

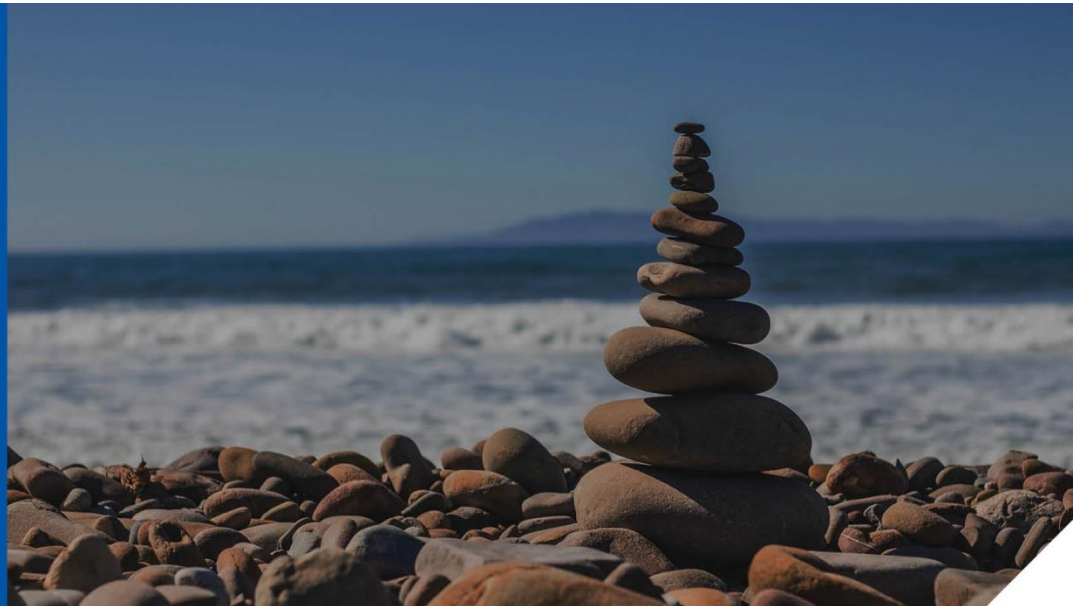


International
Labour
Organization

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i-eval Discovery



Title: Thematic evaluation of the ILO ROAs gender work in the region with emphasis on the SIDA funded ILO- UN Women Joint Programme

QUICK FACTS

Countries: Egypt and the Arab States region, with special focus in Jordan, Lebanon and the Occupied Palestinian Territory

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Evaluation type: Thematic

Evaluation timing: Final

Administrative Office:

Technical Office: Regional Office for Arab States (ROAS)

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BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Purpose, scope and clients of the evaluation

The evaluation's main purpose has been to comprehensively examine the ILO's current efforts in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in the Arab States, in order to inform how future strategies should be designed and implemented in the region. The evaluation has focused on the ILO-UN Women Joint Programme "Promoting Productive Employment and Decent Work for Women in Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine," funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and executed between 2019 and 2024, and on five other interventions, either active during 2024 or recently finished, implemented in three countries: Jordan, Lebanon, and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). The evaluation used purposive sampling to select these five additional interventions by assessing 24 interventions with a Gender Equality Marker (GEM) 2 or 3 against six criteria. The sampled interventions have been: 'The Advancing Decent Work for Women to Achieve Economic Development (DW4W) project' and the 'Climate change, disability inclusion and intersectionality multi-country programme' in Jordan; the 'Women in Management Initiative' (WIMIN) and the 'Women's empowerment in the context of the care economy, WE-Care' projects in Lebanon and the 'Strengthening labour market governance project' in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT).

Methodology of evaluation

The six OECD DAC criteria guided the evaluation, which combined qualitative and quantitative methods and used a grounded theory approach in data analysis to respond to the 12 main evaluation questions and the five sub-questions. Qualitative data has provided additional hypotheses of inquiry, explanations and nuances, while quantitative data has helped identify broader trends and patterns. The main methods used were document review, key informant interviews (KII), group discussions, and an online survey of ILO staff. A total of 79 stakeholders were contacted for interviews or participated in group discussions, while the online survey was responded to by 20 ILO ROAS staff. Main evaluation limitations relate to its reliance on qualitative methods, as KIIs and Group Discussions reflect personal views and are limited in representativeness, all of which can introduce bias.

MAIN FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS

RELEVANCE

The ILO's Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (GEEW) work in the Arab States has shown **relevance to the needs of its tripartite constituents**—national governments, employers and trade unions— which has been achieved by ongoing dialogue and engagement. The priorities of these stakeholders are clearly reflected in the assessed interventions. However, evidence of **regular engagement of end beneficiaries in the design phase of all projects is limited**, with consultations mainly occurring during project implementation, often focusing on gathering feedback on specific project activities. Neither the evaluation has found enough evidence that gender-responsive situation analysis is systematically done prior to the project design phase in all the revised projects, nor was it reflected in several of the available evaluation reports.

