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## Arab Women and Political Development

By Rowaida Al Maaitah, Hadeel Al Maaitah,  
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### Abstract

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. The Arab region ranks the lowest in the world in terms of women's participation in parliaments. The objective of this paper is to examine the Political participation of women in the Arab countries and identify different challenges that impede Arab women participation in politics and decision making. Challenges include: cultural factors, the stereotyped image of women, women's low self-confidence, lack of coordination among women's organizations, effectiveness/efficiency of women empowerment programs, shortcomings in the institutional and legal frameworks, practices of political parties and election process, skepticism about the Agenda for Women empowerment, the process of development of Women empowerment strategies. Thus, challenges facing women in politics are immense. They require the consolidation of all efforts with great belief in women's capabilities as human beings who are able to lead and shoulder the responsibility in the building of their nations.

*Keywords:* Arab women in politics, Arab women and equality, Arab women in development

### Setting the Scene at the Global Level:

During the last decades, the world has witnessed special international attention to women's issues, and devoted 1975 as the International Year for Women. The year of 1975 laid the groundwork for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) during the first international conference on women held in Mexico in 1979<sup>2</sup>. The Mexico conference was followed by other main significant international conferences on women held in Copenhagen (1980), Nairobi (1985)<sup>3</sup>. The pace of the attention to women's issues has accelerated in the beginning of

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<sup>2</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Women in Parliament: beyond numbers*, (Stockholm, Sweden, IDEA, 2005).  
[http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women\\_in\\_parliament.pdf#page=31](http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women_in_parliament.pdf#page=31)

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). *Progress of Arab Women*, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004). And a report Forwarded to CEDAW Committee on Shadow NGO Report to CEDAW Committee Jordan Evaluation of national policy, measures and actual facts on violence against women By a Group of NGOs July 2007, [http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/39\\_shadow\\_reports/Jordanian\\_SR\\_2.pdf](http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/39_shadow_reports/Jordanian_SR_2.pdf)

the nineties, with the growing international concern about the persistence of discrimination against women and the marginalization of their role, the consequent waste of energy, and the disruption of the fundamental forces in the overall development process.

The International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994 had the major impact on the emerging concern of gender issues. This was followed by the Beijing conference in 1995, which paved the way to strengthen women's participation in decision-making process and higher positions and endorsed the cumulative effect of the previous efforts of all conferences emphasizing on the states' accountability and commitment to adopt concrete plans of action that respond to Beijing's Platform for Action (BPFA)<sup>4</sup>.

In further pursuit of women's rights, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) in 2000 clearly specified the importance of women development in its Goal 3; "to promote gender equality and empowerment of women." Other MDG's have not explicitly stated gender as a target; however, women's issues are addressed implicitly in many areas of the MDG's such as poverty, education, and health<sup>5</sup>.

The Arab region was not in isolation from the global debate on women and human rights, where the political will has played a major role in enhancing Arab women development. Arab countries have witnessed major shifts over the past decade in political, economic, and social development.

The Arab region, comprises 22 states that are members of the Arab League, is defined by a complex set of issues, including the Arab-Israeli conflict and its repercussions, unstable economic conditions and trends, population-resource imbalances and environmental stress. The Arab Islamic cultural heritage and common Arabic language have preserved a unique character for the region and its peoples. Democratization in the Arab region remains a slow process which faces various setbacks including regional instability and conflict, economic imbalances, and the lack of freedom to engage in a meaningful democratic process. Such setbacks have not only hindered the democratization process, but have also delayed efforts aimed at promoting women's empowerment and equal participation in decision-making.

The Arab world is ranked by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) as the second-lowest region in the world on the Gender Empowerment Measure. The Arab 'freedom and democracy deficit' has gained much attention since the publication of the first Arab Human Development Report in 2002<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> UNIFEM , Beijing +15, The Shadow Report, Madiha El Safty, <http://ngocswny.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/beijing-15-final-completed-version-to-new-york-with-cover-all-another-version.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2005). Page 2

In addition, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) ranked the Arab region as the lowest region in terms women participation in parliaments<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the political status of Arab women is still a critical issue.

