



Women's Political Participation: the situation

ACHIEVEMENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

regional and national programmes and activities have been designed and implemented in the region. Countries that have multi purposed elections such as Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Bahrain, Morocco, Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, Sudan, and Yemen have undertaken initiatives for strengthening women's participation in the political system and processes.

These countries have conducted quantitative and qualitative assessments of the needs and priorities of the political environment, shared experiences and lessons learnt, mobilized their media, and raised political awareness among men and women. Moreover, some of the countries have witnessed lobbying activities aimed at changing election Laws to introduce women quotas in politics and build capacities of women in political participation as voters, candidates and observers⁵⁸.

In Syria, the March parliamentary elections, the first since President al-As-sad assumed power in July 2000, has brought to the parliament 30 women members (12% of the total) in comparison to 26 in the previous elections (10.4%). In Algeria, the 62 women out of 13981 have been elected for the municipalities, 24 out of 389 in the Parliament and 6 senators out of 144 (4 of whom were designated by the President). In Sudan, women's represen-



one of the young and dynamic social workers

tation at parliament is 10% in northern states and 15% in southern states. Their representation at local power structure is insignificant or non-existent, hence limiting their influence on policies and actions affecting their daily lives.

In Bahrain, the government has decided to grant Bahraini women their political rights in the first national assembly to be elected since 27 years. Bahraini women thus became the first in the gulf countries to gain political rights in legislature. Nevertheless, all women candidates lost the local elections, the first organized since three decades.

2002 witnessed the induction of 35

⁵⁸Women in Parliament: World Classification IPU 30 October 2004.

women to the parliament in Morocco, with 30 women having been appointed on the basis of the national quota and 5 elected locally. This was a result of the adoption by the council of ministers, chaired by King Mohamed VI, the revision of the Election Law that recommended allocating a quota of a minimum of 30 women out of 365 parliamentarians, and the consequent endorsement of the amendment by the Parliament and constitutional Council. This success highlighted the importance of political will in gender institutionalization through empowerment measures and affirmative actions.

As further proof, The United Arab Emirates late ruler, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, believed strongly in the right of women to enter the political arena, reiterating it at many occasions and maintaining that, "every woman has a duty to participate fully in serving her country, as well as in promoting the action collective of Arab women". Before his passing away in 2004, he nominated the first woman minister in

the history of U.A.E.

In Saudi Arabia, progress has been slow but steady; women have been allowed in 2001 to attend the meeting of Majles El-Shoura⁵⁹ and participate in the debate by writing interventions. Women seized this opportunity to raise one issue faced by the Saudis, men and women alike; the high dowry required for marriage and its effect on the age of marriage and the increase in the percentages of unmarried people in society.

One major positive change in the last 5 years has been the state's issuance of personal identity cards for women. Up until 2001, women were not allowed to obtain an ID. Women merely featured as names on the family ID card represented by the photo of the husband, father, brother or guardian. Those that did not own passport had no way of even cashing a check at a Bank for lack of proper identification. This is now no more an issue, except for the fact that those ID cards cannot be issued without the official approval of a guardian.

In the different branches of govern-

Country	Lower of Single House				Upper House or Senate			
	Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W
Tunisia	10 2004	189	43	22.8	-	-	-	-
Syrian Arab Republic	03 2003	250	30	12.0	-	-	-	-
Morocco	09 2002	325	35	10.8	10 2003	270	3	1.1
Sudan	12 2000	360	35	9.7	-	-	-	-
Algeria	05 2002	389	24	6.2	12 2003	144	28	19.4
Jordan	06 2003	110	6	5.5	11 2003	55	7	12.7
Egypt	11 2000	454	11	2.4	05 2001	264	15	5.7
Lebanon	08 2000	128	3	2.3	-	-	-	-
Yemen	04 2003	301	1	0.3	-	-	-	-
Bahrain	10 2002	40	0	00	11 2002	40	6	15.0
Kuwait	07 2003	65	0	00	-	-	-	-
Saudi Arabia	05 2001	120	0	00	-	-	-	-
United Arab Emirates	12 1997	40	0	00	-	-	-	-
Libyan Arab Jamahiria	03 1997	760	?	?	-	-	-	-

Women in Parliament: World Classification IPU 30 October 2004.

⁵⁹ The equivalent to Senate

ment, many women have been nominated as ministers, governors, mayors, and ambassadors. (Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria, Sultanate of Oman, Morocco, Mauritania, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen). In Algeria, 5 female have been appointed to different portfolios in the 39 ministers cabinet, including finances and scientific research. It was the first time since 1992 that women served as ministers and the first time since the independence of the country as well as in the region where they occupied as many seats.⁶⁰ The creation of the Family and Women Affairs ministry made Algeria the first and only country in the region to put women's issues on the ministerial portfolio.

Obstacles and constraints

Even though women constitute more than 50% of the population of Arab countries, the percentage of women in parliament does not exceed 3% overall.⁶¹ The proportion of women in other political decision-making positions is equally low. While there is no question that promoting women's increased participation in politics is a serious challenge, it is also necessary to address the question of how to maximize the impact of those already assuming political roles.

Women's political and decision making participation is still under par, and the progress made in the region as a whole is slow. Some of the main reasons behind this are:

- Hesitant and fluctuating political will,
- Low participation and representation of women in political parties, and little dedication and seriousness on the part of those who are members
- Societal resistance to women candi-

dacy for elections

- Limited resources of women candidates,
- Low participation of women in voting, and low number of women voting for women candidates.

