Multi-Country Review of the State of the

SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE

in the Middle East and North Africa Region

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GLOBAL
SOCIAL SERVICE WORKFORCE
ALLIANCE

Maestral.

A social service worker helps a girl draw at an early
education community centre in Djibouti.

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GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Country-level Task Group (CTG): Country-level Task Groups are comprised of key stakeholders engaged in reviewing and strengthening the social service workforce (SSW) in a country. Led by the ministry, the role of the CTG is to help contextualize the definition of the social service workforce applied in the review and the data collection tools, facilitate access to data and data collection, review preliminary findings of the review, contribute to identifying recommendations for social service workforce strengthening and ensure these recommendations are put into action. Key stakeholders are involved in the CTG on a voluntary basis and include representatives from key government ministry departments responsible for child protection and social protection; UNICEF; NGOs; academic institutions, especially Schools of Social Work; professional associations and the social service workforce representatives.

Social Service Workforce (SSW): An inclusive concept referring to a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental professionals and paraprofessionals who work with children, youth, adults, older persons, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being. The social service workforce focuses on preventative, responsive and promotive services that are informed by the humanities and social sciences, Indigenous knowledges, discipline-specific and interdisciplinary knowledge and skills, and ethical principles. Social service workers engage people, structures and organisations to: facilitate access to needed services, alleviate poverty, challenge and reduce discrimination, promote social justice and human rights, and prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

Social Service Workforce Strengthening (SSWS): The UNICEF Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection[1] focuses on three aspects of workforce strengthening: planning, developing and supporting the SSW. Strengthening the workforce is a long-term endeavour. Short-, medium- and long-term results in each country will vary depending on the socio-economic context, current human and financial resources, and political will, as well as the capacities of the workforce.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[2]: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provides a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future. At its heart are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which are an urgent call for action by all countries - developed and developing - in a global partnership. They recognise that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child[3]: Recognises every child's right to protection from violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, to access justice and to quality care. In accordance with the Convention, states have the primary obligation to ensure that all children are protected and cared for. To meet this obligation, it is imperative for States to establish strong child protection systems to prevent and respond to all child protection risks and concerns.

Country-task group members in Tunisia develop a timeline for strengthening the social service workforce.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A well-planned, skilled and supported workforce is essential to protecting vulnerable groups, especially children, from abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence. Without a strong and resourced social service workforce (SSW) at the core of the social protection and welfare system, the critically necessary services cannot reach vulnerable children, families and other vulnerable individuals, regardless of the quality of the other system components.

Globally and in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the SSW plays the following roles:

- First point of contact for people who need protection or social welfare support, especially children, caregivers and others who work with children;

- Provide holistic assessment and referrals to preventive and responsive/ rehabilitation services for everyone at risk of, or experiencing, protection concerns;

- Ensure an overall comprehensive protection system for people receiving protection support;

- Help to shift negative attitudes, traditions, customs, behaviours and practices surrounding protection; and

- Hold accountable policy makers and legislators who set out the legal and policy framework for fulfilling protection rights.

Figure 1: The social service workforce within the social protection and welfare system
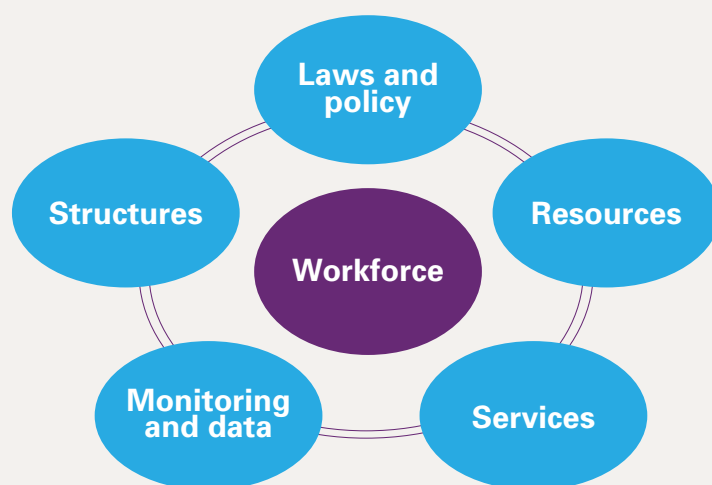
The UNICEF 2018–2021 Strategic Plan recognises the importance of a strong SSW in reaching key child protection and social protection outcomes. Within the framework of the Plan, strengthening the SSW is one of the key priorities identified to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs specify, for the first time, goals and targets to prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children (SDGs 5, 8 and 16), and represent an unprecedented opportunity to address violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. To meet the ambitious SDG targets for child protection and ensure that no child is left behind, Goal Area 3 of the UNICEF Strategic Plan 2018–2021 seeks to ensure that every girl and boy is protected from violence, exploitation and abuse. Goal Area 5 outlines the importance for every child to have an equitable chance to life and promotes the development of integrated systems that prevent, reduce and eliminate multiple economic and social vulnerabilities faced by children. The Plan is anchored in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and framed within the strategic focus of achieving more results for children, especially for those most marginalised.

