

ARAB WOMEN IN PUBLIC LIFE AND DECISION-MAKING



The participation of women in public life in Arab countries remains below the desired level and reflects a pervasive, gender-based gap in rights and freedoms. There exists a substantial gender gap and deficit in women's access to opportunities in practically every aspect of public life, including decision-making and leadership in all branches of Government, namely, the executive, legislative and judiciary; in political parties and other associations concerned with public life; and in the media.

The root cause of gender inequality in the region and the patriarchal control of women's rights and freedoms can be attributed to a re-definition of the role of women as mothers and bearers of the nation and an enforced morality. These constitute important obstacles facing the full and effective participation of women in public life in the Arab region.

According to the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), which was introduced by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ten years ago, Arab countries rank lower than any region, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa. Across the world, women continue to face obstacles in

terms of fully realizing their rights as equal participants in society. However, resistance to gender equality has been the most challenging in the Arab region, despite the adoption of constitutional reforms in some countries in recent years aimed at reaffirming the equality of all citizens before the law in rights and duties.¹ Such reforms have the potential to trigger wide-ranging gains for women's rights. However, enacting laws that putatively guarantee equal rights for women and men can have only a modest impact if those guarantees are not enforced by concrete mechanisms of enforcement of equal rights, which are written in the national constitution or legislation. In effect, Arab States have equally demonstrated their commitment to the advancement of women by instituting mechanisms at high levels to reform their mandates in line with the recommendations of the Beijing Platform of Action; and most countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and have enacted new legislations or revised existing ones.

Moreover, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were

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agreed upon internationally, address the issues of critical concern, including a key reference to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. Specifically, Goal 3 addresses gender inequality in the different sectors of societies, especially in terms of ensuring the equal representation of women at the highest level of Government and in national decision-making. This Goal was adopted to underscore and reaffirm the international commitment towards the inalienable rights of women, including the right to participate in decision-making in all institutions of society.²

This pamphlet aims to review the participation of women in public life in Arab countries. The review extends to the voting rights and the year of suffrage; the actual participation of women in elections, both as voters and as candidates; the number of women holding ministerial and legislative seats; women's representation in local councils and municipalities; women's affiliation with political parties; involvement of women in the judiciary system; women's appointment in high ranking and official posts; the role of women in the media; and the participation of women in civil society, namely, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and in other organizations.



1. A recent example of such a reform is the family code in Morocco of 2004, which raises the age at which girls can legally marry from 15 to 18 and gives wives joint responsibility with their husbands in matters of the family. Women can now also institute a divorce; inheritance laws have been changed; and a woman has the right to accept a marriage only if her intended spouse agrees not to take further wives.

2. This international commitment towards gender equality is particularly evident in such conventions and declarations as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women of 18 December 1979; the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995; the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly on Gender Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century (New York, 5-9 June 2000); and, most recently, the 2005 World Summit.

VOTING RIGHTS

With the exception of some countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), most Arab countries have granted women the right to vote and to stand for election. In Saudi Arabia, the first local election ever held in that country was in 2005, during which only men were given the opportunity to vote and to stand for public office. In Oman and the United

Arab Emirates, men and women do not vote or stand for elections given the oligarchic nature of the political systems in those two countries. Lebanon was the first country to grant women the right to vote in 1952, followed by Egypt in 1956, Tunisia in 1959 and, most recently, Kuwait, which granted women the right to vote in May 2005.

TABLE 1

VOTING RIGHTS OF WOMEN IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Country or territory	Year of independence	Year of suffrage	Year the first woman was elected to office
Algeria	1962	1962 ^{a/}	1962 ^{b/}
Bahrain	1971	2002	2002 ^{b/}
Comoros	1975	1956	1993
Djibouti	1977	1986	2003
Egypt	1953	1956	1957
Iraq	1932	1980	..
Jordan	1946	1974	1989 ^{b/}
Kuwait	1961	2005	..
Lebanon	1943	1952	1991 ^{b/}
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	1951	1964	..
Mauritania	1960	1961	1975
Morocco	1956	1963	1993
Oman	1950	NP	NP
Palestine
Qatar	1973	1999	..
Saudi Arabia	1932	NP	NP
Somalia	1960	1956	..
Sudan	1956	1964	1964
Syrian Arab Republic	1946	1949/1953 ^{c/}	1973
Tunisia	1956	1959	1959
United Arab Emirates	1971	NP	NP
Yemen	1967	1967	1990

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. "2005 Women's suffrage: A world chronology of the recognition of women's rights to vote and to stand for election", which is available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>.

