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A Gender-Based Perspective on the Third Voluntary National Review of Egypt

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■ Introduction

This paper presents a reading of the third voluntary national report (VNR) of Egypt on the implementation of the Agenda 2030, with a particular focus on the goal of gender equality. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the reading takes into consideration the web of relations among the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the need for the adoption of intersectional policies and interventions to enhance the effectiveness, integration, and unity of goals. SGD5 on Gender Equality is no exception in this regard; its set of indicators intersect with those of other goals, adding to their sustainability and comprehensiveness.

In Egypt, follow-up reports on the SDGs indicate great diligence in achieving the indicators of SGD5 on gender equality. In 2017, for example, Egypt declared 2017 as the Year of Egyptian Women. In addition, it adopted several public policies and legislation related to violence against women, credit for small and micro-enterprises, and women's empowerment. The above was lauded in official reports and considered by the Egyptian state as a major step towards policies and programs for women's economic and social empowerment. In the same vein, Egypt is one of 14 countries worldwide that has diligently provided progress reports on SDGs, despite being voluntary reports that lack accountability frameworks. Although Egypt has failed to sustain its reporting on other international human rights agreements and commitments, the diligence in the VNR process is commendable, as they reveal national development policies, attempting to measure its ability to generate change and focusing especially on women's conditions in the country. The comprehensive and cumulative nature of the VNRs is also noteworthy due to

their comparisons with earlier reports. The Third VNR was linked thematically and analytically with the 2018 follow-up report and provided a critical reading of data for researchers.

■ Report's Methodology

The report refers to a "holistic" participatory methodology describing itself as "the national report" representing all parties. However, it ignored and was hostile to the various roles of partners. Its methodology rejected the diversity of views between international financial institutions, the private sector, civil society, and the state's official view. It gave a one-sided evaluation of achievements and challenges in a comprehensive methodology that lacks pluralism and democracy while impeding the expression of different interpretations and readings. On the other hand, the main presentation of SDG achievements, in contrast to policies and plans, lacked a lateral analysis, which would have allowed a more comprehensive reading. The goals were discussed in a sequence without mention of their links or holistic nature. The data comparison with the second VNR issued in 2018 indicated the extent of improvements and setbacks over three years. However, the presentation and comparative reading lacked the same extent of reference to 2020 data and the objectives of the 2030 sustainable development plan. Thus, it did not provide answers regarding the assessment of current development policies.

■ Enabling Environment for Sustainable Development Plans

The report monitors the enabling environment for sustainable development policies adopted by the Egyptian state in line with the 2030 National Development Plan (NDP). However, regardless of the Plan's need to respond to unexpected changes and crises, flexible response to emergencies should not mean the absence of the NDP and SDG indicators. Although the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development provides a rich website with national and international references and follow-up documents related to the Egyptian situation, it did not publish the original 2030 plan or the latest version in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Thus, estimating the progress achieved through a comparative reading of expected achievements by 2030 becomes difficult.

The report mentioned three determinants adopted by national development policies:

- The First Determinant is diligent work to develop the 2030 sustainable development plan and strengthen the response to emergencies and new priorities, which is commendable and necessary. However, it should not preclude making the plan available following each development and considering it a binding document that must accumulate national development policies to achieve the agreed-upon final indicators.
- The Second Determinant involves enhancing the decentralization of sustainable

development plans, targeting governorates and marginal areas through allocations and implementation, and putting an end to the centrality and geographical limits of major cities and capitals. It requires monitoring the decentralization of setting allocations and providing data across the different governorates, in addition to strengthening administrative decentralization, promoting the availability of digital services, facilitating access to services, and developing the state's administrative apparatus. However, despite efforts by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development in administrative reform and governance and attempts to spread digital services, there is a significant legislative absence in enhancing local community participation. The report only monitored some accomplished administrative reform interventions and ignored local governance issues or expanding civil society's mandate to provide services away from the centrality and patriarchy of state agencies. On the other hand, the private sector's role was limited to financing government interventions in exchange for veiled or announced facilities to obtain investment advantages without decentralizing employment policies or opening decentralized branches of private sector companies in the governorates.