In 2019, UNICEF released the Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Service Workforce for Child Protection. Relying on evidence, these guidelines advocate for focused efforts to support the SSW, in order for lasting improvements to children's protection to be realised at scale.

PURPOSE OF THE SSW REVIEW IN THE MENA REGION

The purpose of the Multi-Country Review of the State of the Social Service Workforce in the Middle East and North Africa Region was to create and analyse a baseline of information and data on the status of the SSW in eight countries in the region: Djibouti, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan and Tunisia. The aim is to guide and assist country-level action plans to strengthen the SSW. The review was designed to highlight unique aspects of each country's workforce, identify common challenges or trends, and suggest evidence-based strategies that countries could consider when developing their country-level action plans. It was expected that the review would ultimately help address the question of whether governments currently have the capacity to address the needs of vulnerable children and families with the existing SSW, and if not, what strategies, approaches and resources would be needed to fill the gaps.

Specific objectives of the multi-country review of the SSW were to:

- Provide a basic overview of the context for workforce strengthening, including supportive legislation and policies, financial resources, information management systems, availability of different levels of education and training, including field placements, existence and role of professional associations, and the existence and authority of regulatory bodies that establish licensing, standards and/or a professional code of ethics;

- Provide data (where possible) at the national and sub-national levels on the workforce itself, including numbers of workers by cadre and employer, their roles and functions, and vacancy rates;

- Assess workers' perceptions of challenges and opportunities, including work environment, supervision, job satisfaction, ongoing professional development, career paths and aspirations and their recommendations for improvements; and

- Identify implications for SSW strengthening based on national and regional analyses.

METHODOLOGY AND KEY ACTORS INVOLVED

The methodology for this SSW review was structured around the Framework for Strengthening of the Social Service Workforce. The framework was developed by the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA) through consultations with a wide range of stakeholders globally. It is intended to guide country efforts to plan, develop and support the SSW. The framework was also based on the global-level indicators outlined in the UNICEF Guidelines, developed in close collaboration with GSSWA.

The MENA region SSW review was based on the following core principles:

- Reflective of, and informed by, relevant child and human rights instruments;

- Reflective of, and informed by, national legal and policy frameworks in the countries reviewed;

- Inclusive and respectful of multiple perspectives;

- Guided by participatory approaches;

- Based on sound and ethical research protocols;

- Informed by globally recognised best practice and principles of social work; and

- Build on what already exists.

As recommended in the UNICEF Guidelines, the MENA review focused on three key aspects of SSW strengthening:

1. Planning the social service workforce;
2. Developing the social service workforce; and
3. Supporting the social service workforce.

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The GSSWA team used an existing and tried-and tested approach[4] to conduct the MENA SSW review. This approach involved the seven steps listed below:

1. **Desk review** of global literature on SSW development, as well as country-specific documents from eight countries in the region pertaining to the social service workforce.

2. Establishment of **Country Task Groups**, led by the state ministry in charge of the SSW and comprised of key stakeholders. CTGs were tasked with contextualising tools, ensuring data collection, reviewing preliminary findings and contributing to recommendations and action planning for country-level SSW strengthening.

3. **Inception visits** of the GSSWA team to study countries to meet with the UNICEF Country Office and the CTG to review and contextualise the methodology and tools and agree how to go about data collection (all countries besides Palestine).

4. **Data collection** through administration of two tools:

   ▪ an *institutional questionnaire* designed to obtain data on the numbers of various categories of the SSW in the country by type of employer (sector ministry, NGO, private sector), SSW training programmes, and any professional organisations of social service workers; and

   ▪ an *online survey* self-administered among a purposive sample of 200–300 social service workers in most of the study countries, and designed to identify key SSW functions and explore their views on supervision, access to ongoing professional development, career advancement opportunities, etc.

5. **Data analysis** involving transfer of the collected data into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for data cleaning and analysis, and then use of Excel to form any figures or graphics.

