

## Local approaches to guaranteeing women's rights Documentation and results of two online workshops held in December 2020 and March 2021

Organized in close cooperation with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Sciences in the Arab States – Cairo, the African Local Government Academy (ALGA) of UCLG Africa and the Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa (REFELA).

### Introduction

Key aspects of the urban environment regarding access to services, mobility, security and the right to live without violence, health and hygiene, climate resilience, and security of tenure, cause additional burdens for women and girls, thereby amplifying and reinforcing gender inequalities. Advancing women's equality in cities enables more inclusive economic, social, and ecological development, contributing to the common goal of "leaving no one behind".

This online capacity-building workshop series was designed as part of the efforts of the International Centre for the Promotion of Human Rights at the Local and Regional Levels to support human rights, democracy, and diversity at the local level through training and capacity-building for local and regional authorities in Africa. It comprised two webinars that were organised in close cooperation with the African Local Government Academy (ALGA) of UCLG Africa, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Sciences in the Arab States – Cairo, and the Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa (REFELA).

Participants analysed concepts, arguments, and evidence backing gender programmes and policies in their city in moderated exchange sessions. Together, they identified conditions enabling the implementation of policies and programs, determined key stakeholders, and learned about how to engage them.

This report outlines the results from the two webinars (07-09 December 2020 and 09-10 March 2021). It emphasises the similarities of women's rights issues in different countries in general, as well as specific problems encountered by workshop participants in this regard and their proposed mitigating solutions.

### Overarching topics and human rights mostly discussed during the workshops

#### 1. Non-discrimination and Empowerment

The promotion and protection of women's rights aims at empowering people to stand up for themselves, each other, equality, and inclusive societies. In the human rights context, equality is closely related to the principle of non-discrimination, but also focuses on opportunities, as well as outcomes. The workshop series confirmed that women in African and Arab cities may have attained equal rights before the law, but have yet to achieve equal representation in the political and economic life of many societies. Even in areas where it is already possible for them to benefit

from equal opportunities, they still do not achieve equal results due to certain external factors beyond their control. Women in African and Arab cities continue to face discrimination, including the denial of educational and economic opportunities, and exclusion from effective participation in decision-making processes. Normative structures that confine women to specific gender roles in society create significant barriers for women to challenge the structures and norms which discriminate against them.

The African Union call for 50% representation of women at all levels of political position making and administrative positions has been disseminated throughout regional institutions and member countries, as well as at the local level. Workshop participants mentioned nomination and electoral quotas for women as means to increase the number of women in leadership positions. Further, attendees stated important African examples of women as presidents, ministers, mayors, deputy mayors, and heads of departments in municipal administration. This clearly illustrates that women have all the necessary personal capacities for leadership positions. Furthermore, these examples serve as a strong motivation to actively engage more women in the social, economic, and political life.

## **2. Right to participation**

Even though women have the right to fully and equally participate in the public and political life, and to have their unique experience considered in debates and decisions, there are still several obstacles in African and Arab cities preventing women from being fully and effectively engaged in decision-making at all levels of society.

Participants representing local authorities, NGOs, and civil society all agreed on the vital role of gaining valuable information directly from the affected population, namely women or girls depending on the relevant issue, in order to effectively plan and implement development projects. Women and girls are not merely beneficiaries, but can also inform about the priorities and needs of marginalised and vulnerable groups which include women and girls. Women's participation in normative policy- and decision-making to design innovative interventions was described as the foundation of economic growth. With regard to the high relative number of women living in urban and rural areas, it was agreed that women can strongly influence election results if elections take place under fair conditions.

## **3. Leaving no-one behind**

The majority of workshop participants link sustainable development goals to the African Agenda 2063 and integrate the principle of "leaving no one behind" in their activities related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 5 "equality" and 11 "sustainable cities and communities" described as smart and accessible cities. Local government authorities demonstrate their commitment to the objective of "leaving no one behind and reaching those furthest behind first" by including women and girls in decision-making and creating development projects in the residential areas (rural areas, slums) populated with the most vulnerable groups (children, people with disabilities, the elderly, etc.).

## **4. Collaboration**

A common issue, which can be drawn from the content of most presentations and inputs during the discussion sessions, is the need for collaboration between local governments, NGOs, and civil society. Collaboration was described not only as an exchange of ideas and expertise, but also as a mechanism to reinforce trust between local authorities, development actors, and the local population.



## **Which challenges to the fulfilment of the rights of women and girls were identified?**

### **How were these challenges addressed? Which solutions were presented?**

#### **1. Absence of an enabling environment, cultural factors**

The participants identified customs, traditions, mentalities, and attitudes prevalent in their respective societies as obstacles to the fulfilment of the rights of women and girls.

