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Advancing Women's Political Participation

*Middle East and North Africa Consultation
on Gender Equality
& Political Empowerment*

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Tunis, Tunisia*

Background Information

Even though gender equality and women's empowerment are currently at the heart of the global agenda, the road ahead is still long and challenging. While international human rights mechanisms provide a valid framework to advance the protection of women and to reduce the gaps for inequality, more efforts are needed. The realm of politics has been considered as one of the most challenging spheres of the public life for women to enter and their participation in parliament is crucial for fair representation of women in society.

In this light, it is only timely to focus on an alternative policy agenda to address the root causes of inequality, including looking at the intersectionality of multiple inequalities and processes of discrimination. In addition, it is fundamental that the efforts and the core instruments from the regional organizations, including conventions, resolutions, legal instruments and programmatic agendas move beyond the identification of the causes and impediments towards the achievement of gender equality, but to the design and systematic implementation of gender responsive measures/mechanisms to guarantee equality and prevent gender based discrimination.

The Community of Democracies, from the moment of its inception in 2000, has been actively supporting activities and projects dedicated to women's empowerment and gender equality. The Warsaw Declaration, the founding document of the Community of Democracies, underlines that "Informed participation by all elements of society, men and women, in a country's economic and political life, including by persons belonging to minority groups, is fundamental to a vibrant and durable democracy." Democracy should transform power relations between men and women in such a manner that gender equality is promoted in terms of inclusiveness, participation, representativeness and accountability of democratic processes and institutions. The universal principle of equality and non-discrimination between women and men forms one of the major global commitments in the pursuit of gender equality in democracy building.

To support women's participation in politics, the Permanent Secretariat of the Community of Democracies (PSCD) implemented the project on "Advancing Women's Political Participation", funded by the Republic of Korea and organized in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and International IDEA. Through dialogue, the project provided an opportunity for participants from all over the world to discuss and compare the challenges and successes that women face in politics and look for ways to propel the idea of women's political participation forward. It consisted of five regional consultations organized in 2016-2017 in Strasbourg (France), Johannesburg (South Africa), Tunis (Tunisia), Bali (Indonesia) and Mexico City (Mexico).

The Regional Consultations on Gender Equality and Political Empowerment of Women served as platforms created to enhance a multilateral dialogue regarding the challenges and opportunities in the implementation of the legal frameworks, as well as the exchange of best practices to take specific actions to address the main issues related to the advancement of Gender Equality and the Political Participation of Women.

The project aims to produce a global and regional policy recommendations and contribute to the policy guidebook based on input collected from the five regional consultations. The guidebook is a part of the Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) and provides recommendations on how to efficiently advance women's political participation.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Consultation brought together politicians, state officials, civil society activists, academics, and members of international and regional organizations to discuss gender equality and strategies for advancing women's political empowerment in the MENA region.

This report consists of three sections of relevant experiences and lessons learned on gender equality and the political empowerment of women:

- Challenges to overcome in the region;
- Existing tools and mechanisms;
- Best practices and recommendations on how to effectively advance gender equality and women's political participation.

Women in the Arab States have made dramatic strides in terms of their political representation over the last two decades, rising from a regional average of only 3.3% in 1997 to 18.2% in 2017. Changes that have occurred in other regions of the world over this same time period, however, have still left the Arab States among those countries with the lowest levels of female political representation in the world. The region has only slightly more women in national parliaments on average than countries in the Pacific (15.0%) and trails the average share seen in Asia (19.7%), Sub-Saharan Africa (23.8%), Europe (27.5%), and the Americas (28.2%).

The highest share of women in parliament is in Tunisia (31.3%, ranking 42 in the world). Other countries in MENA with more than 20% female parliamentarians include Algeria (25.8%), Morocco (20.5%), the United Arab Emirates (20.0%), and Saudi Arabia (20.0%). The countries with the lowest percentage of women in parliament are Lebanon and Kuwait, with a mere 3.1%. Only eight countries in the world have lower share.¹

The 2016 Global Gender Gap Index measures progress on gender equality in economic participation, education, political participation, and health. According to this index, MENA countries as a group have the largest gender gap of any region, nearly 40%. This is borne out by the rankings of 144 showing that, with the exception of Israel at place 49, the remainder of states in the region cluster at the bottom of the list, like Algeria (120), the United Arab Emirates (124), Tunisia (126), Kuwait (128), Egypt (132), Jordan (134), and Lebanon (135).

