

Women's Political Empowerment Promoted and Sustained in Arab States Seminar for French Speaking Women Parliamentarians

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I- Background

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 adopted 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 accomplished the set objectives in 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.

In this digest we briefly set out the key arguments for the importance of women's representation in democracies. We then reflect on the results and key points from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)/ French National Assembly (FNA) seminar for French speaking women MPs held in Paris during the week of September 22nd, 2014.

II- Women participation and Representation

It matters for the quality of democracy and social integration that all sections of society are represented and have a stake in the work of parliament, and that its members have equal

standing and an equal opportunity to contribute to its work. The importance of women's empowerment in the decision-making fora is crucial to the achievement of the gender equality and sustainable human development goals. Women's impact on policy increases as governance systems become more inclusive, democratic and violence-free. When women participate in politics, there are benefits for women, men, children, communities and nations. A clear finding from recent research indicates that women are overwhelmingly the main drivers of progress in gender equality in parliament. A minimum benchmark is set at 30 percent target for women in decision-making positions by the 1995 Beijing Platform. Since its mention in the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 to its inclusion as a target in Millennium Development Goals 3, the goal of reaching a critical mass of women in national legislatures around the world, which would mean having women in 1/3 of seats, has been the center pin of global efforts to achieve gender equality. As of today, women in national parliaments only account for 21.4 %.

The inclusion of women in decision-making processes fosters a legal, social and cultural environment favorable to greater gender equality and opportunities in economical and public life. Greater equality of chances and opportunities has a positive impact on the efficiency and growth, poverty reduction and human development. From the Charter of the United Nations to the UN General Assembly Resolution on Women and Political Participation in 2011 all highlighted the importance to promote and protect human rights and freedoms with no discrimination and ensure women participation in all fields. International conventions acknowledge that women leaders are more likely to represent the interests of women citizens, and that they will therefore introduce women's perspectives into policymaking and be able to achieve greater gains for women as a result.

III- Seminar for French Speaking Women Parliamentarians: Brief Synopsis

Despite some incremental progress, the percentage of women in national parliaments worldwide has now reached 21.9%. This figure is still far from the 30% as envisaged in the Beijing Platform, and more parity. In the Arab region, the rate is only 17.8%, despite the introduction of new quotas or constitutional provisions innovative.

UNDP organized in partnership with the French National Assembly a week of training for women parliamentarians in the Arab region which was held during the week of September 22nd, 2014. This new initiative, coordinated by the Bureau for Development Policy (Gender Team and Democratic Governance Group) for UNDP, intended to strengthen the technical capacity and knowledge of the women on the parliamentary institution and functions and to share with them the experience of FNA in the promotion of gender equality. Participants had the opportunity to meet with parliamentarians and senior officials of the French Assembly and the Senate, and

discussed among other things, the laws related to gender equality, strengthening the role of women, the recent legislation to combat domestic violence in France, and were able to compare national experiences.

This activity is part of UNDP's Strategic Plan 2014-2017, which assigns great importance to gender issues, especially the efficient and effective participation of women in decision making process and goes hand in hand with UNDP's new gender equality strategy for 2014-2017.

IV- Arab States Lead on Progress but Rely on Quotas and Constitutional Provisions

The Tunisian and Algerian Experiences

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 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 politicians¹.

Given the legal commitments of states and the practical necessity to produce de facto or substantive equality of women with men in more speedy and consistent manner, additional measures may be required. It is against this background that temporary special measures (TSMs), among other appropriate measures, can be effective in enhancing women's electoral and political participation. Gender quotas are a mechanism used to increase women's participation in politics and power sharing positions. Over the years, gender quotas have become increasingly popular as a means to promote the equal representation of women in politics. They exist in various shapes and sizes, ranging from voluntary party quotas to the official quota laws that are currently in place in many parliaments.

¹ <http://www.unspecial.org/2011/03/women-in-parliament-small-but-significant-gains/>

Algeria is one of the few countries in the Arab region to implement a legislated quota in the electoral law leading to a 32% women representation in the parliament, the highest in the Arab States. Article 2 of the 2012 Law for the Representation of Women 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. The law prescribes the following quotas in relation to the magnitude of the electoral constituencies: 20% for the constituencies with 4 seats; 30% for those with 5 or more seats; 35% for those with 14 or more seats; 40% for those with 32 or more seats; and 50% for the constituencies abroad. Article 3 states: 'The seats are assigned in function of the number of votes obtained by each list. The proportions fixed in Article 2 above are necessarily reserved to women candidates according to their position within the lists.' In addition, political parties can be awarded specific state funding according to the number of their women candidates elected at the national and sub-national levels (Article 7)².