Restrictive factors, such as discriminatory laws, a lack of education, and the toll of being mostly solely responsible for all caring responsibilities in respect to children and elderly family members, hinder women from fully participating in the public life. The discussions showed that women in Arab and African cities mostly bear the burden of family and household duties, as well as childcare responsibilities. These responsibilities also effectively limit their freedom of movement to the vicinity of the house. Further, they have proven to be a great obstacle to women attending meetings and wanting to provide input for decision-making. Moreover, having children has traditionally been a reason for young girls to discontinue their education.

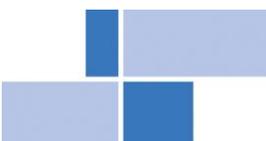
Without adequate support, women lack time and capacity to seek gainful employment which may lead to economic empowerment, participate in the public life, cast a vote, or run for an office. Whenever female participation in decision-making processes was actively encouraged, workshop participants reported that they often must overcome the resistance of men who continue to underestimate women and are convinced that they know 'their' women well enough to be able to speak on their behalf.

#### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Showing that women empowerment not only benefits the family, but also the community and even the entire society
- Raising the population's awareness through TV and radio broadcasts for the fact that by assuming certain roles, namely being a care taker of children and the elderly, women fill the gaps created by a lack of responsibility of men as well as the authorities. This strategy can serve as justification for the role of women's inclusion and equality in society.
- Engaging female colleagues (in municipalities, etc.; i.e. stakeholders) to create role models
- Empower women by capacity-building and showing them ways to succeed outside of their traditional gender roles
- Including local men, especially community and religious leaders, in the design and implementation of programmes to empower women at local and regional levels. Seek support of the population and their representatives.
- Creating a designated budget for incentives or salaries to motivate women to accept certain responsibilities, like attending planning meetings, council deliberations, etc.

#### **Good practice: Bee-keeping and garbage sorting benefitting women's empowerment in Lebanon**

Objectives: Capacity-building for women to excel outside of their traditional gender roles



### **Good practice: Digitalisation as means to leave no-one behind in Rabat**

In a participatory approach (Smart District Forums), one district of Rabat was equipped with the infrastructure to migrate its services to the digital space. The registry was digitalized and all citizen services are henceforth digital. Inclusion was at the heart of the strategy. Capacity building initiatives and various outreach activities (Hackathon, digital means of communication) complemented the strategy.

### **Good practice: Accountability sessions as tool for participation in Benin**

In a GIZ-sponsored project, locally elected women in Benin were coached and specifically trained on central local planning documents. The women received technical and financial support for the organization of public accountability hearings as well as for the organization of radio broadcasts on the actions of the mayor's office.

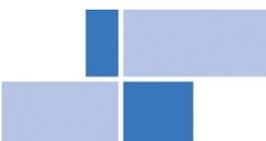
## **2. Limited resources and lack of budget**

It was identified that the overall lack of financial resources, as well as the competition for the limited resources available to local authorities was a considerable challenge to the fulfilment of women's rights at the local level. The limited funds, that are available, are not used efficiently. Participants stated that they often perceive an overlap of the work local authorities, and local and international NGOs conduct to empower women and build their capacities due to a lack of cooperation between these two parties. This overlap results in a duplication of efforts, thereby saving neither money nor time.

Although local authorities have reportedly designed good projects to empower women through micro-finance livelihood- and income-generating activities, they claim a lack of budget to start these projects.

### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Gender-responsive budgeting on all levels of government
- Making earmarked budgets available for women's rights and empowerment as part of the national country plan, as well as in municipal budgets
- Including women in local governments to inform about the specific needs and appropriate budgets
- Including women in financial audits to enhance transparency and receptiveness to local taxes and spending
- Advocating and mobilising donors and partners to support women's programmes, like micro-finance livelihood and income generating projects
- Encouraging women to work in associations to enhance advocacy and to engage them in peer-learning and communication



### **Good Practice: Establishment of Gender Commissions in Chadian Municipalities**

In Chad, 35 Gender commissions that represent REFELA at the local level were created by orders of the Mayor. They are inter alia conducting campaigns for the empowerment of women, fight against violence against women/girls, facilitate the issuance of birth certificates for children aged 0 to 5 years. One of their key functions is to advocate for and defend a budget line dedicated to the women empowerment and gender during the budget sessions of the municipalities.

