

**United Nations**  
**Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA)**  
**Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)**  
**Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)**  
**Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)**  
**Expert Group Meeting on**  
**Equal participation of women and men in**  
**decision-making processes, with particular**  
**emphasis on political participation and leadership**  
**24 to 27 October 2005**

## **Women in Decision-Making in the Arab Region**

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**The United Nations**  
**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

In April 2003, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, the governing body of ESCWA, adopted a resolution establishing a Committee on Women, as one of its main subsidiary bodies. The resolution also requested the Executive Secretary of ESCWA to establish within its organizational structure a Center for Women and Gender Mainstreaming.<sup>1</sup> While attesting to the importance placed on gender issues by decision-makers in the region, the Arab world in general, and Arab women in particular, are far from realizing their full political rights of participation and representation.

### 1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

- One of the most important successful actions taken by Arab States in the area of public policy and legislative change has been, in general terms, the recognition that women have political rights. New constitutions have enshrined women's right to participate in politics and public affairs on the same footing as men, and laws have been enacted affirming that right and specifying that women have the right to stand as candidates for public office, to exercise these rights, and to be appointed to advisory assemblies and the like without discrimination. States in which those rights had previously been recognized have organized training courses designed to enable women to exercise them effectively. Most States have adopted a quota system for women in their national assemblies, and some, in addition, have instituted a positive discrimination mechanism for appointing women as members. These are temporary measures designed to enhance the political situation of women. Some States have recently adopted policy development plans aimed at addressing the issue of achieving a meaningful presence by women in decision-making processes.
- A point that is particularly noteworthy in this connection is that Arab States have implemented programmes aimed at encouraging women to exercise their political rights, including the right to stand as candidates at local and national elections, and Arab women have indeed been participating in such elections in growing numbers. In addition, more and more women are holding important positions that allow them to participate in public decision-making, whether as members of Governments, as members of legislative assemblies, as municipal councillors, as members of the judiciary, as members of the diplomatic corps, or even as advisors to high-level State authorities or permanent delegates or heads of mission at the United Nations.
- As a result, in most Arab States women are now present in most sectors. The list (which is not exclusive) includes, for example, the government sector (women occupy posts as cabinet ministers and directors of government departments and agencies), the judiciary (women serve as presiding magistrates and deputy public prosecutors), the education sector (women are university presidents and deans), and the banking sector (women chair boards of directors). In addition, they head departments and divisions of many organizations, sit on national policy development committees and, in growing numbers, occupy senior posts in political parties and trade unions. Women also serve on other committees of various kinds, including a committee established to develop and implement a national labour covenant, legal and legislative committees, a committee responsible for following up a study on the privatization of several public sectors, a committee to review complaints in connection with commercial transactions, and national committees with authority to

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<sup>1</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, 2003, op. cit. p. 68

assess scientific qualifications. Arab women are now, for the first time, holding various posts from which they were formerly excluded.

- Support for women's participation in decision-making processes has been forthcoming, in several States, in the form of experimental national mechanisms featuring a gender perspective with a view to enhancing participation by women in comprehensive national planning processes and more women in senior administrative posts in State institutions. There have been a number of pioneering experiments along these lines.

## 2. *Remaining obstacles, gaps and challenges*

- While participation by women in most sectors is undoubtedly increasing, in some Arab States they are still marginalized in decision-making centres. Consequently, despite the clear-cut gains that have been achieved in this area in Arab States generally, there are still various obstacles and difficulties. These include:
  - (a) A lack of effective commitment on the part of decision-makers to closing the gender gap in political life and decision-making: official rhetoric in support of equality and equal opportunity is not matched by practical action to that end;
  - (b) The socio-cultural heritage and stereotyping of the roles of both sexes in society;
  - (c) The small percentage of women in policy-making posts, and the fact that women are not extensively represented in political parties, especially their upper echelons, and the fact that political parties tend to be biased against women;
  - (d) The application of a quota system in favour of women, even as a temporary measure, continues to encounter difficulties and challenges;
  - (e) Women continue to be excluded from certain posts;
  - (f) High illiteracy rates among women in the high populated states.
- Arab States generally have committed to greater support for women's efforts to accede to decision-making posts and enhanced participation by instituting proportional representation and quota systems. They have also committed to creating a social culture receptive to the presence of women in senior posts, enforcing constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality for women, greater participation by women in paid employment and resource ownership and management with a view to enhancing their impact on decision-making, amending electoral laws, upgrading the cultural and political situation of women, raising their awareness of the importance of their role in decision-making centres, eliminating factionalism and altering the traditional political mentality.

The constitutions of most Arab countries recognize women's equal civil and political rights to those of men. Nevertheless, the mere existence of constitutional guarantees ensuring the rights of women do not necessarily translate into women realizing their full civic, legal, and political rights. Women's staggeringly low representation in the decision-making circles in many Arab countries has rendered women's constitutional rights largely ineffective in ensuring her participation in political life.

The patriarchal structure of political and social life in most Arab countries has immediate relevance to our understanding of the socio-economic determinants of development in general, and to women's well-being and rights in particular. Unlike institutionalized systems of government, where the individual's rights are guaranteed as a citizen regardless of gender, in most developing countries among which the Arab world is no exception, the political, social, economic and legal realms of life are largely controlled through informal and personalized networks, ultimately controlled by men. The patriarchal organization of Arab societies makes the study of constitutional guarantees for women's rights, well-being, and political representation and participation all the more sensitive in many Arab countries. Women in the Arab world have been largely marginalized from the formal political arena. While their relatively poor educational level and high illiteracy rates worked against their political representation in the past, their educational advancement over the last two decades has not witnessed a simultaneous increase in their political representation and involvement in the formal realm of government. In fact, Arab countries that have the highest rates of female educational attainment in the region are among the countries with the poorest representation of women in public office.