Notes: Two dots (..) indicate that data were not available; NP indicate no parliamentary system.

^{a/} The right to candidacy was granted in 1973.

^{b/} Appointed rather than elected.

^{c/} The rights were subject to restriction in 1949 and were subsequently lifted in 1953.

While women have historically played a significant role in independence movements, their right to participate fully in public life as equals with men lagged behind other nationalist concerns. On average, it took half the Arab countries more than 8 years after gaining their independence to recognize the right of women to vote and to hold public office. Only in Comoros and Somalia were women granted the right to vote and stand for election before independence (see table 1).

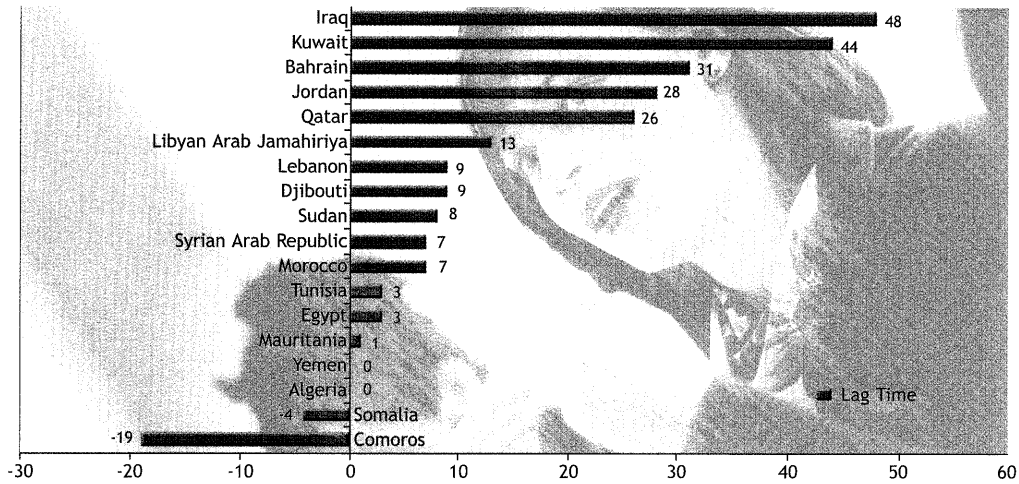
The average lag time between the year of acquiring the right of women to nominate themselves and the actual election or appointment of a woman to office is estimated at 15 years. In Algeria, Bahrain, Sudan and Tunisia, women were elected to the respective Parliaments in the same year that they were given the right for election. However, it took Comoros, Lebanon and Morocco more than three decades to appoint a woman to their national Parliaments (see table 1). This implies that countries need to support women

beyond merely granting them the right to nominate themselves, and to promote genuine participation in the Government. Mechanisms must be tailored to overcome such contextual obstacles as the value systems and the

traditions that still undermine the capacities of women in the political arena in addition to the high cost of running for elections given that women are still economically disadvantaged compared to their men counterparts.

