

EMPOWERING WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE VIBRANT MENA REGION

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is characterized by a mosaic of cultures, traditions, and political contexts, but it also shares common challenges in women's and girls' rights and gender equality.

Women and girls in all of their diversity, in this region, face multiple and interconnected barriers that limit their access to health services, specifically for HIV, TB, and Malaria, restrict their human rights, expose them to systematic gender-based violence, and perpetuate discrimination, stigma, and hostility towards them. These challenges are often amplified by contexts of armed conflict and social tensions, where women and girls become the first affected persons of instability and violence and are further exacerbated by the pervasive issues of HIV, tuberculosis (TB) and Malaria.

In fact, the discrimination women and girls are facing hampers their access to HIV testing, treatment, and support services. Cultural taboos surrounding discussions of sexual health often lead to late diagnoses and inadequate care. Also, limited access to comprehensive sexual education and preventive measures, such as condoms and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), exacerbates the risk of HIV transmission among women. Regarding TB, women are also often underdiagnosed and undertreated due to social barriers, including limited mobility and restricted access to healthcare facilities. Economic dependence and caregiving responsibilities limit women's ability to complete the lengthy TB treatment, contributing to higher rates of treatment default and drug-resistant TB. Finally, pregnant women in malaria-endemic areas of the MENA region are particularly vulnerable, which can lead to severe complications.

This statement presented by Women4GlobalFund (W4GF), a global movement to make the Global Fund responsive and accountable to the needs of women living with, and affected by, HIV, TB and malaria and women-led networks¹ in the MENA region aims to provide concrete examples of these challenges in contexts of conflict and violence, and to issue specific recommendations from W4GF and its partners in the MENA region.

We are calling for increased support from the Global Fund to implement concrete actions to improve the human rights of women and girls in their diversity in this region, by strengthening access to comprehensive health services, protecting their rights, combating violence, and promoting gender equality.

Women and girls in all their diversity in the MENA region deserve a safe and equitable environment where they can realize their full potential and contribute to the development of their communities and countries.

Explanation of the situation of women in their diversity in the MENA region:

To access services, women and girls in the MENA region face significant barriers to accessing health services, particularly in reproductive and maternal health. Health infrastructure is often inadequate, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Health facilities lack qualified staff, essential equipment, and medicines. For example, in Yemen², the civil war has caused an almost total collapse of the health system, forcing pregnant women to travel long distances to access basic care, putting their lives and the lives of their children at risk.

In this sense, the Global Fund is making a great effort in the areas of human resources management and sexual and reproductive health, it is crucial to recognize that the health challenges mentioned, such as the lack of

¹ LIST OF WOMEN-LED NETWORKS IN THE MENA REGION :

² <https://blogs.icrc.org/hdtse/2022/07/13/yemen-les-consequences-tragiques-du-deficit-d-acces-aux-soins/>

qualified personnel and equipment, are areas where the Global Fund is actively intervening. In the case of Yemen, the Global Fund has implemented programs to build the capacity of health workers, provide essential medical equipment, and ensure access to reproductive health services, helping to mitigate the effects of the humanitarian crisis on maternal and child health

Cultural and harmful social norms are significant barriers. Restrictive standards in place limit women's and girls' access to health services, especially around sexual and reproductive health. In some parts of Egypt³, taboos around reproductive health prevent women from seeking the care they need for fear of being stigmatized or excluded.

To illustrate the Global Fund's response in Egypt, initiatives have been put in place to address these challenges, including by raising awareness of gender and reproductive health issues. For example, the Global Fund has supported programs to provide health services tailored to women and girls, which has helped to reduce cultural and social barriers to their access to health care.

Armed conflicts considerably aggravate these challenges. Wars and violence severely disrupt health services, destroying infrastructure and making care inaccessible. In Gaza⁴, the blockade and repeated conflicts have severely damaged health infrastructure. Hospitals are often overcrowded and under-equipped, and the restrictions on movement imposed by the blockade make it difficult for pregnant women to access antenatal and postnatal care, increasing the risk of complications and maternal mortality.

For the three diseases, it would be important to mention the impacts of conflict on the prevalence and management of HIV, tuberculosis and malaria in the affected region. For example, conflict can compromise access to antiretroviral treatment for people living with HIV, increase the risk of TB transmission in displaced populations, and weaken malaria control programmes by disrupting the distribution of insecticide-treated nets and other preventive interventions.

Access to health services for women and girls in the MENA region is severely hampered by inadequate infrastructure, cultural barriers, harmful social norms, and the devastating impacts of armed conflict. These factors combine to create an environment where women and girls, in their diversity, are extremely vulnerable and deprived of essential care for their well-being and that of their children.

Rights and Discrimination. In the face of systematic and institutional discrimination that restricts women's and girls' rights. This discrimination manifests itself in several ways:

Restrictive laws in many countries in the region limit women and girls rights to marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance.

In Sudan, women and girls are subject to laws that govern their social behavior and appearance, such as the Public Morality Laws, which severely restrict their personal and social freedom⁵.

Women are vastly underrepresented in political and decision-making spheres, limiting their influence on public policy. This under-representation hinders their ability to effectively advocate for their rights and promote inclusive policies in the countries of the region.

Inequalities in access to education and economic opportunities perpetuate women's economic and social dependence. In Tunisia, despite legislative advances, black women suffer double discrimination based on gender and race⁶. Racist attacks, and hostility towards transgender women including physical and verbal violence, are common and often go unpunished.

