

Significant increase in Gender Gap



caused by COVID-19

Burdens of the pandemic



borne by women, refugees and IDPs, and migrant workers

Gender gap

40%



Women economic participation

20.53%
at further risk



3 Social Developments and Gender Dynamics

A. Status of gender equality

In terms of gender equality, indicators for the region have not recorded progress since 2018. According to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Report,¹ the Arab region still has a 40.05 per cent gender gap, the highest globally compared with other regions. There are concerns that the current health crisis will exacerbate the gender gap, and reverse progress. The 2020 Global Gender Gap Report divides the gap into four objective dimensions: health and survival; educational attainment; economic participation and opportunity; and political empowerment. The Arab region falls below the global average of 32 per cent. The United Arab Emirates is the top performer in the region, ranking 120 of 153 countries, followed by Kuwait (rank 122) and Tunisia (rank 124). Arab countries' ranks have the lowest dispersion, as they are stacked at the end. The Syrian Arab Republic (rank 150), Iraq (rank 152) and Yemen (rank 153) recorded the lowest ranks among the 153 countries in the index.

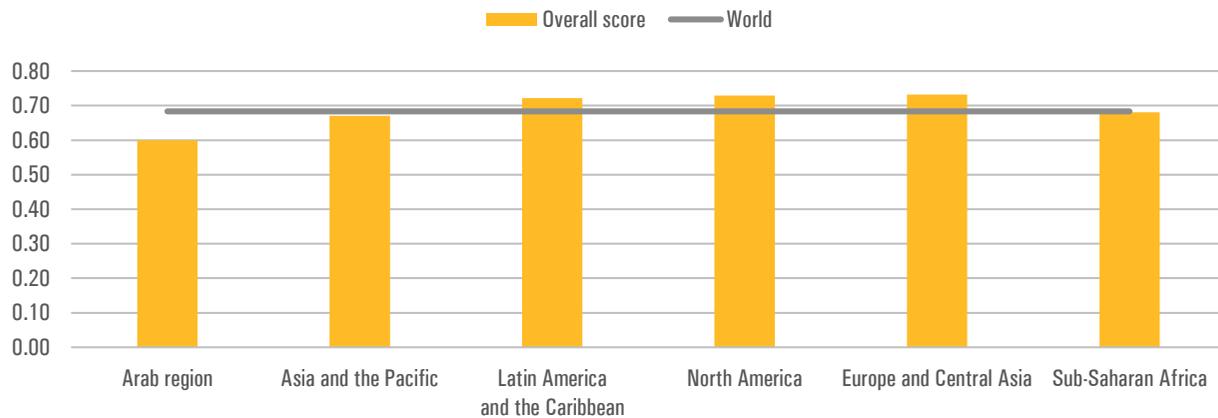
There is divergence in the subindexes among Arab countries. Most Arab countries are close to achieving gender equality in education and health. Women live longer than men on average in all Arab countries, except Bahrain and Kuwait. The education gender gap is narrow and close to 1, with significant disparities between countries. For example, compared with 78 per cent of men, only 35 per cent of women in Yemen are literate. This difference in literacy between genders is around 20 per cent in Mauritania and Morocco. Statistically, the educational attainment and the health and survival subindexes reflect good performance in the region. The wide gender gap is caused by the other two subindexes.

The political empowerment subindex score is below 10 per cent in the region, and is the worst among all regions. Oman (rank 150) and Yemen (rank 151) have the lowest scores in this subindex, with women almost absent from the political arena. Nonetheless, the percentage of seats held by women in Arab parliaments increased, while remaining below the world average. The

Key messages

- The Arab region is facing a significant crisis caused by COVID-19 at a time when it was already suffering from an increasing gender gap and struggling with internal obstacles to redressing social inequalities.
- The burdens of the pandemic are disproportionately borne by women, refugees and IDPs, and migrant workers.
- The region has a 40 per cent gender gap, which is the highest globally. Poverty rates are estimated to have risen by 3.2 percentage points in 2020 along with an increase in unemployment by 1.2 percentage points.
- Around 31.4 per cent of the Arab workforce is at economic risk because of the crisis, which represents 39.8 million workers. The female labour participation rate remains the lowest worldwide at 20.53 per cent.

Figure 3.1 Global gender gap index by region, 2019



Source: ESCWA staff calculations based on World Economic Forum, 2019.

