«The Status of Arab Women in light of the Recent Developments in the Region»

Side event to the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women

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League of Arab States and Arab Women Organization
Background
The Arab region has been currently witnessing large events and shifts at the political, security and social levels. Arab revolutions have emerged particularly like an earthquake that hit strongly a number of Arab societies and echoed in other communities, which produced many political and social changes. Also, the threat of terrorism which escalated recently is threatening the entire region; this was accompanied with internal armed conflicts and harsh consequences in terms of destruction and displacement. These developments came in addition to the ongoing painful situation in Palestine under occupation and the continuation of the Syrian crisis, for the fourth year in a row, and the aggravation of the situation at all levels political, humanitarian and social, which has had a negative impact on the development of the Syrian people at home and abroad, especially women, children and the elderly. Moreover, terrorism poses risks to the bulk of the Arab region as a whole, as well as to men and Arab women alike in both Iraq, Libya and the Levant.

Objective of the Seminar
The seminar aims at bringing together Arab and non-Arab audience to discuss the status of women in the Arab region and arrive at practical recommendations to build worldwide solidarity against terrorism, violence, and exclusion..

Participants:
Participants in the seminar include representatives of governmental women machinaries from Arab, European, African and South American countries, regional and international organizations, human rights and civil society organizations.

Main Topics of the Seminar:
1. Arab Women and the Anticipated Gains.
2. Arab Women and the Current Crisis:
   • Women and Exclusion.
   • Women and Violence.
   • Women and Armed Conflicts.
3. Terrorism and its impact on women and their rights.
4. A future outlook on women in the Arab region.
Discussion Paper
1-Arab Women and the Anticipated Gains:

Observers of Arab women’s advancement, in general, may notice an upward development with respect to the status of women, both in terms of the legal framework governing their social presence, and the degree of their participation in leading positions. However, women’s basic problems remained confined to the degree to which the legal framework guaranteeing women’s rights is effective on the ground, and how far other barriers have been eliminated, particularly the cultural ones that prevent their full participation in society.

In the context of the current changes experienced by the Arab region, and more specifically, the revolutions that have been the biggest variable in the Arab scene, throughout the past few years, women’s strong participation in Arab revolutions, has revealed the truth of her being a full participating member that cannot be eliminated or absent from other scenes of life and social interaction in any way; a fact that has been long ignored. Within this struggle, all ideas and allegations that restricted women or that made her be perceived as an object that is less eligible fell apart. Women won unspoken recognition by everyone that she has been an integral member of the nation. The burden borne by women in those fields and the great sacrifices they made marked the incidence of a fundamental change in traditional gender relations towards more freedom and recognition of the women’s role. Perhaps one of the most important achievements of the Arab revolutions is that the same woman who made this change day after day, and that she adheres to it and will not give it up, even though the surrounding reality revealed later that the social context has denied this change to a large extent, considering it exceptional and temporary.

But, in spite of this, we can still talk about some societal gains, especially the political gains achieved for women in a number of Arab countries that witnessed revolutions; the gains began to loom over the past year in the form of promises expressed by national conferences and constitutional provisions that seemed to restore recognition for Women. However, the fact remains that these promises are yet to be fulfilled on the ground, and will be revealed in the coming days.

In the Republic of Tunisia, the first State to experience revolution, and after the women’s movement was filled with fears of the loss of gains achieved since the issuance of the Personal Status Law in 1956 which was the basis for some ground-breaking legislations ensuring the rights of women and perpetuating women’s position in the family and society, following the emergence of a reactionary rhetoric that waged a focused campaign against women. This campaign was sometimes accompanied with violence in an attempt to drive women out of the public domain and to undermine the Tunisian example of modernity where women are in the heart of it. However, the recent political developments in Tunisia, where women have participated heavily in the hope
of preserving those gains and building on them. Tunisia has succeeded in developing a new constitution promulgated in January 2014 with the participation of all political and social forces. The Constitution stipulated clearly the protection of the acquired rights of Tunisian women to support, develop and to ensure equal opportunities between men and women in bearing responsibilities in all areas. The constitution also aimed at achieving gender equality in elected councils and implementing measures to eliminate violence against women. The country successfully held the legislative elections held in October 2014, followed by the presidential election held in November 2014. Great hopes are pinned so that the collective political that attained this great political achievement can turn these ideas and constitutional texts into reality.

