (ex: the case of Palestine, Lebanon and Iraq).
6. **The shortage of data** on ageing is a major setback in understanding the situation of older persons, assessing it, and more importantly, in planning/implementing policies for mainstreaming relevant issues.
7. **The high incidence of poverty** in many ESCWA countries aggravates the situation of older persons, since they constitute a high proportion of the poor.
8. **Social assistance for the poor**, including older persons, is generally inadequate and short of serving the target population.

ESCWA countries are thus attempting to amend/ introduce legislation related to the human rights of the elderly. They are confronted with several setbacks, the financial conditions being major in this respect. Some countries have, however, succeeded in some attempts.

Question 2: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to protect and promote the human rights of older persons.

- **Formulating a national plan of action on ageing.**
The fundamental principles of MIPAA and the Arab Plan of Action on Ageing (APAA) have prompted Arab countries to draw policy guidelines aimed at initiating and formulating relevant national plans of action for the elderly.

Five countries have completed this exercise (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar and Syria). In Egypt, the draft strategy and plan was declared in 2007. Qatar has set guidelines for a national strategy on ageing.

Other countries are using the already existing national policies to implement programs in this respect. Lebanon is in the process of elaborating its national plan of action, proposing a “social plan of action” comprising all segments of the society, including older persons. Yemen has reported that its national population policy covers the elderly population. Iraq considers that its “welfare law” represents a national plan of action.

In this context, countries are addressing the six priorities identified in the Vienna Plan, namely, social, income and employment security, training, education and media, health, housing, the family and social welfare.

- **Establishing national committees for ageing.**

Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar and Saudi Arabia have set up national committees for ageing, comprising representatives from public and private sectors. In most cases, these committees are headed by the Minister of Social Affairs in the respective countries, except in Syria, where the head is the Minister of Health.

- **Advocacy and raising awareness on the rights of the older persons.**

Most ESCWA countries have made a significant progress in raising public awareness towards addressing ageing issues at both the governmental and civil society levels. Social clubs for older persons, which are active in many countries, including Egypt and Lebanon, form a positive component in this regard. Most countries have implemented awareness-building activities through convening meetings and conferences, through conducting awareness sessions and through issuing brochures and other relevant publications.

Commemorating the annual International Day and / or the National Day of Older Persons has become a major national venue for raising awareness on ageing issues and the rights of older persons. Several countries (namely Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar) have reported commemoration activities. Such activities include specialized training workshops, awareness-raising campaigns, participation at seminars and world conferences, exhibition of handicrafts made by older persons and honoring their initiatives. Lebanon has declared an annual ‘national day to honor grandparents’, on the last Sunday of June. In many countries, the Ministry of Information participates in advocacy and public awareness campaigns through media channels: newspaper columns, radio and television programmes.

Question 3: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to address discrimination against older persons, including measures to address multiple discrimination (eg. discrimination based on age and gender).

Member Countries have reported equal opportunities and provisions within legislation for both elderly men and women. In fact, the only difference in addressing man/woman ageing is age for entry as residents at elderly centers. In a number of countries, the entry age for women is 55 years, while for men it is 60 years. Another difference has been reported in Qatar, whereby the pension law (24/2002) entails eligibility at age 60 years for men and 55 years for women.

Owing to socio-economic conditions, older women in the ESCWA 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, as well as social and financial dependency. Also, given that women live longer than men, the proportion of women among the widowed elderly is higher than for men. This has triggered a high proportion of households headed by elderly women who are poor and widowed. Jordan and Yemen have mentioned 'feminization of ageing' and have initiated some programmes that specifically target the empowerment of elderly women. Other countries, such as Lebanon, have reported that elderly needy women who are heads of households are covered within programmes/plans that aim at enhancing social protection nets. In Egypt, the National Council for Women is involved in the review and assessment of policies and legislations for women, including elderly women. Widowed and divorced women are provided with financial help by the government in several GCC countries. Moreover, several women associations provide social and financial support to older women in need.

Question 4: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to address violence and abuse against older persons in the private and public spheres.

As mentioned in the answer to Question 2 (page 3), Member Countries made a significant progress in raising public awareness about the human rights of older persons, at both the governmental and civil society levels. Awareness-raising programmes included, among others, the issue of violence and abuse against older persons in the private and public spheres.

Question 5: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes addressing old age - sensitive services and facilities, such as those related to mobility, age-adequate design, long-term care, primary health care and adult and continuous education.

In general, health care for the elderly in the ESCWA region is often inadequate, since geriatric medicine is not widespread. There are no specific specialized centers for elderly health care. Health insurance does not achieve universal coverage for the elderly. In addition, health care in the region is mostly directed towards communicable diseases. Training for health care personnel and social workers dealing with the elderly is not common.