### **3. Limited capacities and support**

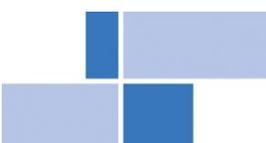
During the discussion sessions, it was found that when women actually participate in the public life or seek employment, they were less likely to have the necessary contacts, resources, and confidence to truly succeed. Early obstacles such as a lack of access to education for women consequently lead to an even greater lack of resources (financial, personal), as well as substantially lower self-confidence. Interrupted or incomplete education leads to a higher prevalence of illiteracy among women. In the African context, it was reported that women often speak in local or regional dialect variants and are less likely to be fluent in the official language(s) of the country or region, which is, nevertheless, often necessary for political participation. Women who manage to be in leadership positions often lack a support system and may find their many responsibilities difficult to balance, leading them to terminate their employment or to not run for a second term in office.

Even if support structures such as networks exist, women in African and Arab cities do not make enough use of the chances and advantages networks try to provide for them. They often are unaware of existing programmes and opportunities created for them. They lack access to the relevant information about opportunities, the resources to attend them (quoted examples included a lack of childcare support while a woman is in the city council, or financial means to reach a capacity-building training by public transport, etc.), and the skills to fully take advantage and benefit from them, such as language or computer skills.

Furthermore, not only women as individuals, but sometimes also local authorities as government bodies as a whole may be excluded from vital decision-making institutions. This example was reported from Tunisia, where local authorities were excluded from the Council for Equality and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women in Tunisia.

#### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Creating women-friendly spaces, such as meeting rooms women can meet to exchange ideas, identify barriers and constraints, but also create their own projects.
- Providing easily accessible childcare as well as nursing rooms, in particular when women attend trainings or meetings.
- Creating and fostering networks for women, empowering and showcasing role models
- Introduce a women quota for political representation at all levels and ensure that they are actually applied
- Considering women's care responsibilities for children and the elderly, as well as women's specific health concerns (menstruation, pregnancies) as part of their remuneration in order to reinforce social and economic equality between men and women.



- Adapting methods and didactic materials to local languages and reflecting realities on the ground.
- Building women's capacities, including social and economic family management as a crucial tool for women's empowerment.
- Cooperating with local actors to assure that locals – women – are actively engaged in planned projects. It is vital to transparently explain to them the aim, objectives, benefits, and overall importance of a planned project.
- Using local languages, namely by translating materials and tools on women's rights into local languages and adapt them to women's skills and literacy levels. Learn local languages or employ people who are able to speak them.

**Good Practice: REFELA Network (Réseau des Femmes Elues Locales d'Afrique, Locally Elected Women of Africa Network)**

Objectives: Engage and support women as representatives at the local government level

Success factors:

National REFELA chapters; Systematic identification of female mayors, heads of executive or elected officials of local governments

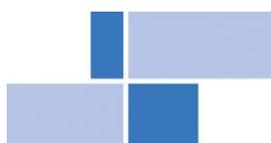
**Bad Practice: Local development plans**

In Tunisia, a five-year local development plan was established. Therefore, local investment programmes/plans were prepared annually. It is necessary to include women in the preparation phase of these investment plans. They have to attend the meetings in order to be heard. Unfortunately, women did not take part in these preparatory meetings, which was a huge problem because, finally, the local investment plans did not result in gender sensitive budgeting.

**Good Practice: Capacity-building in traditional crafts**

There is a creative woman centre in Jordan which aims at empowering women through vocational training. Experienced trainers working on site provide support to women by helping them to produce, package, and sell soap. Therefore, these women are encouraged to become an active part of the (economic) community of their municipality.

Objectives: Economic empowerment and financial independence of women



### **Good Practice: Amending employment laws in Jordan**

Application of an amendment allowing women to work from home. By allowing this, women can become active members of the economic community and generate an income for themselves. Their societal role was enhanced.

Objectives: Economic empowerment and financial independence of women

### **Good Practice: Women-friendly workplace**

Once women reach a powerful position, they make a change. A female mayor of a Moroccan municipality created a restaurant in a city which allowed women to balance their family duties/child care and their career. She installed separate toilets for women and men. Women pay particular attention to detail and can set practices in place that enable women to actively participate in the political, economic, and social life of a community.

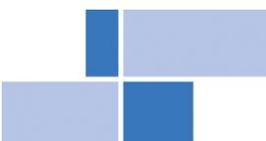
### **Economic empowerment of women in Central African Republic (CAR)**

The destruction of the socio-economic fabric by the recurrent military crises for several decades constitutes an obstacle to the economic empowerment of women CAR. Village Savings and Credit Associations (VSCAs) help women to access microfinance mechanisms.

## **4. Lack of rights' awareness**

Women, as well as policy-makers and policy implementers at the local level have too little knowledge and awareness about their human rights and about what it would mean to guarantee those rights in their communities.