Furthermore, a remarkable part of the national report's monitoring of decentralization of development governance relies exclusively on

providing decentralized statistical data and readings and monitoring Egypt's progress in various international indicators. However, the concept of decentralization of sustainable development is much broader and more complex than what was mentioned in the VNR. The measurement of decentralization does not stop at decentralized interventions and readings. It should include marginalized and excluded groups in development efforts. For example, the report fails to monitor programs and interventions to integrate people with special needs, people with incurable diseases, or environmental diseases, and others. Rather, the report monitors major and high-cost national programs such as expanding the umbrella of comprehensive health insurance or adopting new programs such as a Decent Life, which are implemented locally, but alone do not reflect the decentralization of governance as a comprehensive democratic concept.

- The Third Determinant is the report's reliance on evidence-based policies, related to the provision of datasets, updating indicators, and creating new ones, and the correlation of quantitative indicators specifically with measuring achievements according to the 17 SDGs, which the report does well. However, statistical data is not necessarily correct. There are always questions about the mechanism for accessing data and setting and analyzing indicators, in addition to the fact that measuring the efficiency and implementation of sustainable development policies requires qualitative measurements to the same extent, which is missing from national follow-up reports on SDGs.

■ The Report's Gender-Based Achievements

According to the report, the Egyptian government adopted several policies to empower women at different political, economic, social, and cultural levels. Among those presented is improving women's representation in leadership and decision-making positions, including the government, percentages for women leaders in the administrative positions and the rising rate of representation of women in Parliament.

The data indicate progress in women's empowerment. However, the updated numbers do not necessarily indicate a profound change in the quality and method of empowering women in various fields. Despite praising economic empowerment policies adopted by Egypt to confront poverty and extend social protection networks through major programs such as Takaful and Karama, for example, or the comprehensive health insurance network, paying attention to the small and medium-sized enterprises system, allocating funds, and facilitating lending, it is clear, according to the data published in the report, that women did not achieve progress commensurate with the size of interventions. For example, in the "quality gap index" concerning "the factor of women's economic participation and opportunities," Egypt dropped five places at once in 2020, compared to its rank of 135 in 2015. The closest explanation for this decline may be the Coronavirus variable and its impact on the economy and employment opportunities. However, the decline in rank in international indicators did not come from an urgent or sudden variable. It was rather a product of policies and interventions accumulated over five years, the period of comparative reading of the data available in the report.

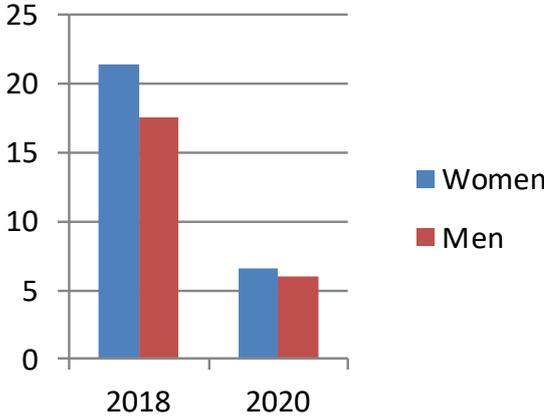
In contrast, there was an increase in women's participation, especially in Parliament. Egypt rose 33 ranks in 2020, compared to the 136th rank in 2015, which is a praiseworthy development but needs a more in-depth analysis of the causes. The growing representation of women in Parliament occurred through electoral systems that lack political pluralism, mostly in unified closed lists and an electoral system based on the monopoly on the electoral process. Thus, the rank is not evidence of political pluralism or electoral competitiveness.

Gender Gap Index: Egypt's Rank in	2015	2020
Economic Participation and Opportunities	135	5-
Education	115	13+
Health	97	12+
Political participation	136	33+

Indicators about women in education and health also improved according to the indicator on closing the gender gap. Egypt rose 12 places both in education and health, compared to 2015. The progress was due to several reasons. Some are due to social protection programs at the Ministry of Solidarity. It is especially true for the novel Takaful and Karama programs, based on linking in-kind and cash subsidies to Egyptian households with health insurance and regular education for children of both sexes.