Note: Regional average scores are weighted by population using population data from the World Bank's World Development Indicators online database.

economic participation and opportunities subindex is also low in the region, as the labour market is characterized by systemic discrimination against women. On average, women's income is 28 per cent lower than men's in the region. Less than half of working-age women participate in the labour force in 16 Arab countries. In six of them, female labour force participation is less than 20 per cent.

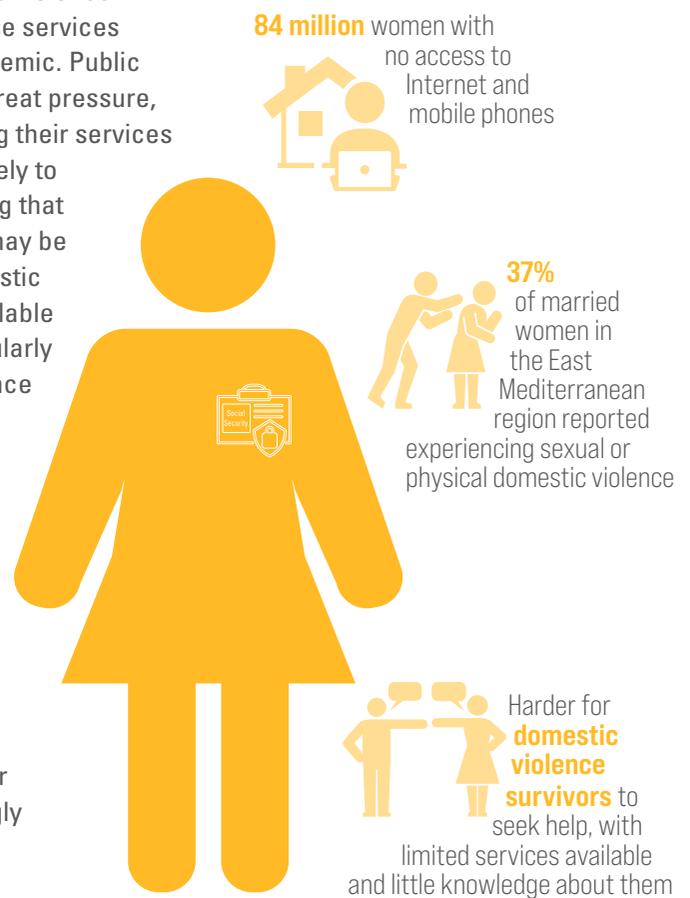
Most Arab countries have introduced social security programmes in the last decade, but the scope of legal social security remains low, especially among women. Moreover, female labour force participation was low and unemployment was high at 19.96 per cent in 2019. The unemployment gender gap has widened in 2020.²

Given the multi-dimensional forms of discrimination women face, and the added challenges caused by the pandemic, women in the Arab region will bear numerous burdens at various levels. Like any other humanitarian situation, the pandemic is forecasted to impact men, women, boys, and girls differently. For example, the region has high illiteracy rates among women, estimated at 26 per cent in 2018,³ which can affect their ability to access information on the pandemic during lockdowns. This makes seeking help more difficult for Arab women. Around 84 million women in the region are not connected to the Internet and do not have access to mobile phones. The pandemic will disproportionately impact these women, especially since certain jobs are expected to be pursued remotely during lockdowns.

Prior to the pandemic, 37 per cent of married women in the East Mediterranean region⁴ reported experiencing sexual or physical domestic violence. The pandemic, fear of infection, food insecurity, economic stress, and community lockdowns have increased violence, particular gender-based violence as women remain isolated with their abusers during lockdowns. *Abaad*, a Lebanese non-governmental organization, indicated a 50 per cent increase in calls to their helpline regarding domestic abuse in 2020 compared with 2019, with one third of those calls during the month of March. A similar surge in reported domestic violence rates was recorded in China, France, Italy and Spain. With many women in the region being cut off from families and friends, and lacking Internet and mobile access, victims of domestic violence are becoming increasingly vulnerable. Significant economic challenges and enforced confinement are putting individuals and households under extreme stress, and acting as a catalyst for violent behaviour.