Today, in 2003, two Arab countries still deny their women the right to vote and run for public office. Since 1990, Oman, Palestine, and Qatar gave women the right to vote and representation, bringing the total number of Arab countries who have guaranteed women's suffrage rights to 20. Among the earliest countries to provide women their political rights were the Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Tunisia, with Djibouti the first Arab country to guarantee women's suffrage rights in 1946. By and large, most Arab countries had upheld such rights by the 1960s and early seventies.

### ***Women in parliament***

The relative longevity in realizing women's suffrage rights in most Arab countries has not been met with proper women representation in the respective parliaments of Arab states. Today, out of 16 Arab countries that have functioning parliaments and have given women the right to vote and run for public office, women's share of parliamentary seats does not exceed 4.1% on average, with Yemen recording a female representation of 0.3%, while Djibouti and Libya have no women at all in their parliaments. Out of the 13 Arab countries that have women in their parliaments, 7 have a female representation below the regional average, recording roughly 2% women representation in parliament. Sudan, Syria and Tunisia show the best records of female representation in parliament, listing 9.7%, 10.4%, and 11.5%, respectively.

### ***Women ministers***

Arab women's representation in ministerial and executive positions is equally low. In 1990, eight Arab countries had women ministers, Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Syria and Tunisia, ranging between one and two women ministers in each respective cabinet. In 2001, Yemen appointed a women minister to head the Ministry of State for Human Rights, and by 2003, Qatar named its first women minister for education and appointed a women as executive secretary of the Higher Council for Family Affairs. Oman also appointed its first women minister in 2003. Kuwait and Lebanon in 2005. While the trend is positive, women's

representation in cabinet positions in the Arab world remains extremely minimal, with women typically appointed to positions mostly in social affairs and less frequently in cultural ministries, but have remained excluded from what are known as core ministries such as, economy, foreign affairs, justice, the interior and trade. Most Arab countries are still a very long way away from seeing a woman prime minister or president instated.

### ***Women judges***

In the judiciary, several Arab countries (Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen) have women judges, albeit again at varying ratios to their male counterpart.<sup>2</sup> While Arab women judges, according to available data, on average represent less than 15% of total judges in their respective countries, in Morocco the data shows that 50% of all judges are women, again suggesting an excellent development trend as the case with women parliamentarians in this country. Egypt on the other hand has only recently appointed a women to its Supreme Constitutional Court, however, women are still not represented in the regular juridical system.

### ***Women's equal rights***

In 1979, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Discrimination in this instance has been defined as *“any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”*

Seventeen out of the 22 Arab countries are signatories to the Convention, with all but four of them (Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, and Syria) stating reservations on a number of articles within the Convention. Egypt is among the first Arab countries to ratify the Convention in 1981, followed by Iraq, Tunisia and Yemen in the mid-1980s, and Libya in 1989. Since the 1990s, 12 Arab countries have ratified CEDAW, with the most recent being Saudi Arabia (2000), Morocco (2001), Algeria (2002), and Syria (2003),.

To date, 2005, Oman, Qatar, Somalia, and Sudan, have not yet ratified CEDAW.

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<sup>2</sup> Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the ESCWA Region, 2003, op. cit. p. 70

## Political Participation of Arab Women (as of September 2005)



Country	Suffrage rights (year)	Lower or single House				Upper House or Senate				Women ministers
		Elections	Seats	Women	% W	Elections	Seats	Women	% W	
Algeria	1962	May-02	389	24	6.2	Dec-03	144	4	2.8	5
Bahrain	1973	Oct-02	40	0	0	Nov-02	40	6	15	2
Comoros	1956	Apr-04	33	1	3	—	—	—	—	0
Djibouti	1946	Jan-03	65	7	10.8	—	—	—	—	2
Egypt	1956	Nov-00	454	13	2.9	May-04	264	18	6.8	2
Iraq	1980	Jan-05	275	87	31.6	—	—	—	—	6
Jordan	1974	Jun-03	110	6	5.5	Nov-03	55	7	12.7	3
Kuwait	2005	Jul-03	65	0	0	—	—	—	—	1
Lebanon	1952	May-05	128	6	4.7	—	—	—	—	1
Libya	1964	Mar-97	760	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Mauritania	1961	Oct-01	81	3	3.7	Apr-02	56	3	5.4	1
Morocco	1963	Sep-02	325	35	10.8	Oct-03	270	3	1.1	2
Oman	2003	Oct-03	83	2	2.4	2004	58	9	15.5	4
Palestine	1996	2004	88	5	5.7	—	—	—	—	2
Qatar	2003	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Saudi Arabia	—	May-01	120	0	0	—	—	—	—	0
Somalia	1956	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Sudan	1964	Dec-00	360	35	9.7	—	—	—	—	1
Syria	1949-1953	Mar-03	250	30	12	—	—	—	—	2
Tunisia	1957-1959	Oct-04	189	43	22.8	—	—	—	—	3
United Arab Emirates	—	Feb-03	40	0	0	—	—	—	—	1
Yemen	1970	Apr-03	301	1	0.3	—	—	—	—	1
<b>Total</b>			<b>4156</b>	<b>298</b>	<b>7.2</b>		<b>887</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>43</b>