In general, governments are expanding health services to cover a wider segment of the population, including older persons, at the same time upgrading their standard. In this respect, there is more training of specialized personnel. Nevertheless, there remains a shortage of a qualified cadre.

In most countries, no special provision is made for the elderly in transportation, as designated seats or discounts. Neither are specific arrangements made in housing or road infrastructure.

Home care for older persons is not commonly available. In many cases, when and if found, it is costly, and is far beyond the average family's means. Moreover, there are issues of accessibility of health services, especially in the rural sector.

Some countries have recorded achievements in this regard, as follows:

- The Gulf States provide free health care for older persons.
- Some countries like Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia have started a system of mobile clinic centers, with the objective of reaching the elderly in their family environment. These units also include social workers who can, in this way, have direct contact with the older persons in their own environment.
- Some countries like Egypt and Jordan have issued directives addressing mobility and accessibility to public premises.
- Jordan has introduced the "family welfare program" to reach the elderly at home, covering their health needs. Qatar has also established a "family welfare unit".
- Egypt provides home services through offices of the Ministry of Social Solidarity in the form of "sitters" charged by the hour at reasonable cost. Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide the same service by highly qualified/trained personnel, but at a higher fee, in general, far beyond the average family's means.

Question 6: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes concerning social protection measures as well as right to work and right to social security with regard to older persons.

In the ESCWA region, the pension / social security systems are short of covering the total elderly population. Pension systems are restricted to the government, and in some cases, the private sector. They do not include either the informal sector or agriculture, denying older persons here any such rights.

In most countries, the statutory retirement age in the government is 60 years, with some exceptions, as in the case of judges in Egypt.

Older persons who continue working beyond this age of retirement may be subjected to “push factors” that discourage their continuity at work, for example difficult working hours, imposing junior employees in higher positions, etc...

On the other hand, the provision of care for the elderly remains inadequate and the adopted approach is more welfare-based, rather than developmental, at both the government and civil society levels. Charity and religious organizations play a big role in this respect. In addition, policies targeting the elderly are, for the most part, fragmented and uncoordinated, and do not target the older persons directly. In fact, older persons are part of a package that covers the poor, the disabled and widows, among other marginalized groups.

Some countries have recorded progress in this regard, as follows:

- Egypt, Jordan, Oman, Qatar and Yemen have expanded health insurance to cover the needy elderly.
- Kuwait has expanded welfare provisions to include disability conditions in ageing.
- Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Oman, and Qatar have upgraded social security schemes, safety nets and pension funds.
- Lebanon has designed projects for a new pension law.
- Jordan, Iraq and Qatar have issued directives for the financial support of the very poor elderly, including free health insurance and monthly pocket money.
- Qatar doubled the financial assistance to the very poor elderly and their dependents in 2006.
- Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar and Yemen have offered programs to train the older persons in handicrafts and other productive skills.

Question 7: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to systematically collect, update and analyze information disaggregated by age.

The ESCWA Region suffers from both the lack and the low quality of data and information disaggregated by age.

While several ESCWA countries (Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Yemen) have indicated that they undertook or are planning to undertake relevant surveys and studies on older persons, the dearth of information, especially disaggregated data, on the social and economic situation of older persons, represents a serious impediment in the assessment of equity/inequity and development.

Data on several health-related indicators, including disability and morbidity rates, are limited in most countries of the region. Thus, the future needs and costs of health-related services are difficult to predict. Moreover, the use of a wide range of various health indicators across studies limits comparability of findings within and across Arab countries.

On the other hand, the vital registration system in most ESCWA Countries is unable to provide reliable national statistics on deaths (which in the bulk occur among older persons), particularly statistics concerning the medical cause of death.

- Egypt's general policy stipulates the establishment of a database on the situation of older persons, particularly their health and socioeconomic conditions.
- Qatar's national strategy on ageing stipulates the establishment of an updated database on ageing.
- Lebanon has updated its statistics on ageing through conducting relevant surveys and specialized studies. For example, a survey on the health situation of the family was completed in 2007.
- Saudi Arabia's national plan includes establishing a registry / database on older persons.

Question 8: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to enhance participation and active engagement of older men and women in community, political and cultural life.

The participation of older persons in public life is generally low in the ESCWA region. In the case where it exists, it is often based on individual political and economic power.

- Some countries, for example, Egypt and Lebanon, have issued tax exemptions/reductions in fees for older persons, for example in transportation, cultural visits and entertainment.
- Jordan and Iraq have issued directives for establishing homes and clubs for older persons.
- In Egypt, a golden card is given to older persons that allows them a number of privileges—reductions in theatres, museums, means of transportation, among other services.
- Lebanon has issued a draft project granting a special identity card for the elderly to offer them a number of privileges.

Question 9: Please provide information on existing legislation, policies and programmes to ensure access to justice and judicial remedies for violations of the rights of older persons, including references to specific mandates of institutions such as national human rights institutions to address their rights.