Many Arab countries do not criminalize marital rape and domestic violence, and few countries effectively document rates of gender-based violence. Even before the crisis, seeking help for domestic violence was difficult. Life-saving violence prevention and response services are expected to be heavily disrupted because of the pandemic. Public institutions, the justice system and the police are under great pressure, are often understaffed and face difficulties in coordinating their services to offer effective support to women and girls. They are likely to deprioritize acts of violence during the pandemic, meaning that perpetrators may not be arrested, and legal procedures may be delayed or halted. This situation makes it harder for domestic violence survivors to seek help, with limited services available and little knowledge about them. Furthermore, it is particularly difficult for social services to access gender-based violence victims in conflict zones, such as in Libya, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.

The pandemic and the resulting containment policies have caused a shock to health-care systems worldwide. Accessing standard health services has become more difficult, with financial resources and health facilities being directed towards containing the crisis. This is illustrated by the number of shelters for women and girls that have either been shut to avoid the spread of the virus, or transformed into health facilities for COVID-19 patients. These factors are making it increasingly hard for Arab women and girls to access sexual and reproductive health services.



B. Poverty and inequality

Initial estimates for the 14 countries in which poverty data is available show that the pandemic increased poverty rates from 29.2 per cent in 2019 to 32.4 per cent in 2020, and could increase them to 32.1 per cent in 2021, raising the total number of poor in these 14 countries from 101 million in 2019 to 116 million in 2021.⁵ The bulk of the region's poor population (over 80 per cent) reside in four countries, namely Egypt, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. The economic slowdown has negatively affected employment, real wages and the flow of remittances. The consequences of this crisis could be particularly severe on vulnerable groups, especially women and young adults, and those working in the informal sector who have no access to social protection schemes and unemployment insurance.

Estimates in tables 3.1 and 3.2 are based on growth projections from April 2020, and on national poverty lines that are not comparable and which may not accurately represent current living costs. A case in point is Lebanon, which has endured multiple growth shocks over the past year, including a severe devaluation of its currency and a resulting triple-digit inflation rate. Using an updated national-income growth rate (as at May 2020 of -1.2 per cent in 2019, -12.8 per cent in 2020, and 2.3 per cent in 2021), and a more appropriate national poverty line representing the cost of basic needs (of \$8.5/day in 2011 \$PPP), more realistic poverty estimates emerge: 8.2 per cent (less than 0.5 million poor) in 2019, 23.4 per cent (1.1 million) in 2020, and 21.4 per cent (1 million) in 2021.⁶

In light of these projections, measures to address poverty in the Arab region are more pertinent than ever. However, it is important to highlight that the pandemic has simply accentuated existing poverty trends. The Arab region is the only developing region where income poverty rose over the period 2010-2018, regardless of how it is measured.⁷ Owing mainly to conflict and economic recession, poverty represented a major development challenge that was accentuated, but not caused, by the pandemic.

To tackle growing poverty, middle- and high-income countries could tap the substantial wealth concentrated in the hands of a small number of their nationals. Table 3.3 compares the estimated assets of countries' wealthiest 10 per cent with the depth of countries' poverty in 2019. Among Arab MICs, including



Lebanon, the cost of closing the poverty gap is 1-5 per cent of the wealth of the top decile. However, among Arab LDCs, the cost constitutes a greater share or even exceeds the available assets of the wealthiest decile.⁸

For Arab LDCs, the ESCWA-proposed 'emergency national policy response' is a more realistic short-term solution. Arab Governments are called upon to establish a regional social solidarity fund that supports vulnerable countries, including Arab LDCs, especially in times of crisis. The fund should target the poor and vulnerable, ensure rapid response, and provide relief during food shortages, health emergencies and other disasters. For the fund to succeed, it is vital that the richer GCC countries fully support the initiative.

Table 3.1 Projected headcount poverty rates using national poverty lines, 2018-2021 (percentage)