³ <https://www.unfpa.org/fr/news/plaidoyer-pour-la-sante-et-les-droits-sexuels-et-reproductifs-en-egypte>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/fr/news/2023/11/14/gaza-les-frappes-israeliennes-illegales-contre-des-hopitaux-aggravent-la-crise>

⁵ <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/soudan-ces-femmes-qui-ont-fait-la-revolution-s-obstinent-a-reclamer-leurs.4761>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/articles/cx9pg5q0rdpo>

Women and girls in the MENA region face discriminatory laws, political underrepresentation, and economic and educational inequalities. These factors contribute to their marginalization and the perpetuation of discrimination and violence against them.

Violence against women is a pervasive problem in the MENA region, including domestic violence, sexual violence, and violence in times of conflict.

Domestic violence is often considered a private matter, rarely reported and even less punished by the authorities. Women who are survivors of domestic violence have little recourse, and support systems are often insufficient or non-existent.

In times of conflict, women and girls in their diversity are frequently targeted by acts of sexual and gender-based violence. In Yemen, the ongoing conflict has intensified violence against women, with documented cases of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war⁷. Forced and early marriages are also on the rise, exacerbating the vulnerability of young girls.

Forced and early marriage robs girls of their childhood and human rights, exposing them to violence and exploitation.

In Gaza, women are often victims of domestic violence and conflict-related violence⁸. Restrictions on movement and severe social surveillance worsen their situation, making it difficult to access help and support.

Violence against women and girls in the MENA region takes many forms and is exacerbated by conflict and restrictive social norms. Concerted efforts are needed to protect women and girls and provide them with adequate support.

Recommendations:

W4GF advocates and partners, networks and allies in the MENA region urge the Global Fund and the international community to take concrete steps to improve the human rights and the right to health of women and girls in their diversity. *Through :*

Strengthening Access to Health Services, fostering comprehensive HIV, TB, and Malaria responses

- The Global Fund should Increase funding for health infrastructure in the MENA region, with a focus on SHRH.
- Establish in Global Fund funding requests, options for mobile health programs to reach women and girls in conflict and remote areas.
- Train and recruit female medical staff to overcome cultural barriers and address the specific needs of transgender women.
- Enhance and establish in Global Fund funding requests, telehealth services to provide remote consultations and health education for women and young girls in inaccessible areas.

Inclusive Decision-Making

- Create platforms for dialogue and strengthen CCMs where women can share their experiences and influence decisions that affect their health and well-being. For example, by strengthening the CCMs, consideration could be given to introducing formal mechanisms to ensure adequate representation of women and girls and their meaningful participation in decision-making processes. This could include

⁷ <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2021/06/act770752004fr.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.la-croix.com/A-Gaza-femmes-victimes-violence-oubliees-droit-2022-07-24-1301226158>

women and girls representation quotas, that should align with legal frameworks and ethical standards to ensure fairness and prevent discrimination. within CCMs, training members on specific women's health issues, and creating safe spaces where women can voice their health needs and concerns

- Facilitate leadership training programs to empower women and ensure their voices are heard in policy-making forums.

Promoting and Protecting Women's and girls' human Rights and the right to health

- Support women-led movements, organizations, civil society, communities, and networks that advocate for legislative reforms to abolish laws that discriminate against transgender women, single mothers, WLHIV and women and girls affected by TB and/or malaria
- Encourage women's political participation in Global Fund programs through quotas⁹ and training programs. Comprehensive support and development programs help underrepresented groups build skills and confidence to participate fully in decision-making
- Strengthen legal protection mechanisms in Global Fund funding requests, programs and actions for women and girls who are affected by racial and gender discrimination and stigma
- Support technically and financially women-led movements, organizations, networks that are advocating for the ratification and implementation of international conventions on women's rights.

Combating Violence against Women and girls

The Global Fund should include in their programs the following initiatives :

- Allocating specific funding streams to projects focused on reducing violence against women and girls.
- Providing grants to organizations that operate shelters and offer support services such as counseling, legal aid, and healthcare for survivors.
- Implement community outreach programs to change cultural attitudes towards gender-based violence.
- Provide protection and support to survivors of sexual violence in conflict areas.
- Supporting community-based organizations in delivering workshops, seminars, and media campaigns that promote gender equality and non-violence

Education and Awareness

- Seeking to conduct awareness campaigns on SHRH to challenge and change societal norms that perpetuate gender discrimination in the Global Fund programs.
- Partner with local women-led organizations to deliver gender-sensitive awareness and training workshops under the Global Fund program.

Strengthening Data Collection and Research

- Improve data collection methods to gather accurate and comprehensive data on women's and girls' health, economic status, and experiences of violence.
- Support research initiatives to better understand the unique challenges faced by women in the MENA region and develop evidence-based policies and programs.
- Ensure data is disaggregated by gender, age, race, and other relevant factors to address the needs of diverse groups of women effectively.

For the next 8th replenishment and allocation cycle, the Global Fund and the international community should significantly increase dedicated funding for women's and girl's health and empowerment initiatives in the MENA region, ensuring these efforts address the unique challenges women and girls face regarding HIV, TB, and malaria.

⁹ To achieve fair and equitable representation in decision-making spaces, it's crucial to integrate quota policies within a comprehensive framework of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This ensures that quotas are not standalone measures but part of a sustained effort to transform organizational culture.

This includes allocating specific resources for reproductive and maternal health, and the prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of the three diseases. Enhanced visibility and advocacy campaigns are crucial to raise global awareness and involve women and girls in decision-making processes. Providing platforms for women and girls to share their experiences and influence policy will ensure their specific needs are met and they receive the necessary support to improve their health and socio-economic status.

The challenges faced by women in the MENA region require a comprehensive and coordinated response. W4GF reiterates that by working together, governments, civil society, community networks and organizations like the Global Fund can make significant progress in improving the fundamental rights of women and girls. The current situation is critical, but with the right commitment, sustained investment and technical support, positive change is possible.

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