Consequently, an improvement in the state of education and health for women was recorded. However, the reality of reproductive and sexual health for women, which is a highly qualitative and gendered indicator, was not measured. Neither was the nature of female education, their access to secondary and university education, and their access to education that fits labor market demands.

■ Labor and Employment Policies and Unemployment Rates



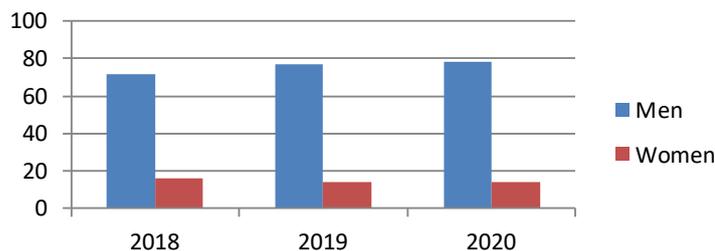
The third VNR monitors unemployment rates between both sexes according to data between 2018 and 2020. The 2018 data shows a remarkable improvement in women's employment compared to men, which declines sharply in 2020. However, there is a slightly positive disparity in Female employment rates compared to men, and the decline may be due to the pandemic's repercussions on the labor market. Furthermore, although the report indicates an intensification of women's economic empowerment policies, especially facilitations regarding work from home and the work of pregnant women, the Coronavirus pandemic's impact on the labor market was much stronger than official interventions, including on women's employment. Finally, it is worth noting that the qualitative data on which the report was based is produced by the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), affiliated with the Ministry of Planning.

Furthermore, the VNR ignored monitoring and analyzing the situation of women who make up most of the informal market and the repercussions of the economic crisis and the pandemic on the

general situation. Women have to bear the burden of poverty and exit from the job market. Although a small cash subsidy for non-seasonal workers was allocated, several categories of affected women fell through the cracks. The reasons were diverse, including administrative, related to the requirements for obtaining the subsidy, and others related to the affected women's ability to register digitally on the platform.

On the other hand, the report clearly monitored the stability of women's employment in the various state agencies and the government's emergency laws and administrative decisions to secure employment during periods of total closure and the sweeping waves of the epidemic.

■ Labor Market Participation



The Third VNR monitors the rates of participation of both sexes in the labor market over three consecutive years, 2018, 2019, and 2020. According to data issued by CAPMAS, women's participation in the labor market declined to reach its lowest point at 13.8% in 2020.

On the other hand, the percentage of men in the labor market rose even in the year of the epidemic 2020, highlighting the need to adopt emergency policies for women specifically to keep them in the labor market and mitigate their expulsion due to the Coronavirus epidemic. The government established several protection policies for women in the past year, specifically assigning

cash subsidies to the informal labor sector. However, a large percentage of both genders, but especially women, failed to obtain the 500 pounds per month cash subsidy. Several obstacles stood in their way, particularly difficulties in accessing digital registration platforms and prioritizing the registration of male members of the family, who were considered. However, the report did not attempt to explain the gender gap, despite the clear data. It preferred to present government policies for women in the formal sector, specifically the state business sector, where paid vacations, exceptions, and alternating work were possible. Absent from monitoring was Informal labor and the private sector's neglect of adopting protection policies for female employment during the years of the epidemic.

The discrepancy in the years of monitoring from one goal or achievement to another greatly prejudiced the objectivity of the comparative reading of the data on which the report is based. It fluctuated between two years (2018, 2020) in some cases, was extended between 2015 to 2020 in others, and provided a combined reading for successive years (2018, 2019, 2020). It led to uneven interpretation and differences in analysis premises along the length of the report. A more orderly approach in the data frameworks would have contributed to achieving an accurate reading of the report's data.