The election result of 10 May 2012 is a considerable leap forward for women representation and participation in Algeria. A total of 145 women were elected to parliament out of a total of 462 delegates. That's almost a third of all the seats. In the last election in 2007, out of a total of 389 delegates only 31 women made it into parliament³.

During the 2012 legislative elections, political parties largely respected the women's quota requirements, nominating a total of 7700 women candidates, or approximately 31 per cent of the total number of candidates.

Following the social stir in **Tunisia**, the High Commission for the Achievement of the Objectives of the Revolution, Political Reforms and Democratic Transition was appointed and given the task to draft the rules for the election of a constitutional assembly. The result was the adoption of an electoral system of proportional representation in multimember constituencies (with up to ten seats per constituency). An astonishing radical quota system was adopted, the so-called 'zipper-system' which allowed for open and equal women political participation. As a result of the newly introduced legislation for parity and alternation provisions in candidate lists, which mandates that women represent 50 percent of candidates on party lists and that candidate names on party lists alternate by gender, about 5000 women candidates participated in the election. Sixty-seven seats were allocated to women in the National Constituent Assembly. Women headed only 7% of more than 1,500 candidate lists and only one woman was given the chance to lead a political party (Maya Jribi-PDP Party)

² <http://www.quotaproject.org/uid/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=DZ>

³ <http://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-the-algerian-womens-rights-activist-nadia-ait-zai-we-need-to-completely>

Article 16:

Candidates shall file their candidacy applications on the basis of parity between men and women. Lists shall be established in such a way to alternate between men and women. Lists that do not follow this principle shall only be admitted when the number of seats, in the relevant constituency, is odd.

There are also 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.

The new **Tunisian constitution** serves as a good example of the above. It is regarded as 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.

In Algeria, the women's organizations fought for a statutory quota for women. The **new constitution** calls for men and women to be treated equally before the law. Furthermore, Algeria has ratified the anti-discrimination convention CEDAW. Among other things, this deals with improving the political representation of women. One measure for the implementation of this convention was the extension of Article 31 of the Algerian constitution in 2008. Based on this, a quota for women was established in a law that came into force in January 2012. This law stipulates that Algerian women must be represented politically at all levels – local, regional and national.

V- Challenges and Way Ahead

On 1 May 2014 **Tunisia's National Constituent Assembly** (NCA) adopted a new electoral law by 132 votes to 11, with nine abstentions. The law's adoption is another milestone in the democratic transition process and the implementation of the new Constitution adopted on

27th January. The new law paves the way for organizing parliamentary and presidential elections to equip the country with its first permanent political institutions. As a step towards increasing female representation in politics, the law calls for gender parity through vertical alternation at the level of the electoral lists. As such, if the head of the list is a man, the alternate must be a woman.

The mechanisms to implement the gender provisions in the new constitution are subject to debate. Some parties argue for a horizontal alteration which includes placing women on alternating slots on the lists and imposes on political parties the obligation to also ensure that leadership positions on electoral lists in the different constituencies are also filled in an alternating manner between the genders while other groups promoted the vertical alteration which only ensures placing women on alternating slots on the lists under the argument that it is more feasible given current women representation in political parties. The absence of specific proactive approaches, such as horizontal integration, to get women to head party lists and increase their chances, may not lead to equal representation in the parliament⁴.

In **Algeria**, the quota is in itself an achievement. Now, for the first time, the law makes it compulsory for women to participate. Political parties in the last elections showed that they really were prepared to admit more women, in that women weren't just placed right at the bottom of the list; some at least were also positioned so that they had a real chance of getting elected. This political will is very significant. It has the potential for creating new, different relationships between men and women. Yet the challenge remaining is twofold: one, finding women candidates with the necessary qualifications and political experience to ensure effective participation and representation. Two, the intention is for the new parliament to pass constitutional reforms. But what will be in the new constitution? What status will be accorded to women's rights? What kind of system of government will result are still questions that need to be answered and addressed accordingly.

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

⁴ <http://www.constitutionnet.org/news/tunisia-new-election-law-and-consolidation-new-constitutional-order>

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 life⁵.

- For additional information and details on the obstacles and strategies for increasing numerical representation through constitutional and parliamentary mechanisms, you may access the Agora Issue Brief on [Enhancing women's representation in parliamentary institutions](#)- The institutional and legal framework.
- Additional information on [Women in politics: current trends and challenges in the Arab States](#) can also be accessed through the July Arab Digest.
- A separate digest on [Women in the new Tunisian Constitution](#) is also available.

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