| Country | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Algeria | 3.1 | 3.1 | 4.0 | 4.2 |
| Comoros | 41.4 | 41.4 | 43.0 | 43.4 |
| Djibouti | 20.7 | 19.6 | 20.1 | 19.1 |
| Egypt | 32.7 | 29.2 | 31.9 | 29.3 |
| Iraq | 18.0 | 17.9 | 23.2 | 22.4 |
| Jordan | 17.7 | 19.6 | 23.2 | 22.2 |
| Lebanon (projection April 2020) | 7.8 | 7.8 | 12.7 | 12.1 |
| Lebanon (updated projection May 2020) | 7.8 | 8.2 | 23.4 | 21.4 |
| Mauritania | 30.9 | 28.9 | 31.6 | 31.8 |
| Morocco | 3.1 | 2.3 | 3.3 | 3.6 |
| State of Palestine | 38.4 | 38.4 | 44.3 | 44.2 |
| Sudan | 46.0 | 48.2 | 53.4 | 55.6 |
| Syrian Arab Republic | 78.8 | 76.8 | 78.8 | 79.9 |
| Tunisia | 12.7 | 12.7 | 15.4 | 15.1 |
| Yemen | 73.6 | 73.7 | 79.0 | 80.3 |
| Arab region | 30.0 | 29.2 | 32.4 | 32.1 |

Sources: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/TP.10; E/ESCWA/CL3.SEP/2020/TP.8.

Note: In Lebanon, rapidly deteriorating growth conditions and inflation have given rise to higher poverty projections.

Table 3.2 Number of poor based on headcount poverty ratio using national poverty lines, millions, 2018-2021

| Country | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Algeria | 1.3 | 1.3 | 1.7 | 1.9 |
| Comoros | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.4 |
| Djibouti | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 |
| Egypt | 32.1 | 29.3 | 32.6 | 30.6 |
| Iraq | 6.9 | 7.0 | 9.3 | 9.2 |
| Jordan | 1.8 | 2.0 | 2.4 | 2.3 |
| Lebanon (projection April 2020) | 0.5 | 0.5 | 0.9 | 0.8 |
| Lebanon (updated projection May 2020) | 0.5 | 0.5 | 1.1 | 1.0 |
| Mauritania | 1.4 | 1.3 | 1.5 | 1.5 |
| Morocco | 1.1 | 0.8 | 1.2 | 1.3 |
| State of Palestine | 1.8 | 1.8 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Sudan | 19.2 | 20.6 | 23.4 | 25.0 |
| Syrian Arab Republic | 13.3 | 13.1 | 13.8 | 14.6 |
| Tunisia | 1.5 | 1.5 | 1.8 | 1.8 |
| Yemen | 21.0 | 21.5 | 23.5 | 24.5 |
| Arab Region | 102.4 | 101.4 | 114.9 | 116.3 |

Sources: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/TP.10; E/ESCWA/CL3.SEP/2020/TP.8.

Note: In Lebanon, rapidly deteriorating growth conditions and inflation have given rise to higher poverty projections.

Table 3.3 Countries' cost of closing the poverty gap and wealth of the richest decile

| Country | Mean wealth of top national decile, 2019 (2019\$) | Adults in the top national decile, 2019 ('000) | Top decile wealth, 2019 (\$million) | Cost of closing poverty gap, 2019 (current \$million) | Cost of closing poverty gap as a share of top-decile wealth, 2019 (percentage) |
|----------------------|---|--|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Algeria | 60 342 | 2 698 | 162 821 | 362 | 0.2 |
| Egypt | 99 771 | 5 831 | 581 755 | 8 952 | 1.5 |
| Iraq | 93 705 | 1 979 | 185 423 | 1 735 | 0.9 |
| Jordan | 163 214 | 551 | 89 964 | 816 | 0.9 |
| Lebanon | 360 069 | 421 | 151 409 | 381 | 0.3 |
| Morocco | 84 181 | 2 361 | 198 777 | 120 | 0.1 |
| Tunisia | 86 227 | 811 | 69 939 | 584 | 0.8 |
| MICs | 98 285 | 14 652 | 1 440 087 | 12 950 | 0.9 |
| Comoros | 33 734 | 42 | 1 427 | 211 | 14.8 |
| Djibouti | 18 685 | 58 | 1 089 | 49 | 4.5 |
| Mauritania | 14 521 | 231 | 3 354 | 529 | 15.8 |
| Sudan | 3 258 | 2 047 | 6 670 | 8 559 | 128.3 |
| Syrian Arab Republic | 13 477 | 966 | 13 024 | 7 365 | 56.5 |
| Yemen | 32 270 | 1 458 | 47 050 | 8 951 | 19.0 |
| LDCs | 15 117 | 4 803 | 72 615 | 25 665 | 35.3 |
| Total | 77 752 | 19 456 | 1 512 702 | 38 615 | 2.6 |

Source: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/TP.9.

