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C E W L A

The Harmful Effects of Austerity on Economic and Social Rights in Egypt Universal Periodic Review: 48th Session

Egypt has been facing persistent economic challenges for over a decade, resulting in state austerity measures such as cuts to food and energy subsidies, increased fees for government services, and cuts to spending on health, education, and public social protection programs. Despite these measures, Egypt has not put in place effective measures to mitigate the impact of these policies on its population and ensure its enjoyment of fundamental economic and social rights. Furthermore, Egypt has exercised punitive strategies against particular groups, including prisoners and human rights defenders, which have exacerbated the impact of the government's austerity policies on these groups and their families, depriving them of the minimum standards of economic and social rights.

The Right to Health and Education

The Egyptian government's austerity policies have depleted government spending on healthcare and education to below constitutional and international standards.

The number of hospital beds has decreased while the population increases, and medical facilities, particularly those in rural areas, lack medical equipment, qualified personnel, sanitation, and safety measures, pressing more people to opt for expensive private healthcare, largely unaffordable to marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Egypt's prisoners are amongst those most vulnerable who are hurt by these spending cuts: health services in Egypt's prisons are severely inadequate, and deliberate medical

negligence is used as a punitive strategy against prisoners. Government cuts to health sector spending, coupled with medical negligence, forces prisoners' families to bear the cost and effort of medical support to prisoners, often requiring bribery of prison officers to ensure their loved ones receive the treatments they need.

Public spending on education in Egypt fell from 3.6 percent of GDP in 2015/2016 to 2.5 percent in 2021/2022, negatively impacting the quality of public education and depriving many, particularly those experiencing poverty, of their right to access free, quality education services.

Women's Right to Work in Just Conditions

The Egyptian government has sought to reduce the unemployment rate in recent years, but its austerity policies have harmed women's access to work, and worsened their employment conditions. Government spending cuts on the public sector, especially education and healthcare which were significant employers of women, and the privatization of public services, have disproportionately impacted women's job opportunities. This is evident with the drop in women's labor force participation rate from 25 percent in 2016 to 17 percent in 2022.

Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds face greater barriers to private sector employment, driving many of these women into the informal sector, where pay disparity is significantly higher and social

protection mechanisms do not exist, increasing their vulnerability to unemployment, poverty, and exploitation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely exacerbated the disproportionate impact on women living in poverty: a vast majority of women in that category lost their jobs or faced reduced pay in the absence of strong social protection umbrellas. Furthermore, the negative impacts of state austerity measures on healthcare predominantly affected Egyptian women, who often are made to take on the unpaid role of primary caregiver to sick or elderly family members due to their inability to afford professional healthcare services.

The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living and to Social Security

The Egyptian government's austerity policies have disproportionately affected people's right to an adequate standard of living, including housing, food, and social security, consequently harming marginalized groups such as women and prisoners.

Reduced government spending on affordable housing projects has resulted in a housing crisis, forcing many families into substandard living conditions. Moreover, spending cuts on food subsidies and social protection programs have reduced social protection coverage for unemployment, maternity, disability, and other situations, resulting in extreme poverty and heightened food insecurity. All of which have disproportionately gendered impacts.

In Egypt's prisons, austerity measures combined with punitive measures applied by officers, force prisoners to purchase expensive, better-quality food at exorbitant prices. Prisoners' families are prevented from bringing them food; family visits are made challenging and arduous by authorities as an additional punitive measure, forcing families to resort to bribery to ensure food and medicine are delivered to prisoners.

Egyptian authorities undermine the economic and social rights of Egyptians in exile by

weaponizing the Terrorist Entities Law to designate certain political activists and human rights defenders on terrorist lists. This denies them access to financial and consular services, such as opening bank accounts, conducting financial transactions, and obtaining or renewing identification documents. All of these policies have a negative impact on their rights to work, access healthcare and educational services, and attain an adequate standard of living.

Recommendations

- Respect, protect, and fulfill the rights to health, education, work, social security, and an adequate standard of living for the country's population, particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups.
- Increase public spending on health and education, and improve the quality and accessibility of these vital sectors.
- Implement regulations safeguarding women's labor rights in the private sector and actively monitor women's work conditions.
- Implement policies that ensure equal access to affordable housing, as well as ensure the right to own property, especially for women who have faced gender-based discrimination in this regard.
- Restore food subsidies and increase spending on social protection programs to protect the population against poverty and its different risk factors, such as unemployment, sickness, work injury, maternity, disability, and old age.
- Halt unfair, punitive strategies against prisoners and their families, investigate their complaints of medical negligence and denial of visits, and facilitate their access to fundamental economic and social rights.
- Halt transnational punitive strategies against human rights defenders and their families, facilitate the issuing and renewing of their identification documents, and ensure their full access to consular and financial services.