¹ See <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif-arc.htm> and <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world-arc.htm>

PART I: Challenges to be overcome to advance women's political participation

The Consultation identified and discussed a number of challenges faced by women in the Middle East and North Africa in terms of political participation.

First, there has been limited engagement with international legal and policy mechanisms to support gender equality and women's empowerment. Many governments in the MENA region have signed and ratified the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but all have entered reservations to various articles in the treaty. Lawyers and judges in the region, further, lack training on international legal instruments dealing with women's rights, which presents a crucial barrier for ensuring that they can hold signatory governments accountable.

Participants also felt that the UN organizations should do more to convince states that cultural specificities should not be mobilized to undermine a universal understanding of human rights and gender equality. One example raised during the Consultation was the fact that Goal 5 of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has not been translated as 'Gender Equality.' Rather, the Arabic version refers to 'equality between men and women.' Participants noted that in the Arab region the word 'gender' is strongly rejected by various religious and community groups on the grounds that it is a Western term that is incompatible with local cultures. It can also be used to recognize homosexuality, which is unacceptable from a religious perspective.

Second, a gap between laws and practices remains. Even when legal change for gender equality is achieved, these norms may not be translated into the conduct of everyday life. This is not only true with concepts like 'gender,' but also understandings of 'freedom,' 'democracy,' 'citizenship,' and 'good governance.' In addition, few governments across the region have brought national laws in line with the international treaties they have signed. Indeed, some countries' constitutions – like the one in Jordan – do not even provide for the principle of equality between men and women and non-discrimination on the basis of sex.

Third, political Islam has, in many countries across the region, served to exclude women from the public and political spheres. At least partly due to this reason, political parties have hesitated to recruit and nominate women as political candidates, even among those women who are already party members. Sectarianism has similarly contributed to weak levels of women's political participation in Lebanon.

Fourth, the security situation in many states across the MENA region has deteriorated in recent years. In Libya, for example, this reality has affected freedom of movement, especially for women – who in turn lack public spaces for meeting and discussion. This context can further exacerbate challenges for women in securing necessary resources and training to run successfully for political office.

PART II: Existing mechanisms to advance women's political participation

A variety of mechanisms and actions at the global, regional, and national levels exist to support women's political participation in the MENA region.

International Treaties, Charters, and Declarations

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979 by the United Nations General Assembly, is an international bill of rights for women and a legally binding instrument obliging states to promote gender equality. At present, there are 189 states parties, making CEDAW an important tool for national and international advocates of gender equality. All African countries, with the exception of Sudan and Somalia, have ratified the Convention. Article 7 specifically addresses the elimination of gender discrimination in political and public life, stating:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

In 1997, the CEDAW Committee issued General Recommendation No. 23 to elaborate on Article 7, making a stronger case for “temporary special measures” (for example, gender quotas) to achieve equality of participation. The Recommendation states that the “formal removal of barriers and the introduction of temporary special measures to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in the public life of their societies are essential prerequisites to true equality in political life.” It also notes that states parties, political parties, and public officials should actively encourage women's full and effective participation, together with all other sectors of society.

The Beijing Platform for Action, signed unanimously by all UN member states at the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, lists Women in Power and Decision-Making among its twelve Strategic Objectives. Under this Objective, states commit to take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making, as well as to increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership. Paragraph 190a calls on governments to:

Commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.