C. Labour market dynamics



Labour force participation



Unemployment

The impact of the pandemic on work modalities and the lockdown in most sectors are unfavourably affecting the Arab region's workforce. The situation is causing harmful losses to business across a range of economic sectors, owing to a sharp fall in economic output. Certain sectors are facing high risks because of the current and expected collapse in regional economic activities. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), millions of workers are now vulnerable to layoffs and income loss, especially unprotected workers. The bulk of declining working hours and job losses in the Arab region will be in the highest impacted sectors that employ 39.8 million,⁹ representing 31.4 per cent of the Arab workforce. These workers are now facing a sharp decline in economic output and serious risk of termination. Nonetheless, the share of employment in at-risk sectors in Arab countries (31.4 per cent) is below the global average of 37.5 per cent, and is the second to last compared with other regions.

ILO has classified the pandemic's impact on economic output at the sectoral level globally. Wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, real estate and business activities, accommodation and food services are the most affected sectors, as they have the highest economic risks for workers. These sectors represent most of the enterprises at risk in the region, especially the wholesale and retail trade sector. Around 31.4 per cent of the region's employment is concentrated in these sectors, which employ millions of low-skilled and low-paid workers. Women comprise an average of 12.58 per cent of those employed in these sectors.¹⁰ However, women make up 47.7 per cent of those employed in health and social work activities in the Arab region,¹¹ meaning that they are on the frontline of the fight against COVID-19.



Labour force participation

The Arab region has one of lowest labour force participation rates worldwide. This is mainly due to the low participation of women in the labour market. Female labour participation in the Arab region is the lowest

worldwide estimated at 20.53 per cent, far below the global average of 47.66 per cent. The average male labour force participation rate is 73.67 per cent, indicating a large gap between the participation of the two genders in the region.

Restricted access to financial services, lower salaries, limited mobility and harassment in public places are some of the challenges that prevent women from participating in the labour force and obtaining better jobs.¹² In some Arab LDCs, male labour force participation is five times the female rate, where most women outside the labour force are housemakers and most men are students. The significant reduction in the education gender gap has not enhanced women's participation in the labour market. In some countries, higher education levels among women have resulted in an increase in unemployment owing to a lack of opportunities for educated women. This education paradox is a result of cultural factors, family responsibilities, discrimination and lack of opportunities for women in the labour market. It demonstrates the importance of applying not only a top-down approach to fighting gender inequality, but also a bottom-up approach that challenges societal and cultural attitudes. Cultural barriers play a key role in maintaining women as an unutilized and unrecognized human reserve in the region. Moreover, women who disregard those barriers are more likely to participate in the labour force.



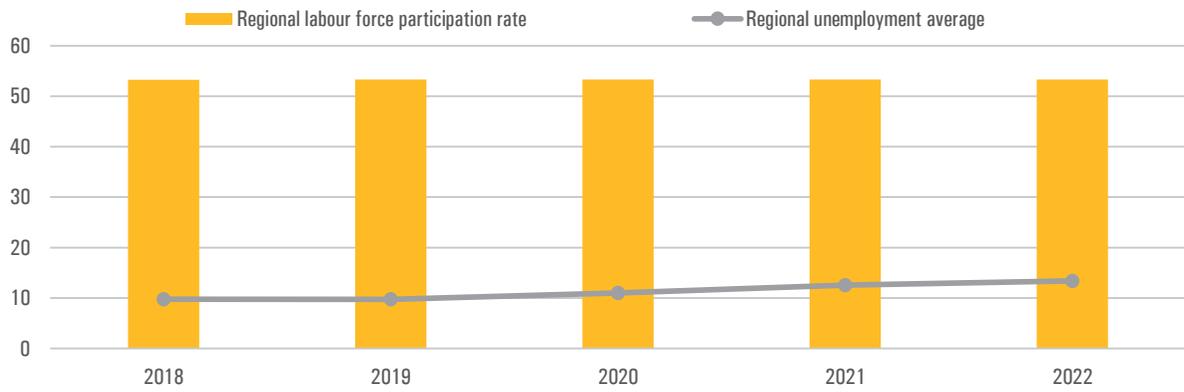
Unemployment

Before the pandemic, high unemployment was already a major development challenge for the region, which has one of the highest unemployment rates worldwide, especially among women and young people. The Arab region has the highest unemployment gender gap in the world. The female unemployment rate is estimated at 19.96 per cent compared with a male unemployment rate of 7.83 per cent, but both rates are above the global average. Youth unemployment is the highest worldwide at 26.44 per cent, while the global average is 13.62 per cent. Female youth unemployment is the highest across all regions at 38.47 per cent, while the global average is 13.07 per cent.¹³ Young people (aged 15-24) form almost 17 per cent (74 million) of Arab countries' population.¹⁴

Youth unemployment



Figure 3.2 Regional unemployment and labour force participation rates projections, 2018-2022



Source: Compiled by ESCWA.

