

## Regional Workshop Report

### Arab Women Political Participation: From Concept to Practice in Local Governance

June 23rd-24th 2006, Hilton Hotel, Algeria

#### The Workshop

##### I. Objective

CAWTAR/UJRC have co-organized this workshop, which is funded by the Middle East Program Initiative (MEPI), to revisit the intertwined issues of Arab women participation in the political arena, decision-making, and local governance. The workshop seeks to maintain a base to exchange views. In particular, it aims to encourage participants to discuss the relevance of these issues to their actual work, and to come out with strategies and recommendations to advocate women's participation in a constructive and practical way.

In this direction, CAWTAR and UJRC have invited participants to exchange views over the twodays of the workshop and to help answer the following questions:

- Why the political advances towards increasing the participation of citizens fail Arab women?
- Is it a problem of approach or practice?
- What issues should be unpacked to address the root causes behind women's low participation as both voters and candidates?
- How can we translate best practices into advocacy tools to enhance women's participation?
- What kind of networking tools the participants think effective in exchanging good experiences and building a mix of supportive groups to facilitate policy dialogue?
- How through networking we can better sensitize policy-makers?
- What are the best strategies to communicate information with the media as a powerful tool to promote positive images of women leadership in general and at the local level in particular?



#### Day 1 : June 23rd 2006

##### Panel I: Opening Session

###### Speakers

1. Dr. Soukeina Bouraoui, Executive Director of CAWTAR
2. Dr. Noara Gafaar, Minister of Woman and Family Affairs, Algeria

###### The Speeches

Dr. Bouraoui welcomed the Minister, the representatives of UNDP, UNFPA, UNIFEM and the participants. She illustrated the objective and the expected outcome of CAWTAR/ UJRC in organizing the regional workshop.

She referred to the importance of partnership and networking as entry points:

- To leverage efforts towards enhancement of women's effective participation in the political sphere and local governance.
- To build synergies and exchange good experiences and lessons in a systematic way.
- To mobilize a critical mass supportive of women's participation in the public domain



and in the political arena.

Her Excellency Dr. Gaffar welcomed the participants and appraised CAWTAR/UJRC for organizing the regional workshop as a considerable step towards fostering dialogue. The Minister's presentation was centered on the socio-political environment of Arab women participation in national development. It noted the openness of the official political discourse towards gender equality, and the growing efforts by NGOs for increasing women participation as fundamental issue lying at the heart of the question of freedoms in the Arab region. However, the main challenges are: the unsystematic messages which compound the participation of women in social development; and the negative so-

cial images towards Arab women's leadership. To restore an appropriate enabling legislative and institutional environment, the presentation referred to:

- Improving the other understanding of the Arab and Islamic culture.
- The responsibility of women leaders role to promote gender equality from different fronts.
- The operationalization of existing national plans through the adoption of the recommendations of key reports and studies on Arab women.
- Drawing lessons from the successful campaigns, such as those in Algeria, Morocco, Algeria, Bahrain and Kuwait which resulted in important gains for women in the legal and the political domains.

## Panel II: The Brain-Storming Meeting

### Session 1: The Perception of Women Participation in the Political Sphere, Decision-Making and Local Governance

#### Moderator

Amal Basha, Chairperson Sisters Human Rights Forum, Yemen

#### Speakers

1. **Dr. May A. Al-Dabbagh**, Revisiting the Discourse on Arab Women Political Participation, Research Fellow, Women and Leadership Program, Dubai School of Government
2. **Nada Alwadi**, Electoral Reforms and Women in Bahrain, Wasat Newspaper, Bahrain
3. **Fatiha Bahgdadi**, The Interface of Constitution and Personal Codes and Algerian Women Political Participation, Deputy Local Counselor, Algeria
4. **Dr. Mourad Mahmoudi**, Algerian Women Political Rights and the Institutional Environment for Their Enforcement, Ex-Dean of Law School, Algeria
5. **Gihan Abuzaid**, The Quota System in the Arab Region, the Director of NGOs Forum for Women in Development, Egypt