VNR Recommendations on Gender Challenges

Regarding challenges to gender equality, the report points to the need to consider the social obstacles that perpetuate violence against women, in particular the practice of female genital mutilation. However, this commendable mention was not part of the context of the presentation of goals, including the fifth on gender equality. Thus, no reference was made to the "right to health" goal, putting an end to the practice of FGM, or family planning and reproductive health challenges for women. The presentation of the fifth goal on gender equality merely presented a limited number of official interventions concerned with work and employment and an attempt to confront the growing unemployment rates. Therefore, the presentation of a single aspect of social challenges appears outside the report's context as a whole, the presentation of the fifth goal, and sensitivity to women's issues.

It should be noted that Egypt has already taken several steps and legislative measures to stop FGM, combat harassment, and increase punishment. It also developed specialized national strategies that are sensitive and related to gender issues, all of which improve development performance. However, the follow-up report ignored them all and did not even monitor the marketing of the relevant official interventions. This neglect could be due to two issues. The first could be a lack of sensitivity by the authors regarding official interventions concerned with gender equality, thus their exclusion from the report. The second could be their limited focus on economic interventions. The prevailing wisdom in the mindset of most development actors is that development means economic growth rates and investment, not society, culture, or the need to spend on social and cultural change to achieve

comprehensive and sustainable development. Subsequent references to challenges to gender equality were numerous, but ultimately limited and often related to individual economic dimensions, such as the challenges of financial inclusion and employment challenges in the informal sector, without shedding light to the same extent on a complex package of cultural and social challenges, and the various interventions they may dictate.

The report also neglected to highlight the role of the private sector in adopting policies and interventions to achieve gender equality. However, it may be a misplaced omission because the relationship between the private sector and the government is one of terms and funding, not a relationship of change and comprehensiveness. Thus, there was no progress concerning private employment or maintenance of women's employment during the pandemic and the closures.

Civil society's role was also neglected by focusing on official interventions only, despite the emphasis in the introduction and methodology on being a comprehensive national report covering all efforts. This issue raises the question about the effectiveness of hearings held with different groups and sectors and the questionnaires made in preparation for the VNR in the absence of quantitative or qualitative monitoring of the efforts of other development partners.

■ Emergency Interventions to Ensure Gender Equality in the Pandemic

The report pointed to the efforts of the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development in monitoring and following up emergency interventions to confront the Coronavirus pandemic, announcing them on a platform and classifying them according to development goals. The effort is remarkable in providing knowledge, making information available, and allowing opportunities for study, critical reading, and comparison.

However, the observatory only monitors 9 projects in the context of Goal 5 on gender equality, including support to the tourism industry and providing a safe environment for women working in this sector through a grant by the Spanish Agency. This measure comes at the intersection of the goals of gender equality, decent work, and international agreements.

The observatory also calls for ending FGM and increasing punishment as an urgent measure during the Coronavirus pandemic. The intervention is welcome and urgent, as police protection is expected to be very weak during periods of total closure in the countryside, and the emergency could be exploited to encourage harmful social practices. However, FGM is not the only harmful practice that requires urgent intervention. Early marriage, for example, is a major threat to development plans and could have been criminalized through measures regarding the closures as well. This urgent intervention intersects between the goal of gender equality and the goal concerned with building community peace.

Another positive development involved providing pregnant women civil servants a 28 week paid vacation to protect them from the pandemic. The measure is also in line with supporting the reproductive health rights of women. However, it was limited to government institutions and was not binding on the private sector. The intervention cuts across the goals of health, decent work, and gender equality.

The Prime Minister also issued an administrative decision to set a fixed price for Coronavirus treatment in public and private hospitals, which ensured gender equality and health services to marginalized groups without discrimination. However, the measure cuts across the goal of health and gender equality.

The National Council for Women, supported by UNWOMEN, conducted an opinion poll on problems facing women in Egyptian families during the pandemic. The survey discovered a high prevalence of domestic violence and various other problems during total closures. Such research and surveys during crises contribute to formulating intervention policies based on societal knowledge. Moreover, the measure cuts across the goals of gender equality and international cooperation.