### **Empowerment and Development of Women in the Arab World**

Human development, empowerment of women, gender and development are concepts that have recently emerged and led to increased awareness to the need for integration of gender in sustainable development. At the international level, the concept of women empowerment is embedded in human rights treaties. Both respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms were incorporated in the United Nations Charter (1945) adopted by all member states, and the Declaration for Human Rights (1948)<sup>8</sup>. All Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) including Beijing (1995) focused on clear agenda for women empowerment and women's rights. The trend of women development throughout these conferences reflects early actions and interventions focusing on women's equality in development (the 'WID approach') particularly in terms of education, health, and employment which progressed later to institutionalization of mechanisms for the advancement of women<sup>9</sup>. As for the concept of women's empowerment, it has been long seen as a core of the protection of women's rights which is critical for achieving progress and national development.

Most Arab states have joined the international agreements and conventions on women, most notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals. Interestingly, the issue of women empowerment was one of the main themes of the Political Reform that was discussed during the Arab Summit in Tunisia in May 2004<sup>10</sup>. Arab leaders, for the first time, discussed the issue of advancing Arab women as an essential element of the political and economic development of the Arab world. In addition, Arab first Ladies have called for greater empowerment of women in the Arab World to enable them to play their vested role in serving and building their countries and communities on equal footing with their male partners. This emphasizes the fact that strong political will is a significant driving forces for women's development in the Arab countries.

The focus on state modernization of many Arab countries benefited the status of Arab women where many countries adopted new constitutions and charters explicitly incorporating women as equal citizens. Consequently, the investments of Arab countries

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<sup>7</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2010, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Program, Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2005: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2005) and Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Bairout, ESCWA, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> Nadia Halim Suliman, a paper presented on Political and Civil Participation of the Arab Women: An essential Constituent in Sustainable Development at the Third Arab Organization Conference in Tunis in 2010, (Cairo, AWO, 2010).

in education, health, job creation, and greater political rights have influenced women advancement and development. Progressive policies were adopted at the national levels especially by countries which were characterized by labor intensive and export oriented economy such as Tunisia and Morocco. These countries realized the importance of the need for social change through integration of women in the labor market to improve the economies of their countries, therefore women development has been started within the context of nation building<sup>11</sup>.

Furthermore, The League of Arab States established a Women Committee in the Secretariat of the League in the early seventies of the twentieth century and adopted the Arab Strategy for the Advancement of Women till the year 2000<sup>12</sup>. This was followed by approval of the Arab Cooperation program, where priorities for the advancement of Arab women were approved by the Arab ministerial high-level meeting in Jordan in 1996. The Arab ministerial high-level meeting focused on three main domains; the economic, political and social domains.

Many other Arab countries endorsed concrete policies to encourage women's participation in public life through new labor laws allowing women maternity leaves and child care benefits, the introduction of women's suffrage, In addition, most Arab countries established different forms of ministries and national institutions for women with the objective of achieving gender equity. Separate ministries for women's affairs were established like Palestine, Algeria, Egypt and Iraq. Other countries formed women's councils or committees as in Bahrain, Jordan and Lebanon, or a mix model of women's councils and ministries at the same time like Jordan and Egypt<sup>13</sup>.

The formulated councils or ministries have the responsibilities of planning, recommending policies and legislations, monitoring and coordinating activities for various women's issues as well as preparing the national reports to the UN<sup>14</sup>. In some cases these organizations are chaired by the first lady, as in Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Bahrain to directly influence decision-making. Therefore, many organizations have succeeded in initiating modifications in some laws, in lifting reservations on CEDAW, and in introducing general strategies/plans for a gender component in national plans. For example, to enhance the legal status of women in

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<sup>11</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Beirut, ESCWA, 2005) and Abu Zeid, Projects of Arab women empowerment: current status and future progress, Arab Women Organization, (Cairo, AWO, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Beirut, ESCWA, 2005) and United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Beirut, ESCWA, 2005) and Abu Zeid, Projects of Arab women empowerment: current status and future progress, Arab Women Organization, (Cairo, AWO, 2008).

Jordan, the Jordanian National Commission for Women's Affairs, in coordination with official women institutions and civil society organizations, prepared a list of demands to the members of the Fifteenth Parliament<sup>15</sup>.

The aim of this initiative was to strengthen the relationship and develop a dialogue with members of the parliament regarding empowerment issues regarding policies and legislation within the priorities of the National Strategy for Jordanian women to enhance women status in Jordan. As a result of this initiative, the parliament approved main legislations issues between the years 2004 – 2009. such as Law of Civil Pension rate, Municipalities law, the civil service system, Protection from Domestic Violence Act, Office of the Ombudsman, the Public Health Law, the Law on prevention of trafficking in human beings, the election law and others.