#### A. The Objective

The objective of the brain-storming meeting was to discuss the regional perception of women's participation in the political sphere, decision-making and local governance. The meeting was divided into two sessions. The first session covered the discourse through revisiting the perception of women political participation in key international reports on Arab women. That is UNIFEM Report, The Arab Women Progress 2004, and the

World Bank Report, Arab Women Participation in the Public Domain, 2004. The second session focused on CAWTAR 4th Arab Women Development Report on Arab Women and Decision-Making which is forthcoming in October 2006.



#### B. Key Issues Discussed in Session 1

- The importance of Arab women's participation in the political sphere.
- The appropriate socio-political environment.
- A common approach to enhance gender-equal institutional practices.
- The correlation between the political will and the enforcement of women's rights.
- The transformation of traditional gender roles.
- The role of civil society, the political parties and the media.
- Women in national elections.
- The quota system.

#### C. The Presentations

**Dr. Al-Dabbagh** presented the perception of Arab women political participation delineated by the UNIFEM and the World Bank reports. UNIFEM report explained the importance of the participation of women in the political domain. This participation mainly enables women to: influence pub-



lic policy, contribute to the management of the state of affairs, select political leaders in trade unions, political parties, NGOs, and to vote and to be elected. The report considers the articulation of the root causes behind women low participation as a half way to the solution. These causes are numerous and relate to: the highly unsecured political activities, the exploitation of women's votes and the intimidation of women candidates, the lack of support of women to undertake leading decision-making positions, the misperception of the political parties of women's political abilities, women's lack of awareness of their own rights, and the discriminatory cultural heritage. The World Bank report takes these factors into account in its analysis of the prevalent gender model in the region. It also describes how traditional gender roles reproduce themselves in policy-making, legislation and institutional practices and undermines women education and health strides. In sum, for the presenter Arab women's political participation can be described as slow and unorganized. To think about better solutions, the presenter opened the floor for discussion by raising the following questions:

- How to restore a conducive political environment?
- How to promote women issues as part of democratic institutional reforms?
- How the quota system can be an effective mechanism to attain a real change of women's political participation?

**Alwadi's presentation** focused on the experience of women in the national elections in Bahrain. The presentation demonstrated that the government political will is behind the increasing participation of Bahraini women in the two consecutive national and local elections in 2002 and 2006. Given that the experience of Bahraini women's political participation is still in its infancy, the outcome of these notable developments is yet to be seen. The presentation wrapped up by touching upon the main trends of Bahraini women's participation in the national elections:



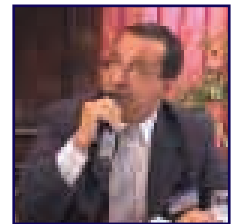
- The emergence of independent women candidates running for elections to overcome the lack of the political parties support.
- The actualization of institutional support programs to reinforce the capacities of women candidates, particularly that of Bahraini Women National Council.

**Baghadadi** focused on the Algerian legislative framework and its connection to women's ability to undertake political activities. The presentation touched upon the existing constitutional public rights and the personal codes private rights which should ideally allow Arab

women participation. In light of that, the presenter considered the absence of the enforcement mechanism is the primary challenge and impacts the ability of women to:

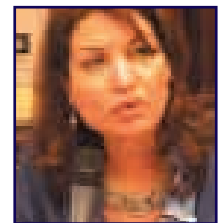
- Fully enjoy their constitutional rights.
- Maintain their work-life balance.
- Protect themselves from criminal acts such as sexual violence and intimidation.

**Mourad's** presentation focused on Algerian women legislatively accorded political rights. He discussed the right to vote and to be elected, the right to strike, the right to association and membership in political parties. He considered the main gaps are:



- The lack of political campaigns to raise awareness among women of their rights.
- Lack of capacities for women in political parties, civil society organizations, and trade unions to exercise these rights.