In the Arab Republic of Egypt, which went through a political experience similar to the course of events in Tunisia, the new constitution was passed in January 2014, which is the product of the fifty member committee where women struggled for fair constitutional articles for women. The Constitution has actually included, for the first time, about 20 articles on women. The articles included provisions directly concerned with women such as the State shall ensure the achievement of equality between men and women in all civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights, taking measures to ensure adequate representation of women in parliaments as determined by law, allocating 25% of the local seats for women which is the equivalent of 13,500 positions in the localities. The Constitution also pointed out that the state guarantees the right of women to public office and functions of senior management of the state and the appointment to the competent judicial bodies without discrimination against them, as well as protect against all forms of violence. The Constitution stipulated the State's obligation to provide care and protection for Childhood and Motherhood and women breadwinners and elderly women most in need, and the eligibility to Egyptian nationality for those born for an Egyptian father or Egyptian mother. The articles indirectly concerned with women, but were of interest to them, as stipulated by the Constitution of the state's commitment to social justice and the provision of social solidarity in order to ensure a decent life for all citizens, as well as providing equal opportunities for all citizens without discrimination, and confirmation of the State's keenness on family cohesion and stability, and the emphasis on workers' rights and preserve and protect them from the risks of the work, and the provision of social insurance services as well as social security for those who do not enjoy it, and rural development and raise the living standards of its population level, and the text that discrimination is a crime punishable by law, as well as the text on issues such as developing a plan nation to face the slums to improve the quality of life, and the protection of children, and persons with disabilities, the elderly and the signal to prevent slavery and slavery and human trafficking, and the signal as well as to comply with international conventions.
The National Council for Women, which is the national machinery for women in Egypt, has been active in the restoration of its role in translating these articles into laws asserting women's rights and gains. The NCW participated in the debate and in the development of the electoral law allowing the allocation of 70 seats in parliament for women despite the fact that the Constitution does not specify quotas, but pointed to an appropriate representation of women in parliament. Moreover, the National Council for women prepared a draft law to combat violence against women.

In the Republic of Yemen, the National Dialogue Conference, which opened in March 2013 and lasted for ten months until January 2014, witnessed a strong participation by Yemeni women, and revealed as well some positive social attitudes towards women, reflecting an appreciation for women’s role. The conference came out with several recommendations affecting some important and sensitive political and social issues that are gender sensitive with the objective of affirming the Yemeni women’s fundamental rights and protection from all forms of violence. These recommendations will hopefully turn into valid legal texts and constitutional provisions. The recommendations included:

- Ensuring women’s right to exercise all political and constitutional rights; empowering women to occupy at least 30% of the functional, leading and trade union positions including more than ten posts of the 10 President's advisers, with not a single woman;
- the State's obligation to develop laws and legislative frameworks and the provision of procedural regulations and seizure and control tools necessary for the protection of women from all forms of violence and discrimination against women, including FGM; criminalizing and punishment of perpetrators and supporters by incitement or by ignoring such acts; compliance with the legal marriage age for women (18 years and above) stipulating the condition of the woman’s approval, and the criminalization of anyone who violates it; ensuring equal rights for men and women at the workplace as well as women’s right to obtain maternity leave and rights relating to pregnancy, childbirth, breast-feeding and nursery. The recommendations also included the right of women, in general, and the divorced, battered, elderly women as well as women with disabilities and marginalized groups, in particular, to proper living and health care. The need to take into account the provision of treatment and to develop special legal for women prisoners. The recommendations included as well the integration of women in, general, and rural women, in particular, in large scale programs and projects for economic sustainable development that are financially viable for the society and women in addition to the provision of a comprehensive social safety net for poor and vulnerable groups and social strata.
2 - Arab Women and Current Crises:
Among the many crises triggered by sharp changes in the Arab region since 2011, Arab women have been living a complex crisis, which we wish draw attention to the following issues:

First: Women and Exclusion:
The events of the Arab revolutions witnessed the participation of women in the entire revolutionary action, their presence ranged between awareness raising, igniting political movement to mobilize public anger through various media, especially new media, or through political organizations to broad participation in long sit-ins, strikes and demonstrations that erupted in the revolting countries. Moreover, women actively took part in public conferences and forums to call for change, which have shaped the views and perceptions of reform. Many young Arab women and activists have lost their freedom and others have lost their lives and paid the price of their political positions, whether at the hands of government security forces in the revolution, at the hands of rival political groups that prevailed the scene in some countries after the revolution, or at the hands of terrorism, which has become a part of the scene later on.