The National Council for Women is also conducting door-to-door awareness campaigns in the countryside, aiming to raise awareness on precautionary measures to protect health and reduce the chances of spreading infection. The council coordinated door-to-door campaigns and health convoys in 922 Egyptian villages. The measure intersects with the goals of gender equality and the right to health.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry responded to the general policy paper on the Coronavirus

pandemic issued by the National Council for Women. It adopted a catalyst to bridge the gender gap in the commercial and industrial sector and try to bridge the gender wage gap, a unique and important measure that guarantees the reduction of poverty rates and deepens gender equality in the job market. The measure is a clear manifestation of SDG5 on gender equality.

Women and children stranded abroad during the pandemic were given priority in return, especially with the increase of layoffs among expatriate workers in many Arab and other countries attracting Egyptian labor. Therefore, it was necessary to protect women and children from homelessness and other repercussions of the layoffs and respond directly to SDG5.

Nevertheless, the Egyptian government adopted more interventions and measures than those available on the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development platform. However, the monitoring and evaluation space could be expanded by allowing civil society and feminist organizations to report on gender issues.

■ Conclusions

In conclusion, several critical remarks on the third VRN following up on the implementation of SDGs are provided to develop its methodology, better monitor achievement, analyze challenges, and arrive at gender-sensitive future policies that would have a positive impact on implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Plan and following-up on its indicators.