**Abuzaid** focused on the quota system in the context of the geopolitical environment of the Arab region. Rather than generally understood as a temporary solution, the presenter supported the quota as an important gain. She considers the ambivalence towards the quota is largely relating to the way in which it is applied. First, the top-down approach in the adoption of the prevalent two types of the quota in the region (the voluntary political parties' quota and the reserved seats). Secondly, the limitedness of the period of time for testing their effectiveness. In order the quota to actually serve its ends, the presenter recommended the followings:



- Maintain women's visibility in the public sphere and decision-making process.
- Reinforce women capacities to effectively participate in political parties.
- Sensitize women MPs to serve as mentors for one another.
- Raise the support of influential institutions including the media, religious authorities, and prominent political parties.
- Promote the application of quota if undertaken in parallel to additional efforts to prepare society for the political change.
- Focus on the gender quota which is only recently backed by NGOs. This is mainly due to its proven success in the developed parts of the world.

## Session 2: Arab Women and Decision-Making: A Recap of CAWTAR 4th Arab Women Development Report

### Moderator

**Dr. Mukhtar Alharras**, University of Mohamed V, Morocco



### Speaker

**Dr. Nadir Said**, CAWTAR report on Arab Women and Decision-Making Birzeit University, Regional Coordinator of the Report

### Rapporteur

**Dr. May A. Al-Dabbagh**, Research Fellow, Women and Leadership Program, Dubai School of Government

### A. Key Issues raised in session 2

- Women participation in the public sphere and in different contexts.
- The suitable approach to tackle women participation.
- The policy gap due to the absence of gender-disaggregated data.

### B. Presentation

**Dr. Said** presented CAWTAR report on Arab Women and Decision-Making. The report departs from a "deconstruction" approach to assess the current discourse on the concept of 'participation' in both the political and economic spheres and to demonstrate the interchangeable use of this concept. Especially, different perceptions in most of the times are induced to serve specific political interests while they entail serious connotation to women's access to decision-making processes. The report also moves beyond the classic approaches adopted by other reports and broadens the scope focus on different types of participation in the private and the public realms. It attempts to present an argument to the perceived dichotomy between these two domains by demonstrating that women participation at each of these levels implicates the other. This mainly through utilizing the 'spider web' model, through which the report opens different ends to examine:

- Women own relations with their bodies;
- The dynamics of power relations in the family, the community or tribes and the public sphere.
- These conditions and the ability of both men and

women's participation in the intermingled global and national policies and the resulting power structures and relations in formal institutions, the market, traditional institutions and the society at large.

### Main Recommendations of the Brain-Storming Meeting

The participants had discussed several issues and came out of the following recommendations:

#### 1. Research

- Develop a research index for Arab women's participation in the political sphere and decision-making.
- Structure a comprehensive conceptual framework for comparison, analysis and recommendations to address the root-causes of problems of women's participation in both the private/and public spheres as interlinked domains.
- Focus on socio-economic issues which impact equitable practices in the political realm.
- Compile gender-disaggregated data to measure impact of women's participation in the political domain, decision-making process and local governance.
- Specific issues in need of further research:
  - i-Arab women in the political parties.
  - ii-The relevance of the international gender-quota to the Arab region.
  - iii-The role of civil society in democratic institutional reforms which particular emphasis on women participation therein.
  - iv-The assessment of women performance at the local level through using local development approach.

#### 2. Capacity-Building and Training

- Reinforce the institutional implementation capacities to design suitable policies and programs through use of existing reports and successful experiences. This includes women's leadership programs; women members of political parties; women's parliamentarians and councilors.
- Enhance the institutional implementation capacities through knowledge and training on gender-equal practices as a strategy to enforce women's accorded rights in the constitution and national legislation.
- Organize training programs which bring together political parties, women activists and electoral candidates and the media to tackle challenges facing women candidacy and their management of public debates.

