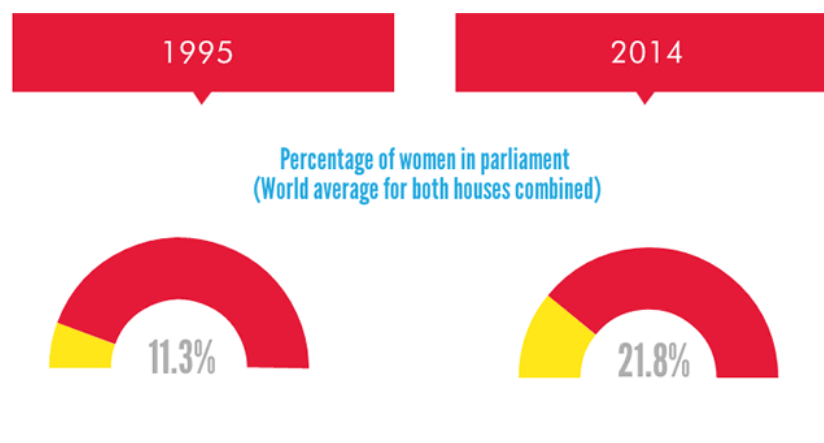


Women in politics: current trends and challenges in the Arab States

Agora Monthly Arab Digest- July 2014

In 2015, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women will carry out a review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action ¹adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) which remains the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing women's rights and a powerful source of guidance and inspiration. While no country has yet finished this agenda, the 20th anniversary of Beijing opens new opportunities to reconnect, regenerate commitment, charge up political will and mobilize the public.

The inclusion of women, youth and marginalized groups in political processes and institutions is key to ensure proper representation and to meet the expectations of the constituencies. As a broader range of citizens take part in the political process, institutions become more responsive to the needs of all citizens. Expanding women's political participation leads to tangible gains for democratic governance. Yet, discriminatory laws and practices hold women back, as do limits on education, income and time away from caregiving. While women have made inroads in many areas, at the current pace of change, we won't see gender parity in governments, parliaments or peace tables until the next century.



¹ <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/>

Note: 2014 reflects numbers as of 1 January².

In this digest we set out the key arguments for the importance of women's representation in democracies. We then assess the current trends in the Arab States as well as the obstacles and some strategies for increasing numerical representation.

I- Women in politics: current trends and challenges in Arab States

Inclusive and effective political institutions (parliament, constituent assemblies, and political parties) are critical to respond to citizen's expectations for voice, development and accountability: this requires a constant engagement with political actors on the ground, a high level of trust-building measures, responsiveness to quickly deliver on very technical demands and adaptability to volatile and highly fluid political environments .

"The Beijing anniversary is an opportunity to position gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment at the center of the post-2015 global agenda and make it a reality." [UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngucka](#)

Women in Arab parliaments: The years in review

Although a milestone has been reached in women's participation in parliament in 2012, with one in five MPs in the world being women, the statistic felt far short of the 50 per cent that women represent in the global population. IPU data shows that the percentage of women MPs is now at a record high of 21.8 per cent globally with numbers growing every year. There are also 46 countries with more than 30 per cent of women MPs in at least one chamber, up from 42 in January 2013. The trend, if it continues, would bode well for women's political participation in the future. In executive government, the percentage of women in ministerial posts has now reached 17.2 per cent, up from 16.1 per cent in 2008³.

Arab States Lead on Progress but Rely on Quotas

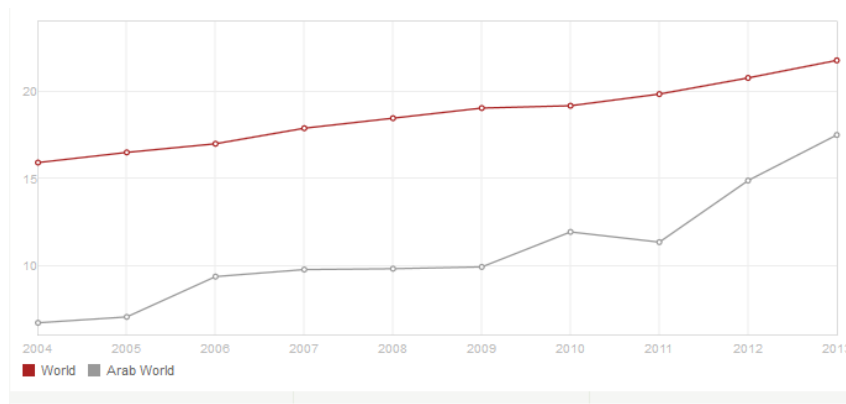
Although many measures have been taken by the majority of Arab countries to enhance women's representation in decision making positions, women's participation in public life and positions of power have not been achieved the desired level. Ten years ago, Arab States were at the bottom of the world table in terms of women's representation in parliament, however

² <http://beijing20.unwomen.org/en/infographic/decision-making>

³ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2014/3/progress-for-women-in-politics-but-glass-ceiling-remains-firm#sthash.51D29BKj.dpuf>

today they continue to make headway: 4.3% in 1995 to 9.5% in 2009 to 11.7% in 2010 and an all-time high in 2013 with approximately 18% of women representation in parliaments. The large variation in the percentages in the region reflects the differences between countries with quotas and those without them. Resistance by conservative groups to the participation of women in politics was visible in a number of the Arab States but did not necessarily translate into a decrease in the number of women politicians⁴. **Iraq** is one of the few countries in the Arab region to implement a legislated quota guaranteeing women at least 25 percent of the seats in the transitional assembly. While **Djibouti, Jordan, Morocco** and **Sudan** have reserved seats for women, political parties in Iraq are required to place a woman in every third position on its lists of candidates under the list Proportional Representation electoral system. This system will ensure that Iraq meets the requirements of the interim constitution of 2004 which states that women must comprise no less than one-quarter of the representatives in the assembly⁵.