FIGURE I

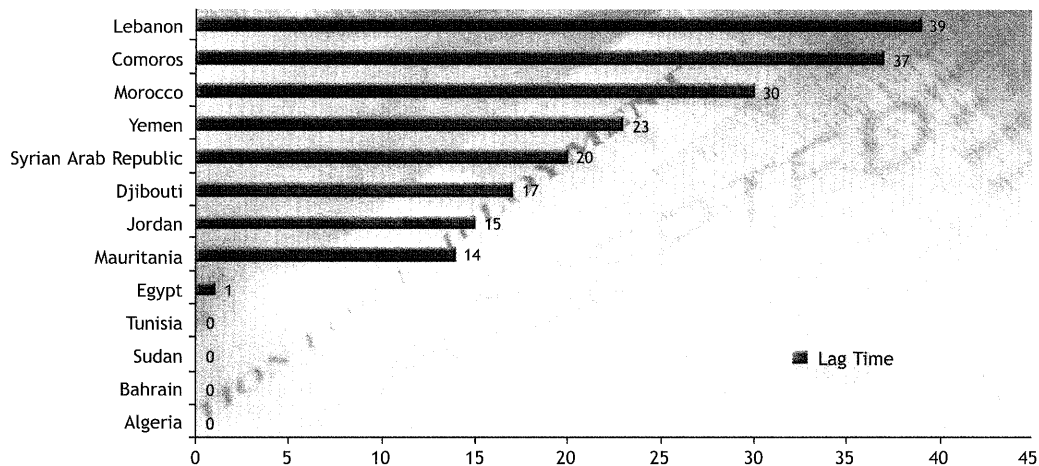
LAG TIME BETWEEN INDEPENDENCE AND YEAR OF SUFFRAGE



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. "2005 Women's suffrage: A world chronology of the recognition of women's rights to vote and to stand for election", which is available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>.

FIGURE II

LAG TIME BETWEEN THE YEAR WOMEN WERE GRANTED THE RIGHT TO STAND FOR ELECTIONS AND THE YEAR A WOMAN WAS FIRST ELECTED OR APPOINTED TO OFFICE



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union. "2005 Women's suffrage: A world chronology of the recognition of women's rights to vote and to stand for election", which is available at: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTARY AND MINISTERIAL COUNCILS

Despite the fact that the law in many countries guarantees the right of women to nominate themselves, there are groups and individuals who still believe that the rightful place of women is at home, and who oppose this right and exert influence against such nominations. In fact, there are women voters who vote only for male candidates owing to family pressure, especially from the male members of their families. Across the Arab region, the greatest representation of women in national Parliaments is found in Iraq at 31.5 per cent, followed by Tunisia and the Syrian Arab Republic, at 22.8 and 12.0 per cent, respectively. This share of women in national Parliaments was lower in Yemen at 0.3 per cent in 2005.

Typically, the high cost of a political campaign places women at a disadvantage to run for elections. Those who have the financial resources to run a campaign must overcome social and cultural obstacles. This is reflected by the low number of female candidates who are able to secure seats in national Parliaments or local councils. It has been suggested that even in Arab countries where women have made inroads into public life, there exists an obstacle that limits women from reaching high-ranking leadership positions in ministries and Government bodies.

The proposed quota systems in Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen are yet to be adopted. However, even if such systems are adopted, they will remain symbolic if they are not attached to and backed by a genuine political commitment to advance the status of women in society as a whole. In Morocco, for instance, gender-based NGOs have lobbied the Government to implement a number of mechanisms, including financial incentives or sanctions to guarantee women's representation. Despite such lobbying, the quota system was not institutionalized and was not used in the local elections of 2003.

TABLE 2

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENTARY AND MINISTERIAL COUNCILS, 2005 (percentages)

Country or territory	Parliament	Cabinet
Algeria	5.3	10.5
Bahrain	7.5	8.7
Comoros	3.0	0.0
Djibouti	10.8	5.3
Egypt	4.3	5.9
Iraq	31.5	24.0
Jordan	7.9	10.7
Kuwait	0.0	0.0
Lebanon	4.7	4.2
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	..	6.0
Mauritania	4.4	9.1
Morocco	6.4	5.9
Oman	7.8	10.0
Palestine	5.7	14.0
Qatar	..	7.7
Saudi Arabia	0.0	0.0
Somalia	..	3.0
Sudan	9.7	2.6
Syrian Arab Republic	12.0	6.3
Tunisia	22.8	7.1
United Arab Emirates	0.0	5.6
Yemen	0.3	2.9

Source: United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Human Development Report (2005), which is available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/>.