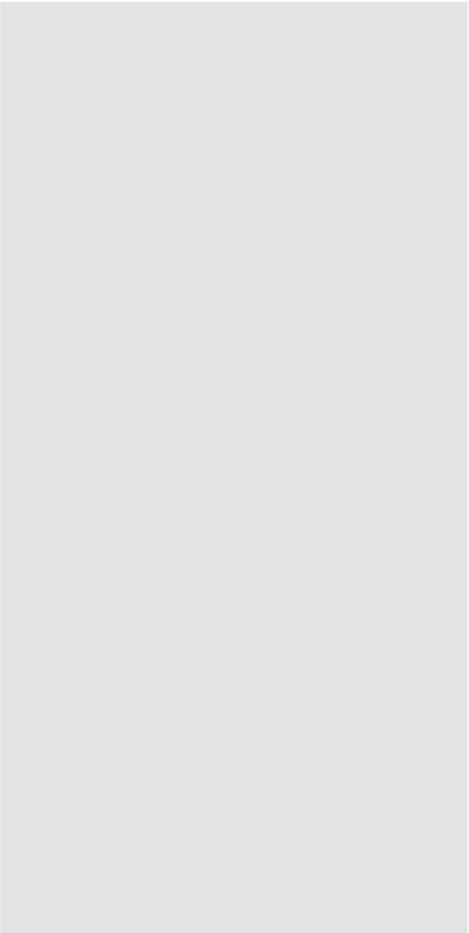
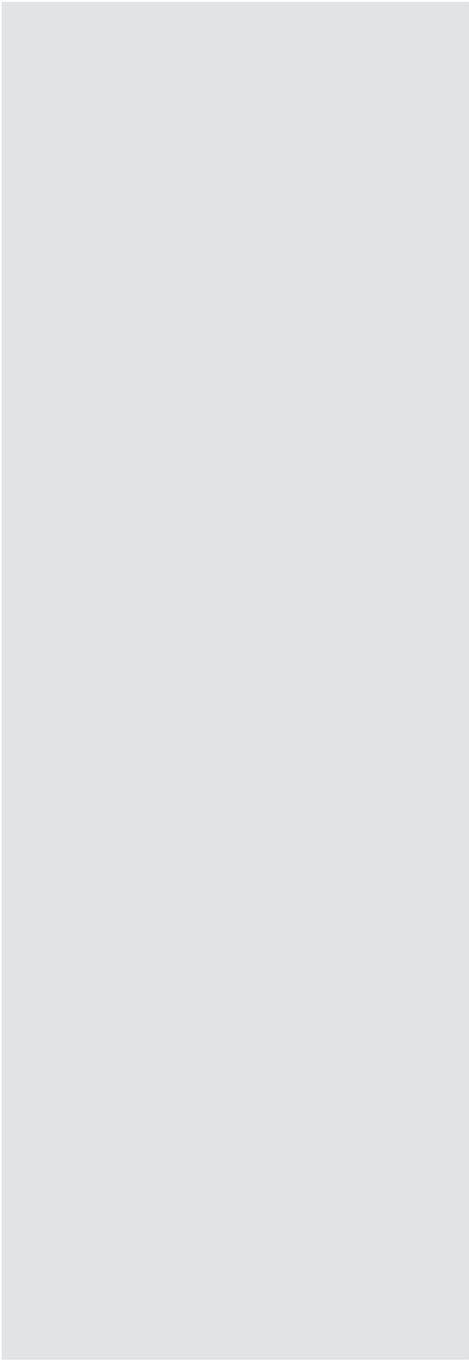
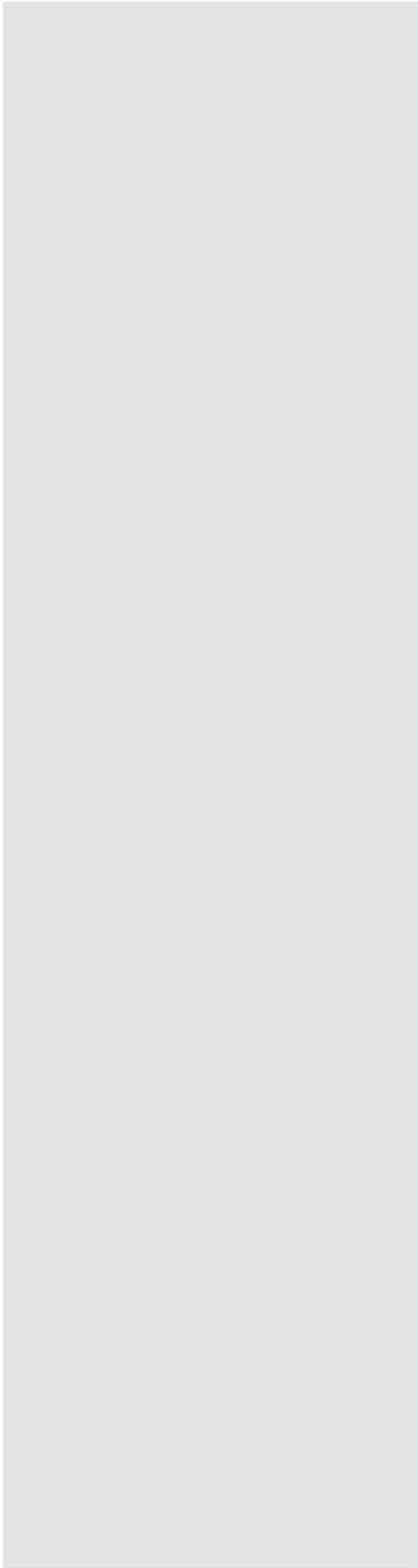
1. Adopt a comprehensive and holistic view of monitoring achievements, discussing the political, economic, social, cultural, environmental, and other sustainable development dimensions. It should not be limited to merely reporting on economic-related data.

2. Adopt an intersectional methodology in monitoring and analysis, where the objectives are not addressed in a sequence but horizontally and in parallel, which would contribute to highlighting the gender dimension in all related indicators and not merely those of the fifth goal.
3. Allocate a chapter for monitoring and analysis related to major national development programs, providing researchers with a deeper look to read their impact on the various SDG indicators, especially concerning the Takaful and Karama program, the decent life program, and addressing the question of slums and providing alternative housing.
4. Unify comparison years in data and statistics related to the VNR, referencing related policy transformations during those years, allowing an objective, accurate, and thorough reading, and avoiding ambiguous variables.

"Financing development policies" remains the most difficult question when reading and analyzing follow-up reports. Referring to the volume of internal and external debt is a must when discussing achievements and an important factor when monitoring challenges. In addition, the national budget, allocations, and financing alternatives are important factors when measuring the efficiency of achievements and looking at positive accumulation.

Sources

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- [UN Sustainable Development Report 2020: the Sustainable Development Goals and COVID-19](#)
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