It was expected that political structures are to be drafted after the revolutions in a way that take into consideration the full engagement of women at the equal level when they participated during the revolution, not only based on the concepts of fairness, but based on the rules of democracy which is what the revolution came to emphasize, as indicated by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Ban Ki-moon stated at the opening of "reform and transition to democracy" conference held in Lebanon in 2012, "democratization requires several preconditions, including "women must be at the heart of the region's future after women stood in the squares and streets asking for change considering that they have right now to be part of the decision making table and can exercise real influence in decision-making and judgment."

However, the Arab reality revealed the continued exclusion of Arab Women from community decision-making, despite the paradigm shift made by women in terms of movements and free actions side by side with men in the revolution. The change in gender roles during the revolution phase seemed temporary; it was not accompanied by a change in gender relationships with its stable structures in the community during the post-revolution phase. In countries that have experienced revolutions, and where women were fully involved in the revolutionary action in all its phases and have been inflicted with some of its disadvantages, they have been excluded from the political structures that were established after the revolution, and remained subject to the same social system specific to their role, restricting their political presence and at best offering limited and traditional positions.
Exclusion has been practiced, at times, as a spontaneous act by a society accustomed to a traditional perception of the distribution of gender roles, considering the participation of women during the revolution as just an exception imposed by that phase. At other times, exclusion was practiced out of religious inclinations by some political currents which have been trying in various ways to impose religious interpretations that create a barrier between women and the public sphere. Exclusion was also applied out of a deeply rooted macho image which has been shown in the most hideous practice of sexual violence against women, even in the revolution arena, to intimidate women and drive them out of the public scene.

The question is: How can the same revolutionary spirit which had put aside the traditional perspective for gender relations and advanced a new perspective that sees in women a full-fledged social partner who fought the battle until the end and shouldered responsibility without negligence maintain itself? In other words, how can the development of Arab societies after the revolution, political frameworks to accommodate and reflect hopes and aspirations of everyone, without exclusion, and promote the presence of women in the public sphere, especially political presence?

**Second: Women and Violence:**

Growing rates of violence against women during the revolutions and afterwards were shocking, especially sexual violence committed at the scene of the same struggle. This type of violence has specifically revealed that women have their own crises in addition to the crises of poverty, lack of freedom and social justice that basically drove the crowd, men and women of the revolution, in the first place. Women's crisis lie at the core of the cultural structure of the society as a whole. As noted by the researchers who spotted this phenomenon, the discourse of all the political and revolutionary forces was unable to deal with the problematics of feminist issues and evaded to handle women’s complex issues despite the fact that this is the basic role for any revolutionary or political movement that raises issues of freedom and equality.

On the procedural level, activists put the responsibility for this violence against women and that of protecting her on the shoulder of all social partners. They stressed the need for the agendas of the political forces while preparing for demonstrations and political events where women participate to include taking the necessary actions to secure the demonstrations, political rallies and events and to address the various crimes of violence against women, especially sexual violence. They emphasized that there also be accountability for subsequent occurrence of a crime of violence including the recognition of the occurrence of these heinous crimes and in pressing for an investigation around these crimes to identify the perpetrators and hold them accountable. Such responsibility also includes the approach adopted by the official media when exposing such crimes, so as not to resort to the logic of full denial nor the
logic of sensation and lack of respect for the privacy of those who have been violated, as well as the responsibility of the state itself and its institutions in response to the growing phenomenon of sexual violence and ensure the safety of citizens and their freedom of movement.

There is no doubt that approaching this issue in a deepened manner will open up different issues, at the forefront of which is the cultural/social structures which carry a perception of inferiority towards a woman's body which allows for its violation, all related aspects to this view, in terms of its factors, motivations and the way to correct them, the moral structure of Arab societies, especially the younger generations, the solidity of their moral values and ethical system, their eligibility to undertake the task of building the future of Arab societies, and last but not least, the legislative structure and disciplinary system in Arab societies in the way these crimes are described and determining the penalties the perpetrators deserve.