Source: World Bank statistics on Women in Parliaments



Women Political Participation in the Arab States

An important measure of women development is their access to voice in the decision making sphere, as measured by their participation in public life and in professional associations. A common definition of political participation is as an activity intended to -or results to- influence the work of the government, either directly by influencing the policymakers or implementation of policies, or indirectly by influencing the selection of persons who make these policies.

It is essential that a fair representation of women occurs at all political and leadership levels including the executive branch and parliament (where all laws are formulated) to give women an equal voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives and choices. This will ensure more

⁴ <http://www.unspecial.org/2011/03/women-in-parliament-small-but-significant-gains/>

⁵ <http://aceproject.org>

practical and targeted policies dealing with women's issues to be implemented on the ground. Women must have a role in shaping the policies and strategies that affect their lives. Parliament is the key institutional forum where laws are formulated and where significant influence can be exerted in the policy making process therefore, a fair representation of women is essential in national parliaments to allow their voices and issues to be clearly heard to promote gender equality and ensure that the rights of women are respected and encoded in law⁶.

Progress and Opportunities

Significant national initiatives related to women empowerment have emerged, led by the women, political figures, the public and local communities. Some countries adopted some form of affirmative action, such as party quotas or reserving seats for women in parliament to ensure their political participation, as in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Palestine, Mauritania, Sudan, and Somalia. Other countries do not adopt this measure; consequently, the average percentage of female participation in the Arab legislative branches is one of the lowest in the world.

II- Why women still under represented and what are the obstacles they face in entering politics?

Over the past few decades, considerable efforts have been made to enhance women's range of opportunities in public life. Women yet remain under-represented in decision making bodies, both in elected and appointed positions. The comparatively low representation of women in elections is the result of many factors, namely but not limited to:

- National legal frameworks that do guarantee equality of access and opportunity to participate in elections in all areas, including as candidates;
- Electoral systems are also not necessarily gender neutral; however, proportional systems offer a greater incentive for parties to draw up a diversified list of candidates;
- Practical or cultural obstacles to women's participation.

For instance, many Arab parties tend to ignore women candidates on their lists based on the beliefs that women are not capable of winning seats in elections because they lack leadership skills, with the assumption that this might affect the party chances in winning elections. However, Political parties are still young in many countries of the Arab world and the majority of men in the Arab world do not rely on their parties, they largely use the community based

⁶ http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women_in_parliament.pdf#page=31

structures of personal family networks and tribal or regional affiliations to rally support among voters.

Furthermore and despite certain positive amendments to legislation in various Arab countries, legal discrimination still remains a significant obstacle to women's advancement. There are existing gaps and discrepancies between legislation, implementation and social practices in areas pertinent to the legal age of marriage, divorce, alimony, custody, visitation procedures, inheritance rights, female genital mutilation (FGM), and violence against women⁷.

A gap also exists between policy formulation and strategy implementation in many Arab countries due to lack of solid qualitative and quantitative data about women in the Arab world, lack of clear performance indicators for monitoring and evaluation of progress and results, budgetary limitations to implement programs, and lack of effective means to link the efforts of mainstreaming gender with other national policies and plans

III- Constitutional and parliamentary mechanisms: entry points & opportunities

There are a number of constitutional and parliamentary mechanisms and opportunities that can address the barriers that prevent women from participating in politics and create an enabling environment to promote equally effective participation of men and women in all governance institutions, including elected and appointed bodies.

For example, the new **Tunisian constitution** is ground-breaking in its provisions to assure women's equality, in explicitly committing to eliminate violence against women, in promoting women's assumption of positions of responsibility in all sectors, and in working towards parity in all elected bodies within the country. Such clear recognition of the importance of equality and of the state's responsibility to enable the realization of equality is rare in constitutions anywhere in the world.

Other mechanisms include Gender-sensitive/-responsive parliamentary working conditions and rules of procedures, Enacting and implementing gender equality legislation related to politics like the case of **Algeria**⁸ which now has approximately 32% women representation in the parliament. Article 2 of the 2012 electoral law, requires variable quotas of between 20% and 50% of the candidates for parliament to be women, depending on the number of seats in each electoral district. Ratifying international conventions which promote women's political empowerment, reaching out to civil society and political parties as well as using temporary

⁷ UNIFEM , Beijing +15, The Shadow Report, Madiha El Safty, <http://ngocswny.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/beijing-15-final-completed-version-to-new-york-with-cover-all-another-version.pdf>

⁸ <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=DZ>

special measures to name a few, have also been successful in promoting equal and meaningful women participation.

For more information and examples on mechanisms for increasing women representation in parliaments, please check the Agora June Brief- Enhancing women's representation in parliamentary institutions- The institutional and legal framework available at this [link](#)

Closing remarks

Global experiences so far denote that the process to ensure an equal and representative proportion of women in elected bodies encompasses a wide variety of legislative, executive, administrative and other regulatory instruments, policies and practices, such as outreach or support programmes; allocation and/or reallocation of resources as well as social customs and political reforms to back up these mechanisms so that, in the end, they will no longer be needed.

So, WHY women in politics? The positive impact of women in politics is undeniable. Kofi Annan noted, "Study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation Further, as Madeleine Albright has stated, the world is wasting a precious resource in the dramatic underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, often resulting in the exclusion of women's talents and skills in political life.

For more information, please visit AGORA the Portal for Parliamentary Development or contact Ms. Reem Askar, Arab States Facilitator at reem.askar@undp.org.