Notes: Two dots (..) indicate that data were not available.

While women can be appointed as ministers in the majority of Arab countries, in cases where they are appointed they do not usually serve in any significant way in such line ministries as defense, economy or interior affairs. Women generally receive portfolios as secretaries of State or junior ministers, and are typically not given strong institutional mandates with significant human or financial resources.

Their participation is generally limited to agencies of the State that work on women's issues and to the ministries, in sub-ministerial positions, that deal with social affairs, including health, environment and labour. In addition, appointed women are usually relatives of men in power and are rarely appointed based on merit or personal achievements.

TABLE 3

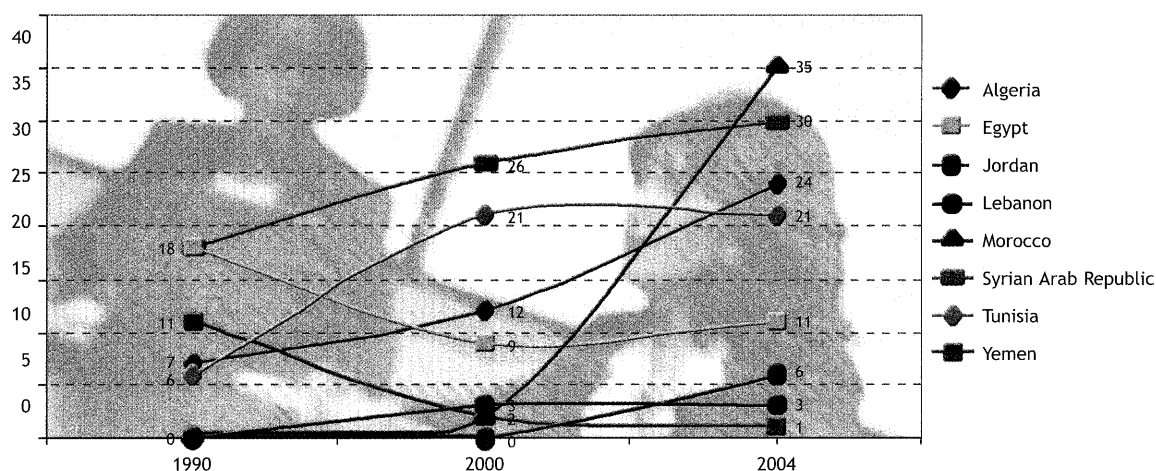
MINISTRIES TO WHICH WOMEN ARE APPOINTED IN SELECTED ARAB COUNTRIES

Country or territory	Ministry
Algeria	Family and Women Issues
Djibouti	Women Advancement and Social Affairs
Jordan	Minister of State
Kuwait	Planning and Administrative Development Affairs
Lebanon	Social Affairs
Mauritania	Culture, Youth and Sports Women's Affairs (Secretary of State) New Technologies (Secretary of State)
Oman	Public Authority for Craft Industries (without portfolio) Higher Education (with portfolio)
Palestine	Social Affairs Women's Affairs
Qatar	Education
Syrian Arab Republic	Culture Expatriates Labour and social affairs
Tunisia	Women and Family Affairs
Yemen	Human Rights

Source: International IDEA, "In search of political power-Women in Parliament in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon" (1998), which is available at: <http://archive.idea.int/women/parl/>; and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), "How democratic is the Middle East?" (BBC News/Middle East, 9 September 2005), which is available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/middle_east/3784765.stm.

FIGURE III

PARLIAMENTARY SEATS OCCUPIED BY WOMEN SINCE 1990



Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Parliamentary seats occupied by women" (2005), which is available at: http://unstats.un.org/unsd/mi/mi_series_results.asp?rowID=660.

C

WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES

While women are active in political parties wherever the law permits, they are compelled to resort to other unofficial venues of political expression and public life where such laws are absent. In general, the representation of women in political parties is low and few women are elected to executive and leadership

positions. In Bahrain, despite the restrictions of national laws, women participate openly in a variety of demonstrations and in political, cultural and social activities. In Lebanon, while many political parties are active, these provide little room for women to participate in the top decision-making processes.