6. **Second round of country visits** to validate findings, agree on recommendations and develop an action plan for SSW strengthening in the country (all countries except Iran and Palestine).

7. **Regional report** writing through collation of country reports into a regional report providing an overview of the state of the SSW in the MENA region, and designed to inform the work of UNICEF and its national, regional and global partners to improve policies, programmes, advocacy and knowledge generation related to the SSW in the region.

The GSSWA team worked in close consultation with the UNICEF Regional Office (RO) and Country Offices to conduct this review. In each of the study countries, the Country Office collaborated with other stakeholders through CTGs, which were comprised of key stakeholders and led by the state ministry in charge of the SSW and to guide, support and contribute to the national review. The review aimed to address the dynamic and context-specific character of each of the study countries' SSWs. To ensure that the various definitions and often different functions could be taken into account, the review began by working with CTGs in each of the study countries. CTGs first defined the composition of the SSW and the scope of the review in their country. Once the study population and scope were determined, CTG members reviewed and contextualised the data collection tools by ensuring that the questions would be correctly understood by respondents. CTG members further aided with collection of data, validated review findings and recommendations, and worked together to develop a multi-year action plan for SSW strengthening.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This SSW review in the MENA region provided an invaluable opportunity to sensitise and engage stakeholders to invest in SSW strengthening through planning the workforce, developing the workforce and supporting the workforce. The engagement of these stakeholders across sectors – both nationally and regionally – shows that many of the challenges faced by the SSW are similar across different countries and contexts. This also presents an opportunity for regional and international collaboration to address these challenges together.

The findings presented in this report have been validated by the CTGs and reflect a clear picture of the state of the SSW in each study country and across the region. Analysis of the review data across study countries clearly shows that the SSW profession is an emerging one.

Summary Findings: Planning the SSW

Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon and Iran are the countries in the region that have to some extent established a normative framework to regulate the SSW, but adherence to the established standards varies, for different reasons: in some countries the normative framework is not enforced and in others it has yet to be finalised.

None of the study countries had a centralised database of social service workers, or the ability to obtain data on numbers of workers by sector working in various geographic areas of the country. This information depends on the extent to which SSW positions are officially recognised and registered by the government, as well as the level of centralisation of such workforce data. While few of the study countries have to date developed a strategic framework for SSW strengthening, their engagement in this review is an indication of growing national recognition of the importance of the SSW and their role in enabling social and economic development. In countries such as Lebanon, where substantial numbers of workers are employed by NGOs or the private sector, obtaining data is particularly complex as no central database exists with details on SSW employees working. Information is neither available from the sector ministry overseeing their services, or from the Ministry of Labour where NGOs and private sector employers are required to register their employees. In Iran, NGOs are authorised to operate by the relevant authorising organisations, which maintain the workforce database (for example, Iranian State Welfare Organisation and Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation). Only in Tunisia is

NGO workforce data gathered by the authorising government ministry that registers NGOs

Summary Findings: Developing the SSW

Professionally qualified social workers comprise a major component of the SSW in many of the countries. In Palestine, 86.9% of SSW respondents report holding a degree in social work or counselling as their most recent degree. This is followed by Iran at 74.2%; Lebanon at 44.1%; Tunisia at 51.1%. In Morocco, 40.6% of respondents are social workers based on the most recent academic qualification. In Sudan and Djibouti, the proportion of social workers is less: in Sudan, 14.6% of the SSW are social workers while in Djibouti no social service worker has a social work degree.

Summary Findings: Supporting the SSW

Lebanon stands out in terms of access to quality of supervision. Almost all SSW respondents in Lebanon have direct supervisors. Most supervisors are reportedly qualified as a social worker or in a closely associated field (for example, psychologist). Supervision is provided with regular frequency and most workers also perceive the supervision they receive to be helpful. In other countries, the quality and access to supervision support is much more varied: in many cases supervisors (and often also SSW lecturers and trainers) lack relevant qualifications and/or do not appear to perform quality supervision practices. It must be noted that this reflects the emerging nature of the SSW: the pool of qualified SSWs is not yet large enough to appropriately cover the needs for training and supervision of the SSW.

Given that in most countries a major proportion of the surveyed SSW is made up of professional social workers with degrees, it is surprising that when asked about professional association membership (except for Palestine where the question was not asked). Only in Iran, Lebanon and Tunisia, SSW survey respondents understood that this question was about membership of a professional SSW association, rather than any work-related association such as a union of workers or even a community-level association. A positive response on association membership was reported to be low even in these three countries (57%, 20% and 25%, respectively).