### 3. Advocacy

- Empower women and their communities through political awareness programs.
- Prepare advocacy tools to better approach decision-makers. These tools include policy briefs, radio programs and newspapers, and polling surveys.
- Open opportunities for policy-dialogue with decision-makers through workshops and roundtables.
- Mobilize research centers specialized on women

political participation to disseminate their research findings to political parties, the media and civil society organizations.

- Forge networks among active institutions focusing on women empowerment in the political sphere to exchange information, adopt common issues of concern and strategize local awareness campaign specially during election time and other key political developments such as legislative reforms.

## Panel III: The Brain-Storming Meeting

### Moderator:

**Dr. Adila Abusharaf**, The Regional Coordinator of CAWTAR's Project on Arab Women and

Local Governance

### Speakers

1. Faycal Ben Halilou, Gustantina Local Councils Association, Algeria
2. Ali Sawi, Barlaman Organization
3. Saneem Ben Abdouhllah, Safakis University, Tunisia
4. Henda Gafsi, Urban Governance and Development Program
5. Hafidha Khadhraoui, Kef Federation for Rural Development, Tunisia
6. Amal Basha, Chairperson of Sisters Human Rights Forum, Yemen



### A. The Objective of the Best-Practices and Mechanisms Panel

The objective of the best-practices and mechanisms panel is to present papers commissioned by CAWTAR and supported by MEPI in the framework of the Center's project on Arab Women and Local Governance. The participants were expected to reflect on the usefulness of these practices to their actual work and to enrich the discussion by providing any practices which have not been covered by the presented studies.

### B. Key Best-Practices and Lessons Learned from Panel III

- Abrogation of the Agency System in Algeria
- The case of Egyptian women parliamentarians who were elected by socially difficult constituencies •

The constituencies committees (consisting development organizations, women groups, as well as individuals) which are informal bodies but effective in responding to the demands of citizens in Tunisia.

- The strategies of the development projects focusing on intra-cities cooperation and rural development and targeting rural women, communal livelihoods and local administration.
- National and local campaigns and wide media coverage of a women leadership and political activities in Yemen.

### C. Presentations

Benhililou emphasized that the local level is key terrain for building capacities of women to effectively participate in the political sphere and for maintaining their contacts with their constituencies. The presentation considered:

- The abrogation of the 'agency' system which marred women from undertaking their role as autonomous citizens can be considered as a best practices.
- The totality of experiences and efforts which revolved around the modification of Algerian legislation to accord women their rights to vote and to be elected should be documented.

**Sawi's** presentation called upon capturing the momentum and look at the changes in the political arena which implicate women participation. Firstly, he considered the Egyptian women parliamentarians representing socially conservative and difficult rural areas, as a positive indication of social development. Second, he called upon addressing the problems of policy creation of parallel systems of governance with no clear ministerial mandate



such as the division of cities into old and new ones. He recommended:

- Revisit the national electoral system to expose the weaknesses that compromise women candidacy and right to vote.
- Promote structural changes of the electoral system (including the introduction of the use of gender-sensitive electoral lists).
- Address the problem of financing women electoral campaigns through seeking private sector support.
- Focus on the relationship between the media and women candidates.
- Using training and role modeling to mentor women to utilize the political opportunities available to them.

**Ben Abdallah** presented the enabling factors behind the present status of Tunisian women in the political scene. These factors include: favorable laws, free education, positive discrimination mechanisms, and reproductive health programs. He noted the good experience of constituencies committees (consisting development organizations, women groups, as well as individuals) which are informal bodies but effective in serving the demands of constituencies. He raised the following issues as challenges which need to be looked at:

- Designation of social files to women in local councils
- Absence of women in rural councils
- Social resistance to women's lead of key local administrations.