Local governments may not put a focus on women's rights when implementing policies or taking measures because they argue that other issues are more relevant, e.g. infrastructure development. When such projects are developed, locals are rarely part of the development process of the relevant project. If there is no focus on human resources, there is consequently no focus on women's issues and their empowerment. Even if there is a legal framework for gender mainstreaming in place in African and Arab cities, ignorance prevails on how to deal with these issues at a technical level. Municipal council members are interested in learning about how to rethink the policy cycle through a gender lens, but they do not have the adequate and necessary tools, instruments, manuals, etc. to apply this process.



### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Continuous advocacy and face-to-face meetings
- Making a business case for women's participation (showing that the benefits extend from family to community and the entire society; showing how even infrastructure projects have a human rights component)
- Adopting a change of perspective and applying a HRBA to municipal policies
- Creating awareness about women's rights in the city and in rural areas
- Continuous awareness raising and advocacy, also in a face-to-face and more private setting
- Localisation by fostering cooperation with local actors
- Use of local languages: providing relevant working materials and tools in local language variants and adapted to literacy levels

#### **Good Practice: Certifying gender-sensitive municipalities**

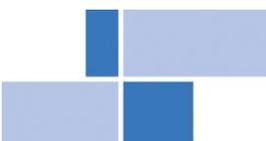
In Tunisia, there is a labelling of the most gender sensitive municipalities in place to create a dynamic in all municipalities on how to integrate gender issues/concerns in the policy process. In order to empower women at the local level and foster gender mainstreaming into municipal public services, incentives are a prerequisite.

#### **Good Practice: Collecting and showcasing good practices**

In Lebanon, a project collected municipal good practices from all over the country which foster inclusion and promote sustainable societal development. The municipalities were supported by students in order to identify and nominate good practices from their municipality. A methodology and a comprehensive set of indicators (score card) was developed to evaluate and rank the submitted policies (71 in total). The impact of a project was more important than its size; a project's replicability for other municipalities was a core aspect. 10 policies were selected and showcased (publication and public exhibition).

### **5. Data gap & Implementation gap**

"If you are not counted, you do not count." It was identified that the lack of numbers, statistics, and disaggregated data to map women in their specific situations was a major impediment to guaranteeing women's rights at the local level. Women's rights may feature in a politician's address during the commemoration of a women's event, but, in reality, there is often no advancement on the ground. Women's rights remain merely conceptual in documents if they are not implemented.



### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Evidence-based policy-making: collecting existing data, disaggregated data, concrete statistics; conducting fieldwork in multidisciplinary teams to gather data about women in vulnerable situations
- Conducting a gender analysis and evaluation of women's needs; evaluate implemented policies based on evidence-based monitoring
- Creating monitoring and reporting institutions to ensure that political commitments are translated into action; these institutions can also report on activities and achievements over a specific timeframe.
- Quantifying the improvement in women's rights at the local level

### **Good Practice: SDG Urban Observatory**

In Amman (Jordan), an observatory department is installed which provides indicators for evaluating and monitoring the progress of the application of SDGs. This municipal evaluation and monitoring instrument was set up voluntarily. On the basis of the report, budgeting, inclusion, etc. can be facilitated.

## **6. Threats to physical safety**

Women's dependent status in social, economic, and political contexts combined with certain traditional and cultural tendencies to discriminate against women have increased their vulnerability to being victims of violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse.

War and conflict accelerate such vulnerabilities, lead to the destruction of social and economic networks, and are a serious impediment to women's empowerment and development. In the post-conflict recovery phase, women's concerns are oftentimes overlooked.

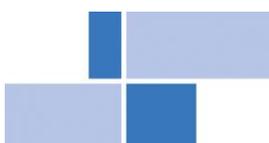
### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Local Authorities have to support a zero tolerance for violence against women strategy.
- Establishing institutions to protect women and support them in gaining access to justice at the local levels. These institutions must contribute to reparative justice and provide remedial mechanisms in the case of violence against women.
- Recruiting of women for police and military services to achieve inclusion and equality in law enforcement.

### **Good Practice: Legal reforms and awareness raising in CAR**

GBV: Several institutional reforms promote access to justice for women and allow them to be informed about their rights and duties and also to claim reparation when they are victims of violence.

Awareness raising about human rights violations due to the conflict through prayer in CAR



## **7. Limited access to services**

The increase of slum areas as places of residence for vulnerable groups, including women and girls, leads to an inadequate access to social services.

### **Arab and African Cities' Suggestions to overcome these challenges:**

- Using integrated, inclusive, and smart cities.
- Seeking beneficiaries' input in the planning stage of infrastructure and other services
- Including women and girls in all project phases for the upgrade of infrastructure, and as members of audit committees for programmes related to water, housing, health, and education
- Including women, as well as marginalised and vulnerable groups in the planning and implementation of urban programmes as part of advocacy and the sharing of expertise.