TABLE 4

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICAL PARTIES

Country or territory	Women participation in political parties	Women elected to executive positions in political parties
Bahrain	Range between 9 to 50.8 per cent	Seven out of 13 political societies have elected women to their executive boards
Kuwait	Involved in all major political groups	
Lebanon	Involved in almost all political groups	Rarely achieve decision-making positions or leadership roles
Morocco	Only 1 per cent of women are members of a political party and 60 per cent of urban women are not informed of the existence of political parties and associations	
Palestine	Heavily male dominated	Eight out of 196 women in decision-making posts in the largest party in Palestine (Fatah). The People's Party granted women 20 per cent of seats in their decision-making ranks
Syrian Arab Republic	Women involvement	No woman representation in the highest levels of the Ba'ath Party
Tunisia	Increasing numbers of women are joining and starting political parties	Women currently account for 26 per cent of the central committee of the ruling party
Yemen	Women's membership in political parties is very low	Representation of women in upper leadership positions within parties does not exceed 2 per cent

Source: S. Nazir, "Challenging inequality: Obstacles and opportunities towards women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa" (Freedom House, 2005)

D

WOMEN IN THE JUDICIARY

Many women in Arab countries specialize in law and become practising lawyers, some of whom enjoy prominent careers. Despite these achievements, women face gender discrimination in bar examinations, access to employment, training and internships. This can be

partly attributed to pressure from conservative groups. For instance, in Egypt women are rarely promoted to district attorneys and judges despite rules and regulation that base promotion on seniority and merit with no regard to gender.

TABLE 5

NATIONAL LAWS AND THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE JUDICIARY

Country or territory	Law regarding women's participation in the judiciary system	Number of women judges	Women appointed to the supreme court
Algeria	No laws that restrict women from being judges	34 per cent of magistrates are women	15 out of the 38 magistrates are women, and the president of the Council of State is a woman
Bahrain	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	All judges are men; Six women appointed by the King to the office of Attorney General	
Egypt	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	Women's opportunities for advancement within Egypt's judicial system are highly restricted	One female judge in the Supreme Constitutional Court
Iraq	Very strict cultural resistance to women serving in high posts	One Iraqi woman lawyer was appointed as the first female judge in the conservative city of Najaf in 2003 but was forced to resign	
Jordan	No law to prohibit women from joining the judiciary	Women constituted less than 3 per cent of Jordan's 608 judges in 2003. No women served as public prosecutors	
Kuwait	Restrictive laws (may hold positions as investigative judges, women are not permitted to serve as judges in court)	Not represented in Kuwait's judiciary	
Lebanon	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges except in religious courts	68 out of 364 in 2000	Six out of 35 positions in the administrative courts and Supreme Court
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	Women are allowed to participate in the judiciary system since 1990	A number of female judges are appointed by the state, although they remain underrepresented in comparison to men	
Morocco	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	Significant presence in the judicial hierarchy: 391 women judges in 1998; 8 serve as counsel for the prosecution at the Supreme Court; 5 deputies of the Attorney General	No woman presides over a chamber of the Supreme Court or a public prosecutor's office, and there are no female examining magistrates
Oman	Women are not allowed to serve as judges in the country's courts		
Palestine	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	Four out of 46 in the West Bank	
Qatar	Restrictive laws	Not represented in the judiciary; no woman was granted a licence to practise law until 2000	

TABLE 5 (continued)

Country or territory	Law regarding women's participation in the judiciary system	Number of women judges	Women appointed to the supreme court
Saudi Arabia	Saudi Arabia's conservative Ulama (religious scholars) forbid women to participate in the judiciary, either as judges or as lawyers		
Syrian Arab Republic	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	170 female judges (13.4 per cent of the total), 33 state lawyers (14.5 per cent of the total) and 250 assistant judges	One woman held the highest judicial post, as Syria's general prosecutor, since 1998
Tunisia	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	25 per cent of Tunisia's judicial magistrate positions	
United Arab Emirates		Women were accepted for the first time to the Judicial Academy in Abu Dhabi in 2004. One woman was selected to an executive position in the Ministry of Justice	
Yemen	No laws to prohibit women from serving as judges	A range of 4-32 female judges compared to 1,200 male judges. All work in primary courts and not criminal courts	

Source: S. Nazir, "Challenging inequality: Obstacles and opportunities towards women's rights in the Middle East and North Africa" (Freedom House, 2005).