Young people are already three times more likely to be unemployed than adults,¹⁵ especially those in the informal sector.

The pandemic will worsen the situation (figure 3.3). According to the ILO nowcasting model,¹⁶ compared with 2019, the Arab region witnessed a 2.2 per cent decline in working hours in the first quarter of 2020, 19.65 per cent in the second quarter, and 12.8 per cent in the third. These estimated declines are equivalent to approximately 3 million, 23 million, and 15 million full-time jobs consecutively in each quarter. The unemployment rate is estimated to have increased by 1.2 percentage points.¹⁷

Increased unemployment will affect all Arab countries. In Saudi Arabia, the unemployment rate is estimated to have increased 1.39 percentage points in 2020, and is projected to increase by 1.83 percentage points in 2021. Qatar, which has one of the lowest unemployment rates globally, witnessed an estimated increase of 2.03 percentage points in 2020, with unemployment rates jumping for the first time in years above 1 per cent, reaching 2.12 per cent in 2020 and 4.77 per cent in 2021. Qatar announced a stimulus package of \$23 billion to support and provide financial and economic incentives to the private sector, which may reduce unemployment. The United Arab Emirates has adopted a similar stimulus package; however, the unemployment rate is estimated to have increased by 2.85 percentage points to reach 5.2 per cent in 2020 and is projected to reach 6.92 per cent in 2021.

In Jordan, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) represent 95 per cent of the private sector, with 52 per cent of the country's total workforce operating informally. Both SMEs and the informal sector are the most economically affected by the pandemic. This raises concerns about unemployment rates in Jordan. Jordanians working outside the country are expected to lose their jobs and return home, adding to the national unemployment rate which increased by an estimated 2.7 percentage points in 2020 to reach 17.41 per cent, and is projected to increase 3.86 per cent in 2021 to reach 21.27 per cent.

The Lebanese economy has been semi-paralyzed since protests began on 17 October 2019. After the COVID-19 outbreak, Lebanon went into lockdown and struggled with a financial crisis and inflated prices because of the depreciating Lebanese pound. The country is expected to lose many SMEs as a result, where hundreds of thousands of employees losing their jobs in the education, services and banking sectors, in addition to thousands of Lebanese workers in GCC and African countries returning home following layoffs. The unemployment rate in Lebanon is estimated to have increased by 1.81 percentage points in 2020 and is forecasted to increase by 2.91 percentage points in 2021. Moreover, because of persistent protests, political instability, temporary and permanent closures, and the Beirut Port explosion, the labour market in Lebanon will face significant challenges in the coming years, as the economy is expected to contract by at least 10.2 per cent.

In Morocco, the Ministry of Employment and Professional Integration stated that 113,000 companies had halted operations since 15 March 2020, and over 700,000 employees have been unable to work or laid off. The unemployment rate in Morocco estimated to have increased by 2.76 percentage points in 2020 to 11.78 per cent, and is projected to increase by 3.46 percentage points in 2021 to 15.24 per cent.

In Tunisia, the Government has rolled out a series of socioeconomic measures to support individual entrepreneurs and businesses in maintaining jobs and incomes across all sectors. Nonetheless, the unemployment rate increased by 2.18 percentage points in 2020 to 18.02 per cent, and is expected to increase by 2.93 percentage points in 2021 to 21.1 per cent.

Somalia in the country least affected by unemployment in the Arab region. Around 83 per cent of the workforce in Somalia operates in agriculture sector, which has a low economic risk for employees and employers. The remaining 17 per cent of the workforce is distributed across different sectors, including those most affected by the pandemic. The unemployment rate in Somalia slightly increased by 0.57 percentage points in 2020, reaching 11.92 per cent.