The ILO's GEEW work is well aligned with national commitments to gender equality. However, entrenched gender norms in Arab states continue to hinder the translation of these national policies into concrete action. The priority given to gender equality by national constituencies remains uneven. Governments' commitment may be driven by some senior leaders who are committed to gender equality, but also by external pressures such as international reputation or the obligation to address rights abuses. For employers, the focus on gender equality is often driven by economic or commercial interests rather than a genuine interest in investing in women's careers. Although challenged by various pressures, trade unions tend to be more progressive on gender equality; the fact that some of them already have some active women in their ranks and the need for unions to expand their membership by attracting more women workers also helps their responsiveness.

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The analyzed ILO's GEEW interventions in the Arab region reflect global frameworks and principles of decent work and have focused on key areas like pay equity, care work, and violence and harassment. However, the ILO GEEW work has been shaped largely by donor priorities and local contexts rather than purely by ILO's planning frameworks. Initial approaches to issues like equal pay and, later, to the care economy have been adjusted to better align with regional realities and stakeholders' receptiveness, underscoring both the need for and the capacity of ILO to navigate complex socio-cultural and political contexts such as those of the Arab region.

COHERENCE

At the global level, the ILO's gender-focused initiatives in the Arab States have aligned with and contributed to some of the global intergovernmental processes in which the ILO participates or leads, notably the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC) initiative and, also, on the care economy as some of the assessed interventions, notably, the Joint Programme and the DW4W project have supported the development of specific policies and infrastructure on care. **At the regional level, synergies between ILO's GEEW interventions have been limited, with the Joint Programme, the most prominent regional initiative, not fulfilling its role of promoting cross-learning between ILO country offices. At the country level, the main synergies existed primarily between national stakeholders**, the Joint Programme and the DW4W project. There is a consensus within the ILO that greater efforts are needed to promote complementarity, harmonization, and coordination with other agencies to achieve better results.

SIDA is a key partner of the ILO in promoting the decent work agenda. Together, they focus on strategic cross-cutting areas such as gender equality and non-discrimination, where there is a strong alignment between SIDA's priorities and the ILO's mandate and comparative advantages. In addition to women's economic empowerment and skills development, there are other opportunities for the ILO to contribute to SIDA's priorities, such as leveraging the ILO's experience in the OPT where the ILO is supporting decent work and social justice with a gender approach.

EFFECTIVENESS

Overall, the ILO's work in the region has made significant progress through its interventions. Through the Joint Programme, the ILO, in collaboration with other actors and building on existing efforts, contributed to several policy and legislative reforms in the areas of maternity protection, equal pay provisions, violence and harassment, and care policies, with Jordan standing out with 13 policy and legislative changes related to gender equality over a total of 23 normative and legislative amendments. These legal reforms have been a crucial foundation for further policy improvements. As a result, and with the contribution of the Advancing Decent Work for Women project, workplace policies in sectors with high female employment, such as education and childcare, have improved, benefiting many women across the region, particularly in Jordan.

ILO has also successfully raised awareness among its constituents and strengthened its capacity to address women's practical and strategic needs. Trade unions, in particular, have received support through gender participatory audits, training, and coaching to become more gender-sensitive, empowering women trade unionists to have a stronger voice both within their organizations and externally. Less progress has been made, however, with employers and their representatives. The WIMIN project succeeded in getting Lebanese business associations and national and sectoral trade unions to review their internal policies and practices from a gender perspective, develop action plans, and support key soft skills for 75 women in technical positions in Lebanese industry. While these are early signs of awareness about gender and equality issues, tangible results in revising internal policies, supporting

women's career development, and increasing women's participation and representation at the board level remain limited.

The ILO's distinctive advantage is largely attributed to its standard-setting nature, tripartite system, and capacity for social dialogue on labour issues, including GEEW. Overall, the technical expertise provided by the ILO in reviewing labour laws from a gender perspective, the use of tripartite social dialogue to agree on proposed changes, and the investment in building quality evidence are key elements contributing to these results. Finally, one factor that has emerged as influencing the ILO's ability to promote GEEW, and on which there are divergent views within ILO ROAS, is whether **to broaden the range of actors with whom the ILO engages beyond its traditional constituencies**, for example, sectoral trade unions or business associations that do not have formal representative positions in the tripartite structures, but also non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations.

EFFICIENCY

The ILO ROAS team, although small, has demonstrated strong commitment and high performance and has been able to operate as a network. However, current staffing levels leave many country offices without in-country specialist staff. This might partially explain the limited internal coordination among different projects, which needs enhancement to create synergies and improve the overall effectiveness of GEEW interventions as siloed approaches continue to challenge collaboration. While some projects demonstrate good practices in gender mainstreaming, many of the non-sampled GEEW interventions lack comprehensive gender analyses and gender-sensitive results and indicators, which hampers the effectiveness of GEEW-focused initiatives. Moreover, the sampled interventions would have benefited from more robust monitoring frameworks and better-designed data collection systems.

