

Advancing the Rights Of Older Persons In the Arab Countries

Six countries have completed national strategies of action on Ageing, namely: Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic and more recently Saudi Arabia. Morocco has initiated a process to prepare a national strategy for advancing the right of older persons. Other countries consider that relevant policy formulation and developmental approaches are addressed through the existing legislation on social welfare and social issues or in sectoral policies and programmes. These countries are thus implementing uncoordinated plans or programmes that are based on existing provisions within the country's general national policies. Nevertheless, none of the countries deemed their level of concern about population ageing policies to be minor.

I. Equality and non discrimination

a. *Work and the Ageing Labour Force*

The qualifying statutory retirement age in most countries ranges between 60 and 65. Two points are noteworthy. Firstly, although the qualifying age for old-age pensions is gender-neutral, in some countries (e.g., Egypt and Kuwait) it tends to be lower for women than men (55 vs. 60 years). Secondly, the level of basic benefits for retirees in the region tends to vary widely with older adults who have worked in the public sector, including civil servants, the police and members of the armed forces enjoy more privileged system of social insurance than those who are workers in the private sector; and workers in the informal sector (such as the self employed and women working in household and agriculture) often do not qualify for an old-age pension.

National reports and data available did not include policies or strategies targeting specifically older adults' employment or job training. Egypt, however, promote micro-credits and markets for small sized enterprises and older persons are trained on handcrafting as a means to raise money. It is worth noting that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE) are oil-rich countries, and hence older retired adults enjoy relatively more privileged conditions than those in the remaining countries of the region.

b. *Social Security and Poverty Reduction*

Several modalities of health and social insurance systems exist in Arab countries, with wide variations in the level of basic benefits for retirees across and within countries. In the majority of countries, civil servants enjoy better schemes and higher benefits compared to those employed in the private sector; and older persons who have worked in the informal sector often do not qualify for old-age pensions. This also means that Arab women, often engaged in the informal sector, in unpaid work in family income or in caring for grandchildren, are denied access to social and health benefits as they age. As a result, the quality of life of the older population has been adversely affected by *inequitable* systems of pension entitlement and health insurance programs.

The level of basic benefits for retirees across Arab countries varies widely. In some countries, the old-age benefit may be as high as 20 to 65 per cent of the insured person's average monthly earnings before retirement (e.g., Kuwait). Overall, the Gulf States pioneered the provision of social welfare services for older persons. In the majority, however, the basic benefit is between 2 and 2.5 per cent. In such countries with limited coverage of pension systems, the degree of economic security among older persons may vary with educational attainment, gender and living arrangements.

One expected result of pervasively small old-age pensions in these countries is that a large percentage of older Arab men continue to work after the legal retirement age and much beyond (e.g., a substantial proportion continue to work beyond 80 year, Egypt: 12 percent, Lebanon: 14 percent, Yemen: 21 percent). This is in marked contrast to the developed countries, where withdrawal from the labour force is a natural phenomenon at some advanced age. Provision of health insurance and pension schemes, as well re-enforcement of legislation that address the vulnerability of the impoverished older persons remain a challenge to many countries of the region.

II. Neglect, abuse and violence

The regional mapping (2012) and ICPD mapping (2012) indicated that the issue of **elder abuse** is addressed in National Plans of Action on ageing in Morocco, Palestine and the Sudan and is mainstreamed into wider sectoral plans, policies or programs in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar and Tunisia. The rights and needs of older persons as victims of abuse are also addressed in civil laws in 70 percent of the countries surveyed, and are included in policies and programs in 60 percent. Other countries and societies (e.g., the Sudan and Yemen) consider that social and religious obligations are sufficiently resilient to the protection of older persons against neglect and abuse, making legislation to this effect unnecessary. In 12 countries (Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar and Yemen), laws and policies hold adult children, mainly the eldest son, responsible for the wellbeing of their ageing parents. The Tunisian Law No 94-114 (31 October 1994) is concerned with the specific protection of older persons with a legal definition of the term "elderly" and the duty of the family, society and state in protecting and caring for older persons. In Jordan, the National Center for Human Rights documented 25 complaints between 2009 and 2011 in nursing homes and, annually, courts of law process several cases of children refusing to pay for their older parents' long-term care. Programmes that address neglect, abuse and violence towards older persons were reported in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Palestine, including programs that help victims be integrated back into society. These programs serve as a model of cooperation between the Government and civil society.

Also a number of countries (44 percent) noted that they provide **training workshops** to health and social workers focusing on skills for detecting elder abuse and facilitate its reporting. Special attention is geared in the region towards older people who are homeless and those living alone, with almost 90 percent of the countries surveyed noting the existence of policies and programs that target, specifically, those with no family. In 2010, the MENA Regional Network for Prevention of Elder Abuse, with 12 national representatives of member countries, was established as a division of the parent International Network for prevention of Elder Abuse (INPEA).

Arab societies demand veneration, affection and honour towards the aged and emphasize the prominent role of older persons in preserving family relations and re-affirming traditional identities. Older people are also praised for their wisdom, life experiences and valued for their advice.

The regional mapping (2012) identified several initiatives in Arab countries that provide channels for empowerment and public participation and that may play a role in generating positive images of older persons. These include micro credits and loans to establish small projects (e.g. Djibouti, Egypt, the Sudan and Tunisia) and voluntary and primary work opportunities in NGOs. Older persons assume leadership roles within the community councils, particularly in Bedouin and tribal councils, and as board members of governmental institutions and civil society organizations. Saudi Arabia and Palestine include in their national policies on ageing clauses that endorse the need to promote 'positive images of older persons' in the media and elsewhere. The national Plan of Action in Saudi Arabia stipulates activities to

conduct mass media campaigns and awareness meetings and workshops in schools, universities and clubs in support of raising community understanding of the human rights of older people. The Qatari Foundation for Elderly Care publishes 'Al-Braha Magazine' that focuses on ageing issues and provides advice and counsel to older Qataris. In Egypt, a TV station has been instituted that addresses older adults in its programs. Close to 70 percent of Arab countries celebrate Annual Day for Older Persons on October 1st. A smaller percentage (23 percent) celebrates Annual Day of Grandparents (Bahrain, Lebanon and Qatar). When asked to rate on a 5-point likert scale the overall image of ageing in their societies, only 15 percent of the countries responded 'excellent' and over 50 percent responded 'good'.

ICPD mapping (2012) showed that Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Palestine and Qatar have programmes that promote anti-discrimination against older persons, especially to widows, with most of these countries (except Iraq, Oman and Palestine) indicating a specific budget allocated to these programs. Evaluation of these programs by experts in each country show that Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan and Qatar are on schedule in implementing these programs, while Iraq, Kuwait and Palestine are behind schedule on implementation.