Jordan

national unemployment rate increasing by **2.7 percentage** points in 2020 and **3.86 per cent** in 2021

Lebanon

national unemployment rate increasing by **1.81 percentage** points in 2020 and **2.91 percentage** points in 2021

Morocco

national unemployment rate increasing by **2.76 percentage** points in 2020 and **3.46 percentage** points in 2021

Tunisia

national unemployment rate increasing by **2.18 percentage** points in 2020 and **2.93 percentage** points in 2021

Somalia

national unemployment rate increasing by **0.57 percentage** points in 2020

Figure 3.3 Projections of unemployment and labour force participation rates in selected Arab countries, 2018-2022



Source: Compiled by ESCWA.

D. Migrant workers' conditions

The pandemic has exposed migrant workers in the region and the world to significant risks. The region hosts 35 million international migrants, of which 31 per cent are women.¹⁸ They are mainly concentrated in GCC countries, Jordan and Lebanon. Non-nationals represent the majority of the population in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (80 per cent of the population in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates). The six GCC countries host over 10 per cent of migrant workers globally. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates host the third and fifth largest migrant populations, respectively. Most of these workers are from South and Southeast Asia, and East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda).¹⁹

The pandemic, the travel ban and lockdown restrictions have harmed migrant workers' livelihoods, and hindered their ability to support family members in their country of origin. Most migrant workers in the region are either self-employed or work in sectors where there are minimal employee protections, making them vulnerable during economic downturns. They are explicitly excluded from labour laws in nearly all Arab countries. Most migrant workers in the region are regulated by the *Kafala* system.²⁰ Under this system, migrant workers cannot leave the country, transfer employment, or resign from a job without their sponsor's consent or until a contract expires.²¹ This raises serious concerns regarding their situation during the pandemic, which will also affect women disproportionately owing to the nature of their jobs. Migrant women form a high portion of domestic workers in the region. Globally 6 out of every 10 working women are migrant domestic workers.²²



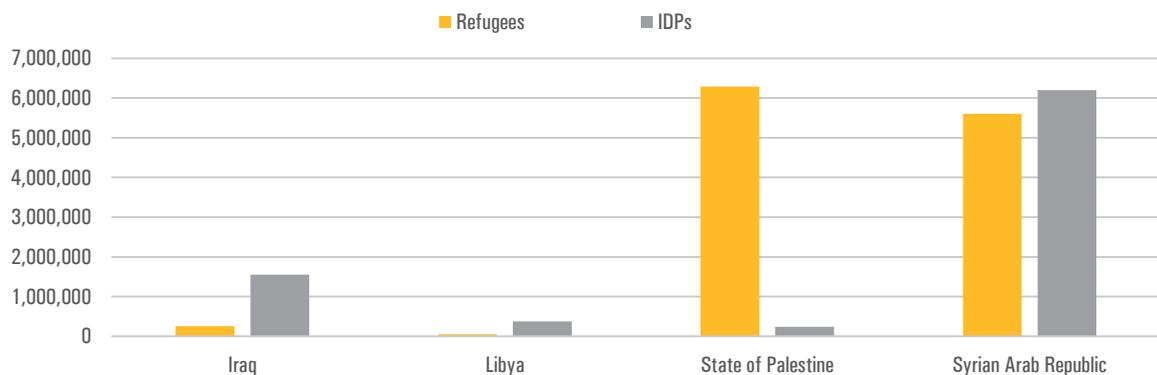
E. Refugees and internally displaced persons

Armed conflict, poverty, famine, corruption and political rivalries have ravaged many Arab countries, and represent a perpetual obstacle to the region's development and shared prosperity. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 16 million people of concern in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).²³ The number of both refugees and IDPs is increasing in the region. There are 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide,²⁴ and 41.4 million internally displaced. As at the end of 2019, there were 79.5 million forcibly displaced people and 26 million refugees worldwide, with 80 per cent of the world's displaced living in countries

affected by insecurity and malnutrition.²⁵ Refugees and IDPs create significant pressure on the infrastructure and public institutions of host countries. They compete with citizens over scarce resources, services, food, water, housing and land. With persistent unrest in the Arab region, many host countries are facing overwhelming demand for natural resources, social services, health and education services, energy and transport, and employment. This leads to price inflation and depressed wages for both locals and refugees.