E

WOMEN IN HIGH-RANKING POSTS OR OFFICIAL APPOINTMENTS

Appointments of women to Government positions have increased in the past few years in certain countries, albeit not to a satisfactory level. The appointment of some women as ambassadors, director-generals in ministries and other executive positions gives hope that Arab countries have taken tentative steps on the road to gender equality. In December 1999, the first woman in the history of Bahrain was appointed by the King as the Ambassador to France. In Lebanon, there are two women ambassadors out of a total of 53 ambassadors; and three out of 22 directors-general are women. In Qatar,

while only four women fill high-ranking posts, substantially larger numbers of women occupy mid-level positions. In the Syrian Arab Republic, 11 women occupy the positions of director-general, 27 are deputy directors-general, 47 are branch directors, and 23 are deputy branch directors. Currently, 22 per cent of executive positions in the civil service are held by women in Tunisia, compared to 14 per cent in 1999. In Yemen, the same woman who served as the first female ambassador for that country currently serves as the Minister of Human Rights, representing the only woman in the 35-member cabinet.

F

WOMEN IN THE MEDIA

There is an increasing number of women with promising careers in journalism. For instance, in Yemen, the proportion of female syndicated journalists is estimated at 10 per cent of the total number of journalists. The State-owned Bahrain Radio and Television has diversified its programming to cover a broader spectrum of topics, including women's issues, violence against women and the political rights of women.

However, a modest number of women occupy decision-making positions. In newspapers across the Gulf sub-region, for instance, women rarely write editorials or cover political, economic or defense news. In Lebanon, one woman held the position of advisor to the President of the Republic on media-related issues, thereby representing perhaps the only woman to have attained a senior media-related position in an Arab Government. In Jordan, the daily newspaper, the *Jordan Times*, has a woman editor; and the national satellite television has a female general manager. Equally, a Lebanese woman was promoted to the position of senior international editor with Cable News Network (CNN).

Similarly, the first woman editor-in-chief of a weekly Jordanian paper, namely, Mahasen Al Emam, established the Arab Women Media Centre in Amman in 1998 with the aim of helping Arab women journalists in their careers and of promoting women's issues. She was the first female to be accepted by Jordanian Press Association as a registered journalist and was elected to the ten-member Jordanian Press Council.

Moreover, the media has largely failed to cover the inequalities and problems specific to women. Owing to a lack of information and cultural attitudes, which are prevalent across the region, the demands of women are often perceived as being in violation of their traditional role. Indeed, the portrayal of women as mere consumers and commodities in the media has been criticized by many women activists, who demand increased participation of women in the media in order to ensure an impartial representation of women.

In 2002, the Arab Women and Media Forum, which drew delegations from various Arab countries, demonstrated that the key challenge for Arab women in the media was a society that still views working women negatively.

"Media discourse presents women first and foremost as dependants and relatives ... and their role as caring for poor exhausted men. In a situation of high unemployment women are seen as 'taking' jobs from men... When we raise issues, such as violence against women, we are accused of presenting a false and distorted image of women to the country and the rest of the world".

Source: Nawla Darwiche, founding member of the New Woman Research Centre in Egypt addressing the Conference on Women's Human Rights in the Middle East (London, 11 March 2000).