As an example, Egyptian Women obtained their political rights in 1956 but their participation is still limited and slow (the proportion of women in local assemblies in Egypt did not change from 18,1 % since 1988) despite their important involvement in the design of policies and the decision-making process. The National Council of Women⁶² (sixty women who participated in the 2002 elections) were asked about reasons behind women's failure to win elections, and summarized them into the following:

- The absence of women in the lists of parties;
- Violence against women and intimidation to force them to withdraw their candidacy;
- Rejection of women candidates by election committees, sometimes after having paid the fees of registration.
- This situation is not unique in the Region. None of the 31 Bahraini women (approximately 10%) who vied with the 275 men for the 50 seats succeeded in winning seats for the local assembly or even for a second turn. In 2003, this negative trend has been confirmed by the results of the election in the Sultanate of Oman where none of the candidates won a seat in the parliament.

No major achievements or breakthroughs have been made openly regarding the situation of women in Saudi Arabia. Only male candidates have been chosen to be members of the "consultative" body within Majles

⁶⁰in 2002 but this number decreased and currently 3 women are member of the government.

⁶¹Inter-parliamentary union (IPU) 2004 statistics on the Internet.

⁶²Egyptian Women Machinery headed by the first lady and considered as semi-public organization due to the NGOs membership/representativeness

Al-Shoura. Moreover, although it has been announced recently that municipal elections will be held in one year and parliamentary elections for a third of the seats in two years (a great step towards democratic governance), it was unfortunately specifically mentioned that no women participation would take place!

Last but not least, Women in Kuwait, generally considered as some of the most emancipated in the gulf Arab region, have been struggling for suffrage for almost four decades. Where the economic, scientific and cultural achievements of the Kuwaiti Women could be easily underlined, their exclusion from political life and from exercising their right to vote and run for parliament, in total contradiction with the constitution, continues to be one of their main struggles.

ROLE AND IMPACT OF NGOS



Over the past 10 years, a number of initiatives have concentrated on enhancing women's political participation. Advocates of these initiatives have tended to be mostly NGOs and intergovernmental organizations. Most of these attempts have succeeded in prioritizing and highlighting the issue in different venues. International conferences such as Nairobi 1985 and Beijing 1995, have

provided significant momentum and outreach to all local, regional and international initiatives. Concurrently, many of the donor organizations have prioritized gender concerns throughout their development programmes, resulting in widespread familiarity with the notions of women in politics and "gender and development".

Stemming from the fact that political empowerment of women is one of the distinguishing marks in the democratic process, a number of NGO's have called for the development of political awareness among women and the activation of their political participation. These activities had a great influence on building the capacities of women to participate in the decision-making process, and increasing women's effective influence in public service. NGO's in many countries successfully advocated for the adoption and implementation of the quota system in parliamentary elections, which resulted in an increase in women's parliamentary participation in these countries (Jordan, Morocco, ..etc.).

Many NGO's call for promoting women's political awareness and the activation of their political participation. They help women in localities and at grassroots levels to participate in efforts to identify societal issues and find solutions that can be implemented successfully, such as assisting families supported by women. Although such efforts are exerted at the local decision-making level, they have an extensive influence on building the capacity of women to participate in the decision-making process. Furthermore, they increase the effective influence of women in the public domain.

Emanating from the fact that forecasting the future and formulating the political, economic and social future of societies is no longer restricted to governmental institutions, a number of



Iraqi Women Demonstrating for Democracy in Iraq.

NGO's and civil society organizations have taken on pioneering initiatives, including the organization of the first regional summit for political, social and economic reform in the Arab region in 2004 at the Alexandria Library. The summit produced the Alexandria declaration which called for the alternation of authority, increased involvement of women in public life, and the separation of powers as a precursor to achieving reform.

The main contention between the NGOs and government is government attempts to control and dominate the thinking and activities of NGOs. Typically, governments attempt to use laws governing the formation and operation of associations to censure activities having a political impact. In fact, most

of these laws stipulate that an NGO should not be involved in political activities at all⁶³.

In other countries, NGOs are or were strongly involved in the political life of the nation. NGOs are important actors in conflict ridden areas, as is the case in Algeria, Palestine under occupation, and Lebanon during wartime.

It would be accurate to describe what happened in that country as a veritable explosion of civil society organizations and associations. The social categories that felt most at threat from extremism, alongside the the Algerian government, were the first to organize themselves. Civil society was an active actor in combating extremism and terrorism, with many people sacrificing their lives and possessions in this pursuit.. The most

⁶³ Kandil Aman: Civil Society in the Arab World. Civic Us, Egypt 1995.

active were women and the Amazighs who operated out of concern for the Republic and the citizenship of both women and men.

Before the national authority assumed its responsibility in Palestine, civil society upheld the social, economic, education, and health infrastructure of a territory occupied by Israel for thirty years. And during the Lebanese civil war as well as the period of occupation of South-Lebanon by Israel NGOs were a primary provider of health care and education, and later established a viable forum for conflict resolution and peace amongst the torn nation.

The challenges

Developing the role of NGOs in propagating women's political participation requires a comprehensive country-level strategy that addresses the specificities of the status of women in society, structures of governments, and the culture of governances. To overcome the barriers that remain there are several areas that need to be addressed. The culture of local government needs to change to ensure equal opportunities, Gender awareness programmes for men and women need to be developed, and women's NGOs need to provide a voice for women's views and a base for networking.

NGOs should consider getting involved in political training and mentorship, and, work alongside political parties to help women in local government develop their skills and enable them to functions within the tier of political parties.

On the regional level, action should focus on establishing regional targets for increasing women's participation in politics; this could be done through increased cross-regional dialogue and sharing of experiences, lessons learnt and best practices, and the dissemina-

tion of information and comparative research through networks, political parties and research and training institutes.