As at August 2019, there were 6.2 million internally displaced Syrians, and 5.6 million registered as refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and North Africa.²⁶ The Syrian crisis is in its ninth year, and continues to be the largest refugee crisis in the world. In Iraq, as at September 2019, at least 1.55 million people were internally displaced, and 257,000 Iraqi refugees were registered with UNHCR in neighbouring countries. Around 32 thousand people live in camps in Al-Hasakah, the Syrian Arab Republic, without formal registration. The ongoing conflict in Libya has undermined all the country's systems and sectors. Libya has 373,709 IDPs and 48,626 refugees registered with UNHCR. There are also people of concern outside conflict situations. According to the Displacement Tracking Matrix, there are 1.2 million IDPs in Somalia and 2 million in the Sudan. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA),²⁷ there are 6,293,390 registered refugees distributed across Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the West Bank and the Gaza strip, in addition to 238,000 IDPs according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. The ongoing conflict in Yemen has resulted in 24.1 million people in need of humanitarian assistance. This represents more than 80 per cent of the Yemeni

Figure 3.4 Refugees and IDPs in the Arab region, 2019



Source: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2020c, 2020d; UNRWA, 2019; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2019.

population. Yemen recorded nearly 4 million IDPs and 276,000 refugees in 2019. The first case of COVID-19 was reported on the 10 April 2020, causing immense concern about the virus spreading in a country already grappling with one of the worst humanitarian crises in contemporary history, where half of the population at risk of famine.²⁸

The pandemic is disproportionately impacting those living in the economic margins of society, asylum seekers, refugees, IDPs,²⁹ and host communities. The virus is threatening 55 million people in need of humanitarian aid in the region, where around 26 million are refugees and IDPs. Humanitarian aid, including medical supplies, health services, food, water and sanitation, is at risk. Refugee camps and IDP settlements contend with high population density, making social distancing difficult to apply. There are limited health services, which may further increase exposure of people of concern to severe health risks. Many already struggle with underlying health issues.

Many host countries suffer from serious socioeconomic obstacles that impact both refugees and locals. There are 910,256 Syrian refugees in Lebanon and 656,213 in Jordan, where 52.1 per cent of those in Lebanon and 50.1 per cent of those in Jordan are females.³⁰ Compounded factors will expose forcibly displaced women and girls not only to the virus but also to an increasing risk of violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse. The economic devastation and burdens that the pandemic has created may be translated into child marriage and survival sex. Many forcibly displaced women are facing increasing burdens as caregivers. The lockdown and mobility restrictions make it harder for women to access services, including shelters that have been shuttered. Over 75 per cent of Syrian refugee families in Lebanon live in overcrowded shelters in dangerous conditions below humanitarian standards.³¹ Around 63 per cent of Syrian refugee households are food secure, but households headed by women are more food insecure (35 per cent) than households headed by men (28 per cent).³² About 55 per cent of these refugees have less than \$2.9



to spend per day. The pandemic will lead to additional economic pressures and burdens on refugees, which in turn will exacerbate already dire humanitarian conditions. They will also suffer from restrictions to health-care services.³³ Discrimination against refugees and IDP is likely to increase, and funding needs for humanitarian aid will grow substantially.

F. Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

Prior to the pandemic, socioeconomic development in the Arab region was already marked by high levels of inefficiency and inequity. COVID-19 has exacerbated all these issues. To mitigate the social impact of this unprecedented crisis, the following actions should be considered:

- National and international collaboration and solidarity can act as an important line of defence against the detrimental effects of the pandemic;
- Policies and measures implemented to tackle the pandemic must target all social groups and ensure that no one is left behind, including the most marginalized and vulnerable women and girls, refugees and IDPs in camps or informal settlements, prisoners, migrant workers, migrants in detention centres, and persons with disabilities;
- National policies should be comprehensive, timely and well-coordinated to stimulate economic growth and labour demand;
- Governments should help protect companies, especially SMEs, by reducing employers' charges in the most affected sectors, offering extended tax credits, and reducing interest rates;
- Compensation packages should be provided to workers in the informal sector, where women represent over half the workforce;
- Gender dimensions must be integrated in countries' economic responses, given that social distancing and school closures will oblige many women to take leave from paid jobs to undertake disproportionate amounts of household responsibilities and unpaid work, which can increase stress levels and mental health issues.