Generally, professional associations in the study countries lack the mandate to provide professional support to its members or to regulate the profession. This is illustrated by the fact that to date none of these associations have been accorded any regulatory authority by the government. Formal recognition of a professional code of ethics is also an important step toward regulating the SSW profession. Such a formally recognised code of ethics exists in Lebanon and Tunisia. In Lebanon, the Syndicate of Social Workers and the Ministry of Social Affairs formally disseminated the Code of Ethics for Social Workers in November 2018. In Tunisia, the ethical code of the SSW is defined by Decree. In Iran, graduates of academic programmes in social work recite the code of ethics. In Jordan, a Code of Ethics for Jordanian Social Workers exists but it is unclear to what extent it is officially recognised or enforced by the government. None of the other countries has a publicly disseminated code of ethics for the SSW.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SSW STRENGTHENING IN THE MENA REGION

While the review revealed various characteristics of the current nascent state of the SSW in the MENA region, it also highlighted specific issues to be considered in strengthening the SSW in the region. These include: addressing data gaps to enable policy formulation and action planning; the need for standardisation of SSW concepts, terminologies and titles across languages and cultures; key issues that legislation should address to enable SSW strengthening; training, capacity strengthening, quality assurance and professionalisation of the SSW; and the need for advocacy to promote better recognition of the distinct and important role of SSW vis-a-vis other professions.

In most of the countries, CTGs reviewed study findings and identified recommendations for SSW strengthening. These are summarised below in terms of the three pillars of SSW strengthening: planning, developing and supporting the SSW.

Recommended Actions: Planning the SSW

- Develop a mechanism to obtain data on the numbers of SSW employed in the country, by title, sector, type of service and gender, possibly through conducting a census-like

enumeration of workers and/or establishing a centralised database (Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia)

- Analyse worker-to-client ratio and staffing gaps and set increasing target ratio of social service workers with responsibility for child protection per 100,000 child population (all countries)

- Strengthen state-level recognition of the importance of the SSW as a partner in national policy, strategy and budget development (Iran, Tunisia)

- Strengthen legislation and regulation of the SSW, including mechanisms to enforce minimum standards for service provision, specifically personnel qualifications and numbers (Djibouti, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia)

- Introduce legal protection of the SSW (Iran, Morocco, Tunisia)

- Standardise SSW titles and terminologies across sectors and languages (Djibouti, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Palestine, Sudan)

- Include SSW titles in the government's list of civil service jobs and requirement that candidates meet SSW qualifications to be considered for recruitment (Djibouti, Lebanon)

- Standardise job descriptions for the SSW (Iran, Lebanon)

- Establish as legal requirement for practice that social service workers sign and adhere to the SSW Code of Ethics (Morocco)

Recommended Actions: Developing the SSW

- Strengthen (or establish if none exist) pre-service SSW training programmes (Djibouti, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia)

- Design and/or support implementation of nationally recognised in-service training to upgrade current SSW competencies (Djibouti, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia)

- In countries where SSW data is not centralised, obtain baseline data on SSW numbers by title, sector and location through a census-like enumeration of the SSW. Use this data to inform the establishment of a centralised database within one ministry with SSW oversight or through a professional body

**Recommended Actions:
Supporting the SSW**

- Strengthen (or create if none exist) professional associations of SSW (Djibouti, Sudan)

- Promote the specific and important role of the SSW among stakeholders – from community to national level (Djibouti, Jordan, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia)

- Strengthen opportunities for professional/career development (Djibouti, Jordan, Iran, Lebanon, Tunisia)

- Strengthen national and international networking among workers (Djibouti, Iran, Morocco, Tunisia)

- Strengthen the quality of services provided by the SSW by establishing minimum service standards; appropriate and standardised supervision systems; adequately qualified SSW supervisors; and ensuring the adequacy of human and financial resources to perform social work functions (Djibouti, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia)

- Set aspirational ratio of supervisors to workers and requirements for quality supervision (all countries)

- Strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration including referral systems and the role of the SSW within cross-sectoral referral (Iran, Jordan, Morocco, Palestine)

- Strengthen coordination between humanitarian and developmental actors (Djibouti, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Sudan)

- Formally recognise professional codes of ethics for social service workers to increase regulation of the SSW profession

In each country, the CTG also developed detailed action plans to strengthen the SSW, as well as designating individuals or institutions responsible for executing these plans, and the timeframe in which the action should be accomplished.

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