G

WOMEN IN NGOS AND OTHER SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS

There are no structural forces hindering the participation of women in the work of NGOs in almost all Arab countries. Rather, the overall political climate in the region restricts the effectiveness of the civil society, irrespective of the gender balance within NGOs. In fact, women in Arab countries play an active role in the civil society organizations, albeit with roles that are often limited to welfare and provision of services. In some countries, Governments put limitations on the establishment of women's unions, as in the case of the Bahrain, or keep a close eye on their activities when these are formed, as in the case of Egypt.

The situation in Lebanon constitutes a model for other countries to follow given the significant number of women organizations and of women involved in NGOs that focus on such diverse issues as the environment, development, children and the family, and poverty eradication. Similarly, in Palestine, women have been freely advocating for the rights and concerns of women through a number of organizations on various economic and social issues; and have been successful in disseminating their messages through their own print, radio and televised programmes.

H

CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this pamphlet is to present a succinct report on the state of the political and civic rights of Arab women. While the pamphlet provides some evidence of the progress made towards gender equality, women continue to face gender-based obstacles to full realization of their rights as equal participants in society. The need for change in women's status grows increasingly urgent as the demands for democratic reforms are felt across the Arab region.

Women organizations need to coordinate their efforts and overcome their differences, thereby forming a powerful front to lobby their Governments into drafting laws that benefit societies and that encourage men and women to work together as equal partners. Arab countries need to adopt radical strategies in order to provide a platform that fosters a certain level of representation of women in national decision-making.

Arab countries are encouraged to pursue the following:

- (a) Ensure high-level political commitment towards the increased participation of women in political and public life;
- (b) Ensure the meaningful participation of women in national decision-making processes by adopting practical strategies that go beyond the rhetoric of gender equality and mainstreaming;
- (c) Encourage the adoption of quota systems that promote the participation of women in national political decision-making, public institutions, local councils and municipalities, political parties and trade unions;
- (d) Prepare women to assume leadership positions through special training programmes and educational institutions;
- (e) Recognize the achievements and contributions of women in the Arab media and adopt mechanisms that promote their participation in the media.

PROFILE OF HODA SHA'RAWI,

Early pioneer of the feminist movement in Egypt (1879-1947)

Hoda Sha'rawi was an advocate of equality for women and was among the few women who joined the national resistance against the British occupation of Egypt. She served as the head of the first women's society in Egypt and was elected vice-president of the International Women's Association and president of the Arab Women's Association.

Her major achievements:

- ⇨ *Formed the Wafd Party's Central Committee on Women, which was in charge of supervising women's participation in the national movement at that time*
- ⇨ *Advocated the education of girls and equal opportunities for women in education and employment*
- ⇨ *Led the first women's demonstration in Egypt in 1919*
- ⇨ *Founded the Egyptian Women's Union in 1923*
- ⇨ *Presented the major problems facing Egyptian women during a conference in Paris in 1924*
- ⇨ *Played a prominent role in lobbying for a law that raised the age of marriage to 16 for girls and 18 for men in 1924*
- ⇨ *Advocated the opening of secondary schools for girls in 1924, leading to the opening of As-Saniyya Secondary School for girls; and advocated the admission of girls into university*
- ⇨ *Founded two magazines, namely, L'Egyptienne in French, 1925 and Al Misrya in Arabic, both specializing in women's issues*
- ⇨ *Selected vice president of the International Women's Association in 1937. Formed the Arab Women's Association in 1944 to discuss the Palestine issue, which is a source of pride for Arab women given that the Association was founded prior the League of Arab States*
- ⇨ *Represented Egypt in 1945, together with Mrs. Siza Nabarawi and Mrs. Esmat Assem, and called for the prevention of nuclear weapons, particularly in the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima*

Source:

Egypt State Information Service, "Women in Politics", which is available at: <http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Women/politics/>.



* This pamphlet has been prepared by the Social Statistics and Indicators Team under the supervision of Mr. Ahmed Hussein, Head of Statistics Coordination Unit and with the assistance of Ms. Nadine Shaar and Ms. Gheda Temsah. Special thanks go to Ms. Afamia Kaddour for preparing the first draft of this pamphlet and to Ms. Rania al-Jazairi from the Centre for Women at ESCWA for her valuable comments.