Third: Women and Armed Conflict:

Several Arab countries are witnessing destabilizing internal conflicts. Among many sad situations resulting from and produced by the burning prevailing conditions, the painful picture of Arab women comes to the forefront. The picture of women bearing compound types of sufferings in terms of displacement, dislocation, loss of family, the risk of death or injury under poor health care conditions, the burden of shifting to one bread winner for the family, the pain of being kidnapped and physically and sexually abused. In refugee camps, woman and her family lack the basic needs of living in terms of housing, food and medicine, and on top of that women may be deprived of access to education, subjected to sexual abuse, while many women undertake the traditional tasks of a man like earning livelihood and protection of the family.

The events of Arab revolutions in Libya, Yemen and Syria have experienced severe violence against women to varying degrees. This prompted the Security Council to keep recalling its resolutions on women, peace and security, in the body of its different resolutions on the situation in these countries. Such sufferings are to be added to the suffering of other Arab countries such as Palestine which has been experiencing the tragedy of permanent occupation, as well as Iraq where women have been exposed to the risk of murder, kidnapping, physical violence since the beginning of the millennium until today.

Obviously, the status of women in situations of armed conflict and instability is an extension of her status in peace in terms of being subject to the same social structure of the Patriarchate, which is depriving her from owning resources, symbolic and material, and set them at the bottom of the social oppression ladder. Moreover, problems of asylum, migration, displacement insecurity and exposure to force majeure are suffered by women in the situations of armed conflict.
The question posed at the Arab level is how to develop an active position on the ground, first: to support and protect women facing the scourge of these conflicts, and secondly: to ensure the activation of the role of women as resources for peacekeeping and peace building, and thirdly: to ensure a gender perspective in all reconstruction efforts directed to, states emerging from conflicts.

The answer to this question include the way the Arab side introduces its vision on how to activate its legal structure in order to handle the issue of women and armed conflicts, as reflected in the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Additional Protocols to the 1979 Convention, the United Nations Declaration on protecting women and children in times of war and armed conflict issued by the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 and sponsored by Egypt, the Security Council resolutions since 2000 on women, peace and security issues, as reflected in Resolution 1325, which adopted a broad agenda that called for the integration of women at all levels of decision-making within the State, including decisions related to conflict prevention, management and resolution, Resolution No. 1820 of 2008, which focused in particular on sexual violence, Resolution No. 1888 of 2009, which also focused on sexual violence, Resolution No. 1889 for the same year (2009), which was adopted five days after Resolution No. 1888, recalling the broad agenda of resolution 1325, Then Resolution No. 1960 of 2010, which drew attention to the issue of sexual violence, with a focus on accountability and punishment measures, Resolution 2106 on sexual violence of 2013 in armed conflict, and resolution 2122 of 2013, which explained the necessary procedures and measures to ensure women's participation in peace-making.

3. Terrorism and its impact on women and their rights

The phase of Arab revolutions has been associated with an escalation of terrorist organizations activities that were able to relocate their activities in a number of countries in the region such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt, Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia in Iraq, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq & Syria «Daash»), which has become a terrorist organized army extending its control over large parts of the Arab land and seeks to hold a wider range of alliances throughout the territories of West African States and the northern Maghreb down to Iraq.

Under this climate, and in view of the dangers posed by terrorism to the body of the Arab region as a whole, and to Arab men and women alike, the mounting tide of terrorism poses additional dangers for Arab women as they risk of losing their gains and rights as a result of some extremists’ thoughts that shape their position towards women falsely while disguised under religion and fueling their position with some sick and wrong ideas about women as a source of temptation, a synonym for impurity or a source of pleasure to be bought and sold and does not have the right to any independent action.
The shameful images of women's status presented by the organization of the Islamic
State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/Daash) is the most important warning on the extent
that vulnerability of women may reach at the hands of some blind extremists wearing
a false cloak of religion. The observers are talking about ISIS forcing women in Iraq
on wearing the veil, undergoing FGM, the sale of Yezidi and Christian women in the
markets for slaves at prices posted on websites, which was confirmed by the Iraqi Red
Crescent in a statement issued in August 2014.

4. A future outlook on women in the Arab region

In light of this situation experienced by Arab women, the question is: What to do? It is
certain that what is needed to be done is huge and complex involving several parties
and covering many areas of work. In fact, a solution for a large part of problems faced
by women, who are an integral part of the society, lies in serious development work
of the society as a whole in terms of eradicating poverty and illiteracy, improving
education and health services, the development of the legal structure, the establishment
of a democratic nonexclusive political system etc., while adopting this developmental
approach to gender perspective that understands the needs of both men and women in
their respective settings.