In terms of achieving results within the intended timeframe, most of the interventions reviewed faced delays, often resulting in no-cost extensions. Additionally, the systematic application of logical frameworks and/or Theory of Change remains a work in progress. Some interventions were ambitious in scope and based on assumptions that were not thoroughly tested or confirmed. A limited number of gender-responsive initiatives show gender-sensitive budgets, incorporating activities specifically targeting women or addressing gender gaps. Gender-sensitive budgeting is inherently linked to the broader process of gender mainstreaming.

ORIENTATION TO IMPACT

ILO interventions have made a tangible impact by enhancing the legal, policy, and institutional frameworks that support gender equality across the region. These reforms have contributed to concrete advancements in labour rights, such as equal pay, maternity protection, and safeguards against violence and harassment, which have led to improved working conditions in highly feminized sectors like childcare and education, particularly in Jordan. Additionally, ILO efforts to promote gender equality have influenced workplace dynamics by encouraging greater representation of women in decision-making positions, albeit with modest results, and, above all, by strengthening the capacity of trade unions for gender equality, especially among female cadres. This has strengthened the meaningful engagement of trade unions in social dialogue and collective bargaining, laying the groundwork for long-term improvements in gender equality within the labour markets

SUSTAINABILITY

None of the assessed interventions had an explicit sustainability or transition strategy in place. However, the Joint Programme and the DW4W project contributed indirectly to sustainability by focusing on legal reforms aligned with the ILO's normative function. Both interventions supported coalition-building with government, civil society, and key stakeholders on pay equity, private sector education workers' rights, or legal reform of the Labor Law in the

OPT, all of which have laid the groundwork for continued advocacy for reforms. The WIMIN project sustainability strategy revolved around the supported employers and business membership organizations that would establish their sustainability strategy. However, while the project demonstrated the benefits of supporting women's advancement in the workplace, employers did not commit to financially supporting the fund, allegedly because of financial constraints. **All interventions focused on capacity building at the institutional level, inherently aiming for sustainability.** However, the sustainability of these efforts depends on creating supportive environments that enable the practical application of new skills and knowledge.

RECOMMENDATIONS, LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES

Recommendations

1. **Strategic advocacy for gender priorities.** The ILO ROAS might pursue incremental change and adapt its approaches by adopting more culturally sensitive strategies that foster greater social acceptance in close cooperation with like-minded partners at the government, employer and trade union levels, while promoting women's employment opportunities in the private sector.
2. **Strengthening internal and external coherence for GEEW.** ILO ROAS could adopt a more integrated and cohesive strategy across its various GEEW-oriented projects at the country and regional levels by promoting information sharing and learning between projects. Externally, it should identify current and potential GEEW-oriented partners in each country and at a regional level, and expand its collaboration with other stakeholders involved in GEEW beyond its traditional tripartite constituencies
3. **Engender the ILO's operational model.** Strengthening gender mainstreaming in project design, implementation, and budgeting is crucial to fully leverage opportunities to advance gender equality priorities. The ILO ROAS should: identify key moments during the preparatory phase when GEEW input, advice, or guidance is essential; make gender assessments mandatory ensuring consultation with final beneficiaries; validate assumptions to inform the intervention's theories of change or gendered results frameworks and budget for the resources needed to achieve the expected gender outcomes.
4. **Mobilise funding for GEEW.** The ILO ROAS should aim to secure multi-annual funding to ensure that gender transformative outcomes are both achieved and sustained. It could do this by developing a resource mobilisation strategy and a corresponding multi-annual resource mobilisation plan; exploring opportunities for triangular cooperation among Arab States; promoting multi-annual funding from current ILO partners such as SIDA; and prioritising GEEW-focused or GEEW-aligned interventions for RBSA funding.
5. **Strengthen the communication function.** ILO ROAS should position itself as a *knowledge bridge or facilitator* by translating complex labour issues into understandable and actionable insights. It could segment audience profiles and tailor messages accordingly, using different strategies to demonstrate the positive economic and social impact of reforms, including on everyday life.

Main lessons learned and good practices

LESSONS LEARNED

- Professionalizing female-dominated occupations such as education by improving legislation, policies, and working conditions might serve as an entry point for expanding gender equality across other employment sectors like childcare.
- Future joint programmes between ILO and other UN organizations should adopt a harmonized implementation approach based on continuous communication and collaboration and mutual accountability

GOOD PRACTICES

- Empowering female teachers for Decent Work: The 'Stand Up with the Teacher' Campaign in Jordan
- A cross-cutting coalition of Palestinian trade unions and social organizations for a gender-responsive labour law.
- Strengthening gender-sensitive labour inspection in Egypt.