Paragraph 191, in turns, urges political parties to:

- Consider examining party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women;
- Consider developing initiatives that allow women to participate fully in all internal policy-making structures and appointive and electoral nominating processes;
- Consider incorporating gender issues in their political agenda, taking measures to ensure that women can participate in the leadership of political parties on an equal basis with men.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, emphasizes the involvement of women in conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict reconstruction. Recognizing “the importance of [women’s] equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security,” Resolution 1325:

1. Urges Member States to ensure increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;
2. Encourages the Secretary-General to implement his strategic plan of action (A/49/587) calling for an increase in the participation of women at decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York in 2015, enumerate Gender Equality as Goal 5. The 2030 Agenda situates women’s rights within human rights and development frames, explaining that “ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, but it also crucial to accelerating sustainable development.”

Goal 5 includes among its targets to:

- Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life;
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels.

Regional Organizations

The League of Arab States (LAS), or the Arab League, seeks to improve relations between member states in the MENA region by coordinating collaboration to safeguard the affairs and interests of the Arab countries. Although the LAS was established in 1945, it was only in 2003 that the Arab Women Organization (AWO) was created under the umbrella of the Arab League. The impetus for its founding was the Cairo Declaration coming out of the First Arab Women Summit convened in Egypt in November 2000. The AWO structure consists of a Supreme Council composed of Arab First Ladies (or their representatives) and an Executive Board consisting of representatives from member states specializing in women's issues.

AWO priorities include enhancing women's political participation, among other goals. Its main tools and instruments for action include collecting and disseminating data regarding the status of Arab women, coordinating local and national efforts pertaining to women's issues, networking and cooperating with governmental and non-governmental actors, organizing seminars and workshops to coordinate joint Arab action on women's issues, and conducting research on Arab women's issues and their role in society. Participants in the Consultation were critical of what they saw as limited efforts on the part of the LAS for Arab women, however, which appeared to emerge from the priorities of member governments rather than civil society organizations working in the area of women's rights.

Following the promulgation of the 2030 Agenda, the LAS – together with UN Women and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) – established the Arab Task Force for the Integration of Gender Equality in the National Plans Related to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The ESCWA Centre for Women also partnered with UN Women and the Arab League to organize various capacity-building workshops for members of the Task Force.

PART III: Recommendations on how to effectively advance women's political participation

During the Consultation, participants working across the MENA region shared examples of best practices for effectively increasing women's political participation.

A common theme across the various presentations was the importance of gender quotas in increasing the share of women in elected positions across the region. In Morocco, an informal agreement among the political parties was formalized and increased in 2011, with women now being guaranteed sixty seats in parliament (slightly more than 15%). In 2016, 81 women gained seats in parliament, suggesting that quotas have also spilled over into greater opportunities for women to be elected to non-reserved seats as well.

Quotas have also worked well in Libya, where a 50% quota – involving both horizontal and vertical parity – applies to the small number of seats in parliament elected by proportional representation (PR). Although some critics suggest that the presence of a quota for party lists deters women from running as independent candidates in the non-PR portion of the electoral system, civil society groups are currently calling for an even stronger quota.

Political transitions in the region have created opportunities for quotas to be included in new constitutions and electoral laws, and in several of these countries, women are serving in transition governments and as cabinet ministers for the first time. Civil society organizations, however, have been largely excluded from political negotiations, despite the fact that they are well aware of the situation on the ground and the needs of the population.

In Tunisia, the Jasmine Revolution provided an opportunity soon after the fall of the regime for women to mobilize to remove the country's reservations to CEDAW. More recently, in 2016, the government established an advisory council called the Peer Council for Equality of Opportunities between Women and Men, which works to integrate a gender perspective into policy planning, programming, evaluation, and budgeting. One of its tasks is to develop quantitative and qualitative indicators related to the empowerment of women in the economic, social, cultural, and political fields.

Participants in the Consultation also offered a series of recommendations for future initiatives to empower women in the political sphere.

First, participants felt that further advocacy campaigns were needed to urge governments and political parties to promote women's political participation. The Women's Union in Bahrain is currently

engaged in a campaign along these lines. More work is needed, in particular, to secure women's meaningful participation in peace and security processes, including by engaging them in national and local peace dialogues and initiatives.