However, as revealed from the above, there are peculiarities for women's issues that
make its approach at a deeper level with respect to the need to work on changing the social
anti-women culture that degrades her, and dry up the sources of these distorted culture
through ongoing awareness and education campaigns and promotion of enlightened
thought reform on women's that takes into account, inter alia, the promotion of true
religion.

This requires combine efforts by several parties, including governments, civil society,
as well as intellectuals and enlightened clerics and media while identifying clearly
the responsibilities of various parties. Governments bear the primary responsibility
of resorting to all ways in order to perpetuate women’s rights at all levels
and ensure the protection of these rights by force of law and public order. The Arab
media should seriously revise the image they portray for women and the way they
deal with their issues. There is also the compound responsibility borne by all political
organizations and civil society in providing a successful model for the integration of
women and their full participation, as well as ongoing community outreach processes.
As for thinkers and enlightened religious leaders, they are responsible for opening all
women issues in a rational way that would not ignore sensitive issues or approach them
superficially or from an ideological perspective, but based on the concepts of justice,
equality and true religion.

In light of the serious threats posed by terrorist organizations, Arab countries today are
desperately in need to adopt a new way of enlightened thinking that would make them
win the grounds they lost in the face of the tyranny of the extremist tide that attracts intellectual and religious devotees through temptation.

Perhaps one of the ways to move forward to confront this terrorist tide is to support those with discretionary enlightened thought so as to form a counter force, at the intellectual and cultural levels, and expose the deceiving and insidious tactics practiced by these organizations, showing the true Islamic religion which called for the freedom of man, men and women, and his responsibility for his actions, and acknowledged the values of justice and equality clearly.

This is one path in a work system that should be considered, formulated and adopted by all the parties concerned with the future of the Arab community and structure, not only the political and security only, but also social, cultural and moral fabric.

Moreover, this situation requires collective action by the international community. It is not enough that the international coalition pursue and fight ISIS/Daash by air bombardment to demolish its military and physical strength, but there is a need to counter the actions taken against women by this terrorist organization. The situation is very serious and requires a societal and international solidarity to stop this tampering.
Annex

About the Organizers
The League of Arab States (LAS) is a regional inter-governmental organization working on strengthening links among member states and coordinating the political, economic, security, social and cultural plans. The Arab League attaches great importance to the advancement of the status of women and girls in the Arab region and takes all necessary actions to do so. It was the Arab League Council Resolution 2828 adopted in September 1971 to establish a committee for Arab women, as a specialized technical committee whose membership comprises member states representatives. Moreover, a specialized department for Women and family affairs was created in 1984 at the LAS Secretariat which had an impact on coordinating national mechanisms efforts concerned with women's affairs and confirmed their roles and promoted joint Arab action in this area.

The Women, Family and Children's Department of the Secretariat of the League of Arab States is currently working as the Technical Secretariat of the Committee of Arab Women to develop strategies and programs for the advancement of the status of women in the Arab region, to support their rights and promote gender equality through economic and political empowerment, protect women in times of peace and during periods of instability and armed conflicts and ending violence against women and girls, follow up on progress in the field of implementation of treaties and the relevant international conventions.

The Arab Women Organization is an intergovernmental organization established under the umbrella of the League of Arab States and headquartered in Egypt. The Arab League Council approved the establishment of the organization since the «Cairo Declaration» issued by the Arab Women Summit, the first conference held in November, 2000. The Convention establishing the Organization entered into force in March 2003.

The Arab Women Organization was founded to achieve the goals of empowering Arab women, enhance their capacities in all fields, raise awareness of the importance and centrality of the Arab woman to be an equal partner in the development process and to perpetuate coordination of efforts and cooperation among Arab countries in order to accomplish the goals of empowerment and awareness.

The areas that are priorities for the work of the organization to achieve the advancement of Arab women are: education, health, environment, media, social sphere, the economic, political spheres as well as the legal field.

The organization adopts a variety of means and measures to achieve its goals, including the collection and dissemination of data regarding the status of women, the preparation of the training of trainers programs, communication and cooperation with governmental and non-governmental organizations, holding seminars and workshops, conducting studies and research about women and their place in society.