**Gafsi** presented the strategies of the Urban Governance Program, an international program initiated by UNDP, World Bank and CNUEH and sponsored by several European countries. The program in the region covers Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, and Tunisia. Its main objective is to build the capacities of cities and urban councils in the field of: poverty reduction, gender mainstreaming and environmental protection. It targets the engagement of the youth and women in the cities administration. It provides technical assistance in strategic planning and mainstreaming gender. Its main advocacy tools are documentaries and surveys. This is in order to reinforce inter-cities collaboration and programs on the management of city resources, and promotion of citizenship and gender equity. The main lessons learned from the Governance program experience are:

- Enforcement of the concept of a city for all and
- The technical support of women in localities
- The viability of the collaboration with elected wom-

en in the city councils.

**Khadroui** presented activities of Kef, a federation mandated with development of rural areas in Tunisia. The foundation focuses among others on literacy programs, poverty-reduction through income-generation, and family planning. The lessons learned from Kef's experience are:

- Focus on improving the livelihoods of rural community
- Use suitable time to encourage women to attend meetings to discuss their actual daily needs and how they do see the impact of the national plans of development on their own lives and families
- Synthesize men to encourage women to attend these meetings.

**Basha** focused on how the unity of Yemen downplayed women participation.

The existing challenges in the political arena are: the dominance of conservative Islamic views over the national political environment, the barriers created by the amendments of electoral laws, and the evasiveness of political parties. She noted the success of political campaigns and the media coverage of women political activities which supported their entrance to national elections and the parliament. Her main recommendations are:

- The amendment of electoral and political parties' legislation.
- More pressure by the civil society to raise the percentage of government proposed quota of 15% to 30% D. Recommendations of Best Practices Panel
- A broader approach to local governance through considering community livelihoods and local development
- Diversify campaigns and strategies to limit the regression of women's participation and entrance into national and local election campaigns
- Monitor policy changes of governance structure
- Reinforce the capacities of women leaders and voters to effectively participate in national elections and other political activities
- Train women in cities, municipalities and other localities to effectively deliver services to their constituencies
- Gender mainstreaming of local development plans

## Day 2 : June 24th 2006

### Benefiting from Mechanisms and Best Practices

#### Panel 3: Networking

The objective of this panel was to focus on networking mechanisms to maximize the use of good experiences and best practices and to enhance policy dialogue.

**Moderator:** Dr, Ali Sawi

**Speaker:** Dr. Bouraoui

##### Presentation:

- Dr. Sawi recapped Day 1 discussion of conceptual problems, challenges and mechanisms.
- Dr. Bouraoui briefed participants on CAWTAR's compendium of best practices which intends to benchmark what a best practice and to compile a number of good experiences to consider their replications by different national programs across the Arab region. She also referred to CAWTAR's multi-media website on Arab women and Local Governance and called upon participants to contribute to the compendium.

##### A. The Small Groups Recommendations

The participants broke into two groups: Group one focused on networking mechanisms and Group 2 on using networking to encourage policy dialogue. The main recommendations of these groups are:

##### Networking Mechanisms to Exchange Information

1. Systematic electronic exchange of information about key development, events and strategies through serve-list and e-forums
2. Meetings and regional workshops to disseminate research findings
3. Contribute to national organizations activities by sending papers for presentation in events organized
4. Mobilize committed specialized experts and organizations to update information about the national context of research and training in their respective countries.
5. A quarterly electronic newsletter in which partners

broadcast their ongoing activities and areas of interest.