### **The Establishment of the Arab Women Organization (AWO)**

The Arab Women Organization (AWO) was established in 2003. It is an intergovernmental organization established under the umbrella of the League of Arab States in Egypt. It emerged from the Cairo Declaration issued by the First Arab Women Summit in Cairo in 2000, became a reality by announcing the establishment of the Arab Women Organization (AWO) in the Second Arab Women Summit in Jordan in 2002 in Jordan<sup>16</sup>. The regional strategy for the advancement of Arab women was also launched by her Majesty queen Rania Al Abdallah in that summit. The Higher Council of AWO includes Arab First Ladies or their representatives. Its presidency rotates biennially according to the alphabetical order in force at the League of Arab States.

These regional Summits create momentum and political will to advance women status in the Arab world. The Arab first ladies played a significant role in transforming women's rights and involvement in public life in the Arab world such as Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain and Unites Arab Emirates<sup>17</sup>. The AWO builds on ensuring greater Arab women's cooperation and integration as well as furthering inter-Arab cooperation and synchronizing the Arab stance on both regional and international arenas. The organization also aims to address women's issues in regional and international forums in order to raise awareness on the situation of Arab women.

AWO seeks to achieve women's empowerment through policies furthering legislation based on equality and competence, integrating women's issues within the priorities of comprehensive development schemes, raising grassroots awareness on issues pertaining to women and their ability to participate in decision-making on all levels to enhance their role within the family and society. Priority areas to enhance women development were identified in relation to eliminating illiteracy, health promotion, and awareness raising on environment and fighting the negative stereotypes of Arab

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<sup>15</sup> Jordanian National Commission for Women's Affairs, Jordan national report for *Beijing +15*, ( Amman: Jordan, 2009)

<sup>16</sup> Arab Women Organization, Strategy of women development in the Arab world, (Cairo: AWO, 2002) and United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Arab Women Organization, Strategy of women development in the Arab world, (Cairo: AWO, 2002).



women<sup>18</sup>. In addition, women participation in politics and decision making was highlighted as one of the main priority areas for women development.

In response to that, further Policies focusing on gender equality, especially with regard to women's rights, have been formulated and national strategies have been developed aiming at empowering women and addressing issues for the advancement of Arab women role in politics, economic, social development<sup>19</sup>. This created a huge demand on the local governments and international donors and non-governmental organizations to support activities targeting women programs and projects in several areas, particularly in the areas of education, women's health and poverty alleviation<sup>20</sup>. With time, more interest has been directed to Gender equality and the importance and nature of Arab women role in politics and decision making.

### **An Overview of Movement of Gender Equality in the Arab World:**

The movement of Gender equality in the Arab world is not well documented, but early signs were evident in the movement of girl's education in the nineteenth century which has started in the early twentieth century to involve active participation of women in national efforts and movement to attain national independence<sup>21</sup>. Further development on the women movement was witnessed during the 1950s and 60s, from being mainly the aspirations of progressive groups to being placed on the state's agenda as part of the overall national development plans during the period of independence of many Arab countries<sup>22</sup>.

Consequently, by the mid-1980s, both the discourse and the interventions by Arab countries have changed their strategy for women development after realizing the fact that change cannot be achieved through working with women alone but rather men and society as a whole must be equally responsible for introducing social and political change. The nineties witnessed the emerging of the concept of 'Gender Approach' where governments made commitments to mainstream gender equality in their institutions, policies and planning. Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of Arab states ratifying the CEDAW convention<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Arab Women Organization policies of the Arab Women Organization, (Cairo: AWO, 2003).

<sup>19</sup> Arab Women Organization, Report of the AWO first summit in Bahrain in 2006 on Evaluation of women empowerment in the Arab world, (Cairo: AWO, 2007) and Abu Zeid, Projects of Arab women empowerment: current status and future progress, Arab Women Organization, (Cairo, AWO, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Bairout, ESCWA, 2005) and United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Beirut, ESCWA, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004) and Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab

Following the Beijing Conference, governments began to develop strategies and national plans targeting women, as well as mainstreaming gender in national policies. Many National Councils for Women and other women institutions have been successful in mainstreaming gender in the national plans and introducing, to some extent, the gender-based analysis of budgets and engendered statistics. Other major achievement of the councils is the establishment of an office of Ombudsman to receive complaints by women e.g. Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain.