Second, national women's machineries across the MENA region require additional technical support and capacity-building so that they can better integrate international commitments into national development plans and strategies. Resources to facilitate the collection of sex-disaggregated statistics are also needed to monitor policy and program implementation, and thus gain a better sense of progress (or not) related to women's empowerment. Regional human rights organizations lack a strong gender focus and thus could similarly benefit from training in gender instruments and analysis.

Consultation participants also noted that additional financial resources from donors could help support various kinds of regional projects, especially the implementation of pilot projects and the exchange of experiences and lessons learned across the region.

Third, international, regional, and civil society mechanisms should be established to compel governments to implement Goal 5 and Goal 16 of the SDGs at both the country and local levels. Similar efforts are needed to translate provisions in CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action into plans and strategies at the municipal level.

Fourth, initiatives targeting men are particularly needed in order to promote gender equality in both the public and private spheres. The limited engagement of men in gender equality debates, some participants proposed, resulted in the lack of a genuine political will to enact change, as well as to commit adequate financial and human resources to gender equality reforms and programs.

Finally, more partnerships should be forged among various stakeholders in these debates – for example, among international and regional organizations, governments, and civil society – in order to better coordinate efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and the SDGs more broadly.

Conclusion

Women in the MENA region have made substantial progress in politics in recent years, but much more remains to be done to ensure that women can participate in political decision-making on equal terms with men. Political transitions occurring in the wake of the Arab Spring have created unprecedented opportunities for legal reform, including the writing of new constitutions and electoral laws that have enshrined women's right to participate in politics through gender quotas. More work is needed, however, to transform cultural preconceptions that women do not belong in public life, including engaging men to become allies in the fight for greater gender equality. National legislation also needs to be better aligned with international commitments made by governments across the region. Enhancing women's political participation, in turn, will help deepen democracy and spur sustainable development into the future.



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The Community of Democracies is an intergovernmental organization that drives the global democratic agenda through common action. Since its establishment in 2000, the Community has brought the world's democracies together to advance and promote the democratic principles and standards enshrined in the Warsaw Declaration Toward a Community of Democracies that was signed by 106 countries.

Building on the Warsaw Declaration, the Community's founding document that 106 countries signed in 2000, the Community of Democracies seeks to support democratic transition and consolidation worldwide by:

- Assisting societies in the development and strengthening of democratic institutions and values
- Identifying, alerting and responding, consistent with the UN Charter and the Warsaw Declaration to threats to democracy so as to assist states to remain on the path to democracy
- Supporting and defending civil society in all countries
- Advancing broad-based participation in democratic governance
- Giving a voice to those working peacefully for democracy in all countries



The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)/Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD)

Since its inception in 1995, International IDEA has made significant contributions to the body of available knowledge and applicable policy options for promoting democratic participation and representation of women in decision-making processes. Through its global and regional programmes, IDEA supports political reform processes, awareness raising and capacity building on institutionalizing gender equality and women's empowerment in electoral and constitution-building processes, and within political parties. The Inter-Regional Dialogue on Democracy (IRDD) was launched in April 2011 by seven Regional Organizations and International IDEA at the headquarters of the Organization of American States (OAS). Its primary objective is to offer and facilitate a platform for regional organizations to exchange as peers' knowledge and experiences in the application of democratic principles.

To date, eight regional organizations are participating in the IRDD and these include the African Union (AU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Council of Europe (CoE), the European Union (EU), the League of Arab States (LAS), the OAS, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). International IDEA acts as the facilitator of the IRDD and functions as its dedicated secretariat through the Inter-Regional Democracy Resource Centre.



United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

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UNDP works in nearly 170 countries and territories, helping to achieve the eradication of poverty, and the reduction of inequalities and exclusion. We help countries to develop policies, leadership skills, partnering abilities, institutional capabilities and build resilience in order to sustain development results. UNDP is working to strengthen new frameworks for development through integrated approach to supporting inclusive political processes in supporting and strengthening the capacities of political processes and institutions in order to improve citizen participation, voice and accountability. The advancement of women's equal participation and decision-making in political processes and institutions is one of the key priorities for UNDP across a variety of development contexts including stable, conflict/post conflict and transitional settings.



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