

## United Nations Development Programme

Parliamentary Development Initiative in the Arab Region (PDIAR)

GPPS - POGAR



Regional Seminar on

### Women in Arab Parliaments: Progress, Stagnation or Regression?

Beirut, Lebanon. 9-10 July 2008.

The seminar was organized in the framework of the GPPS-POGAR Parliamentary Development Initiative in the Arab Region as part of its continuous efforts to strengthen women political participation by increasing and strengthening their representation in parliament. It was attended by over 50 Arab and international participants including members of parliaments, women candidates in recent elections, representatives of political parties and civil society organizations, in addition to experts and practitioners from over a dozen countries. The seminar was convened in Beirut, Lebanon on July 9-10, 2008, shortly after the political tensions started to dissipate and the country began to work towards setting the foundations for long-term stability, namely through an electoral law which guarantees fair representation of the Lebanese population including women.

Over a two-day period, and with a rather innovative and ambitious agenda at hand, this regional gathering provided a unique opportunity to analyze the issue of women's representation in Arab parliaments through an in depth review and comparison of the last two parliamentary elections in 11 Arab countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Yemen. In an attempt to answer the question "progress, stagnation or regression?" the discussions relied both on factual information and on personal testimonials of women who contested in recent elections and either won or did not win a seat in parliament.

The seminar started by exploring the international trends and the progress that women have achieved in accessing national parliaments over the past few years. An expert from IPU provided a detailed overview and analysis of the global trends and explained that the recent significant progress in the numbers of women in world parliaments is moving towards stagnation unless new avenues are explored, initiatives taken and renewed efforts



made. She highlighted a number of factors including electoral systems reform, campaign support, political will, and work towards changing the mentalities.

These factors were well illustrated in subsequent presentations of the cases of Rwanda and Belgium. The MP from Rwanda (where women represent 48% of MPs) emphasized the important role that the political parties have played, the main opportunities that women seized and the obstacles they have had to face in the post conflict reconstruction phase. The experience of Belgium offered an interesting example of progressive quotas as a necessary temporary measure to alter the status quo and raise awareness about the need to translate the principles of equality and fairness in concrete policies that ensure gender equality and inclusiveness of parliaments and other government institutions.

Participants then moved to examining the Arab regional trends, through a comparative paper commissioned by UNDP which reviewed the institutional and legal frameworks, the electoral systems, the role of political parties, affirmative measures taken, the number of women candidates and the nomination process, the electoral campaigns and the results in several Arab countries. It highly contributed to opening the debate in an

attempt to assess the reality and examine the options, mainly in light of the experiences of some countries like Iraq, Mauritania and the Palestinian territories where the evident progress of women in parliament is a direct consequence of the electoral system reform and the introduction of statutory quotas.

The following sessions were allocated to discussing the analytical papers and country case presentations, illustrated by personal testimonials of Arab women MPs and candidates. Motivated by a strong awareness of how alarming the situation is in the Arab States region, and with a high level of honesty and openness, more than 20 women from Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Yemen went over their personal experience with parties, elections and parliament. They spoke about how they ran for elections, the encouragement they received, the way they organized their campaigns and mobilized support, and the main obstacles they faced. This new approach to understanding the slow and complex struggle of Arab women towards political empowerment helped identify a number of patterns, common obstacles and shared concerns.

In addition to women's weak faith in women's ability to influence policies once elected, which came up in several testimonials, political parties appear to be among the most influential factors of women's success or failure in getting to parliament. Some interesting exceptions, such as the Labor Party in Algeria and the Islamic Action Front Party in Jordan, have played a key role in the success of their women candidates. Most parties in Morocco, Egypt Yemen, and most other countries are generally obstructive to women's political participation. Unless they are forced, by law as it was suggested, to open up to women members and facilitate their vertical mobility, political parties may remain mostly men-dominated grounds.

Electoral laws and quota systems were among the most hotly debated issues in this seminar. It is worth-noting that over the two-day discussions, initial disagreement about the usefulness and necessity of quotas slowly converged towards a quasi-consensus among most participants on quota systems as a necessary temporary mechanism to promote women's representation, help overcome social and traditional barriers, and set the ground for the political landscape and elected institutions to be

anchored in the principles of equality and participation.

The successive description and analysis of 11 countries' experiences enriched with personal case narration confirmed the diversity and complexity of Arab women's progress. Some factors, such as the rise of Islamist trends, were perceived as obstacles to women's progress, like in Kuwait, but viewed as pro-women and pro-equality by some participants from Morocco and Jordan.

During the last day, a roundtable discussion was dedicated to examining the electoral systems, political parties, and civil society and media as entry points to provoke change and help elect truly representative institutions. This session was marked by the presentation of concrete measures to promote women's access to elections and parliament. Highly detailed explanations of the impact of the proportional representation system with examples from the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria and Iraq, helped illustrate the "women-friendliness" of this system (the world average percentage in PR elected chambers is 18.3% as opposed to 13.8% in chambers using other electoral systems).

Political parties and civil society organizations were also depicted as key players in women's progress in politics. The session ended on a positive note and an agreement that efforts towards the political advancement of Arab women should rely on political will and an integrated approach which engages all key stakeholders.

The regional seminar was seen by most participants as a groundbreaking event that provided a platform of exchange of experiences and ideas between men and women on ways to advance women representation in Arab parliaments and explore means to overcome the obstacles hindering that. The participants stressed that future UNDP regional work should build on this platform of learning and exchange to support the launch of a regional policy dialog and an advocacy group on women's political participation and representation.

This event was also a timely occasion to present [iKnow Politics](#), the UNDP-UNIFEM-IPU-IDEA-NDI International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics, to an Arab audience in preparation of the launch of the Arabic version of the website in the fall of 2009.

For more information on the seminar you can contact [karima.el.korri@undp.org](mailto:karima.el.korri@undp.org)

Seminar documentation is available at: <http://www.arabparliaments.org/activities/details.asp?aid=151>