##### Networking and Policy Dialogue:

1. Engage NGOs, political parties, trade unions, media agencies, traditional leaders as key groups in influencing policies while they can also be considered as target groups.
2. Influencing policy process should be considered in short, medium and long term. In that it is important to study the actual role of civil society, understand development approaches and mechanisms, delineate the role of women and capitalize on it.
3. Understand the mentality of decision-makers and identify their priorities, use scientific data to influence policy and target young decision-makers.
4. Utilize the stock of knowledge produced by international and regional reports to integrate women issues as part and parcel of development issues.
5. Define decision-makers to be targeted national government, women associations and institutions, local councils and administration in urban and rural areas, local administrators, elected councils and local communities.
6. Train the media and active players in trade unions, women associations and NGOs on: gender equity, use of best practices in the field of institutional reforms.
7. Use updated statistics as advocacy tools and monitor official commitment to international women conventions.
8. Use policy briefs and other innovative tools such as arts theatres cinema caricature to raise social awareness.
9. Capitalize on the media and produce newsletters, CD ROMs, and documentaries on experiences of active institutions...

#### Panel 4: The Media

##### Session 1: Promoting Women Leadership: Findings of CAWTAR's 3rd

Arab Women Development Reports on Arab Women and the Media,

**Ms. Atidel Mejbri**, Officer in Charge of CAWTAR's Media and Communication Unit

##### A. Presentation

Atidel Mejbri presented 3rd AWDR on Arab Women and the Media: an overview of media studies conducted between 1995-2005. The presentation highlighted the contribution and the problematic of Arab media research which as of yet deal with women as a subject rather than an actor. She considered the limited media coverage of

women role relates to the challenges facing women as media staff whom are in fact discriminated against in terms of responsibilities and opportunities. The report observed that media prioritise political issues. However it is only in terms of official news, and the research assessed by the report only lip-served the question of women participation in decision-making and the political sphere. With reference to women's role as political leaders, the report indicated that despite the increase of women leaders the negative images of women role persists. As a result, the presenter considered the following as the main hurdles when it comes to the position of media towards women leadership:

- The dearth of Arab media coverage of the achievements of women political leaders.
- The limited media access and strategic use of ICT.
- The limited public work of media staff in trade unions and popular campaigns.
- The unsuitable socio- political environment of the media production.
- The absence of women in leading positions in the media industry.
- The lack of attention of women participation in decision-making inside and outside the media domain.

## B. Key Remarks

- The "Gulfization" of Arab media and its influence on social values.
- The role of the translated media and the imaging of women to the west.
- Credibility of statistics available to the media.

## Session 2: The Media and Women in Local Governance

### A. Presentation

Alawadi presentation focused on the experience of Baharaini women and the imaging of women candidates in the written press. According to the presenter, the main problems behind the fuzziness of media support relate to:



- The official data is the only source for journalists.
- Women elections are not yet a media priority.

**Moursi and Sabra** focused on the mechanisms for the media to support women in local governance. In that the presenters raised the following issues:

- Reinforcing the capacities of women to deal with the media.
- A unified vision and agenda for NGOS, associations, trade unions and the media in adopting this issue.
- The media staff and journalists to keep abreast of recent development in this domain.
- Integrate media in development programs and agenda, field studies and polling surveys to identify conditions of women in local governance.
- Use of simple language,
- Focus the contents of advocacy tools used by the media. Recommendations
- Importance of media staff to keep abreast of women issues .
- Maintain partnership among media and other influential political players such as women leaders, civil society, decision-makers, and political parties.
- Mainstream media as a component of development programs.
- Encourage specialization of journalists in the field of local governance and women participation.
- Introduce concept of gender in media and journalism colleges and universities.

الشبكة المدنية العربية للإصلاح الديمقراطي (إصلاح)  
Arab Civil Network for Democratic Reform (ISLAH)

المنسق العام: هاني الخوراني (hhourani@ujrc-jordan.org)

المديرة التنفيذية: د. مي الطاهر (maltaher@ujrc-jordan.org)

المقر الدوري: مركز الأردن الجديد للدراسات

هاتف: ٤/٩٤٠٦٣١ عمان ١١١٩٤ الأردن، فاكس: ٦٥٥٣٣١١٨ +٩٦٢

ص.ب: ٩٤٠٦٣١ عمان ١١١٩٤ الأردن، E-mail: acson@ujrc-jordan.org