Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen:

- I am pleased to be here today, participating in this important roundtable and delighted that UNCTAD XII, is focusing on the social and gender dimensions of globalization, development and poverty reduction, an issue that is often overlooked.

- My intervention today will primarily focus on highlighting the region-specific social and gender dimensions of globalization, development and poverty reduction for the Arab world.

- Promoting a socially and gender-sensitive development and globalization process requires that we pay attention to issues of equity. At the global level, there needs to be equity in terms of the benefits and outcomes of globalization, and an equal voice for developed and developing countries in negotiating global agreements.

- At the country level, an “equitable globalization process” or an “equitable development and poverty reduction strategy” should
ensure that all individuals, men and women, young and old, are benefiting from national policies in comparable ways. Similarly, attention must be paid to differential progress based on rural or urban status.

- It is at the regional, sub-regional, and country-levels which I will primarily focus my intervention today.

****

- Unquestionably, economic growth is a key element in any strategy for promoting development and combating poverty. However, although economic indicators such as GDP growth or per capita GNI are important markers of overall progress, we must also be conscious of the fact that aggregate data often mask important gender and social disparities.

- At the same time, mainstream indicators and instruments used to measure poverty often capture only income poverty, and do not reflect the multidimensional nature of poverty including the chronic deprivation or capabilities, choices, security and power.

- Most Arab countries, and especially those in the Gulf Cooperation Council, have been witnessing a positive growth record since 2002, as a result of overall favourable macroeconomic conditions and the hike in oil prices. However, the LDCs and countries in conflict in
the region have been lagging behind with some displaying little and even negative growth.

- National aggregate level data on poverty suggest that regional positive economic performance has not improved the lives of the poorest who are also suffering the most from inflation especially the serious rise in the price of housing and food. Given that several Arab countries are net food importers, the current spike in global food prices is of particular concern for the poor in the region.

- Trends in the proportion of people living below national poverty lines highlight the fact that the Arab region as a whole has not experienced significant progress in reducing income poverty in the last decade. Based on data for 12 Arab countries, representing 74 per cent of the region’s total population, the proportion of population living below the national poverty lines has remained at approximately 23 per cent.

- Among Arab LDCs, the poverty rates declined slightly from 46 to 45 per cent. Due to ongoing conflict, there has been an enormous increase in poverty resulting in approximately one third of the population of Iraq and one half the population in Palestine to be living in poverty.
• Although there is a lack of adequate disaggregated data on poverty by gender, there is concern that poverty rates may be much higher among women. The feminization of poverty in the Arab world is primarily due to the fact that women face legal, structural and attitudinal barriers that prevent them from having equal access or control over various resources. These resources include access to training, credit, equal property rights, and free mobility.

• Legislative barriers in labour and property laws are of significance, however, women’s poor literacy in the Arab LDCs and lack of awareness of their legal rights are also crucial challenges for women’s economic empowerment in the region. At the same time, the high fertility rate and limited availability of facilities such as for child care, prevent women from taking advantage of economic opportunities.

• Across the region, rural areas tend to lag behind urban areas in all of the development dimensions addressed in the Millennium Declaration, mostly due to a lack of sufficient private and public investment. This has resulted in poor infrastructure facilities (e.g. roads, energy, and telecommunication), low educational quality, poor health outcomes due to inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and a low rate of technological progress in rural areas.
• A key challenge for reducing poverty in both rural and urban areas, involves addressing the persistent high rate of unemployment and underemployment.

• In many Arab countries, a combination of relatively low levels of savings and investments and a bias towards low productivity capital-intensive investment, namely in housing and real estate, has resulted in a much smaller number of jobs being created than are needed to close the unemployment gap.

• At the same time, the demographic profile of the region in terms of a large youth population, and the important gains achieved by Arab women in access to education, has led to a significant increase in new entrants to the region’s labour markets each year. These new entrants however, are currently not being adequately absorbed, and contribute to a strikingly high youth unemployment rate across the region.

• In 2005 around 25 per cent of Arab youth were unemployed and there was widespread underemployment. The unemployment rate for young females was estimated at around 35 per cent in 2005 and there is little indication that this trend will be reversed without targeted interventions.
• Due to the significant level of youth unemployment, many countries of the region face heavy emigration of youth, especially among males. Despite some benefits to this mobility in the form of experiences gained and remittances sent home, there are also important social concerns.

• The brain drain caused by this migration of the region’s most educated and qualified youth is of particular concern especially in countries such as Lebanon where ongoing political instability, in combination with high unemployment and poor economic performance, provide few alternatives for the country’s youth.

• The migration of youth has played a role in changing social structures in several Arab countries. Support systems for the elderly are being eroded, families are often separated for extended periods, and youth are finding difficulty in becoming economically independent and establishing their own families.

• This pattern of migration is also seen at the country level, where the Arab region is experiencing heavy migration from rural to urban areas, particularly, in working age groups and is a key contributor to rural ageing. Population ageing in rural areas has major implications for agricultural production, food security, health services, labour markets and the process of development itself. In addition, families, the basic structural unit of rural societies, will
experience rapid and significant demographic change, in many instances leading to reduced family support for older persons and possibly an increase in poverty among the elderly.

- The region has recently witnessed a surge in efforts by Governments, non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations to address some of these social and gender regional concerns I have highlighted today.

- Significant progress has been made to tackle all forms of discrimination against women. On the education front, the gender parity index - measured by the girls-to-boys gross enrolment ratio - has substantially increased at all levels of education from 1991 to 2005. Similarly, the percentage of seats held by women in national parliaments increased since 1990, however stood at only 8.7 per cent in 2007, one of the lowest in the world.

- Coordinated and concerted efforts are needed to continue to support women and youth, and promote their political and economic participation. Governments, public and private institutions should work collectively and the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), as the regional development arm of the UN, is prepared to support these efforts.
• The normative, analytical and operational work of ESCWA supports member Countries to reach internationally agreed development goals and respond to the social and gender challenges highlighted earlier.

• ESCWA advocates for and offers policy advice and support to help member Countries integrate social concerns in national policy making – be it economic, fiscal, environmental, or otherwise, and curb possible adverse effects on particular groups.

• A primary constraint for the region in promoting gender-sensitive policies is the absence of gender-disaggregate data. ESCWA has worked with and will continue to work with member Governments to help build national statistical capacities in collecting and analyzing gender disaggregated data in order to be able to promote evidence-based policies that benefit the entire society.

• At the same time, ESCWA, in collaboration with other UN agencies and the League of Arab States monitors and reports on progress in the Arab Region towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

• Finally, in promoting regional integration, ESCWA contributes to stimulating trade and regional economic development, and accelerating technology acquisition to combat poverty.