Another positive impact of the Beijing Conference is the increasing number and role of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGO's), as they started in the Arab world to take action in bringing about changes in many issues relevant to empowering women and increasing their involvement in decision-making, therefore, they became active partners in promoting gender equity<sup>24</sup>. Many Arab countries have made progressive steps towards changing legislation to enhance the equality of women in labor law, social security and introducing more protection to women against violence.

Throughout their participation in international conferences, Arab women shifted the nature of their participation from passive participants to active participants, influencing women's priorities based on political, social and economic domains. Meanwhile, more collaboration was witnessed at the national level in the Arab countries among non-governmental and governmental organizations as well as civil societies to prepare comprehensive national reports on the status of women in each country, and to coordinate national efforts for their participation in the international conferences.

### **Arab Women and Political Participation**

An important measure of women development is their access to voice in the decision making sphere, as measured by their participation in public life and in professional associations. A common definition of political participation is as an activity intended to - or result - to influence the work of the government, either directly by influencing the policy-makers or implementation of policies, or indirectly by influencing the selection of persons who make these policies<sup>25</sup>. Like many countries in the world, politics in the Arab world is identified with the 'public' sphere which men occupy and continue to dominate<sup>26</sup>.

The participation of women in politics and decision-making was one of the central and crucial areas of focus of the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995, reaffirmed in 2000 by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs also draw attention to the

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Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Beirut, ESCWA, 2005).

<sup>24</sup> For more information UNIFEM , Beijing +15, The Shadow Report, Madiha El Safty, <http://ngocswny.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/beijing-15-final-completed-version-to-new-york-with-cover-all-another-version.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Burns, Nancy, "Gender: Public Opinion and Political Action" In Ira Katznelson & Helen V. Milne., Political Science: State of the Discipline, 2002, ( London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002) Page 435.

<sup>26</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Women in Parliament: beyond numbers, (Stockholm, Sweden, IDEA, 2005). [http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women\\_in\\_parliament.pdf#page=31](http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women_in_parliament.pdf#page=31)



importance of women's empowerment and women's role in governance. Women's participation in public life and decision-making processes is critical for achieving women's empowerment, gender equality and other developmental goals<sup>27</sup>.

In the Tunis Declaration of the Arab Summit held in May 2004, Arab State leaders, for the first time in their Arab summit, expressed their commitment to enhance women's participation in the political, economic, social, and educational fields and reinforcing their rights and status in society<sup>28</sup>. Many Arab countries have introduced measures to improve the representation of women in parliament. These measures include the reform of the electoral system. In addition to the amendments of election laws, the most significant change that was made in some Arab countries was the introduction of a gender quota in parliament, with a number of seats reserved for women. Political parties have also introduced measures to promote women's representation in parliament.

Full participation of women at all levels of the decision making cycle and political life is considered a critical drive for achieving international benchmarks including<sup>29</sup>. (Al Maaitah, 2005, UNIFEM, 2004):

- “The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)
- “The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).”
- “UN Security council Resolution 1325 which highlights the importance of bringing gender perspectives to the center of all United Nations conflict prevention and resolution, peace-building , peacekeeping ,rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.
- “The twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled”women2000: Gender equality , development and peace for the twenty-first century, “which called for the full participation of women at all levels of decision-making in peace processes, peace keeping, and peace-building(United Nation2002)”

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<sup>27</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Women in Parliament: beyond numbers, (Stockholm, Sweden, IDEA, 2005).  
[http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women\\_in\\_parliament.pdf#page=31](http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women_in_parliament.pdf#page=31)

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Al Maaitah, Rowaida, a paper presented on Arab women and political participation at The Arab International Women's Forum 3rd Annual AIWF Conference At the Headquarters of the League of Arab States. Cairo, Egypt on "Women in the Arab World: Partners in the Community and on the World Stage", June, 6-9 2004 and United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

- The Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) identified gender equality and women's empowerment as central cross cutting goals that are essential in achieving the eight goals of the MDGs.

Arab countries have achieved progress in women's status, since the Beijing conference, albeit the variations in the different areas. It is essential that a fair representation of women occurs at all political and leadership levels including the executive branch and parliament (where all laws are formulated) to give women an equal voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives and choices. This will ensure more practical and targeted policies dealing with women's issues to be implemented on the ground. Women must have a role in shaping the policies and strategies that affect their lives.

Parliament is the key institutional forum where laws are formulated and where significant influence can be exerted in the policy making process therefore, a fair representation of women is essential in national parliaments to allow their voices and issues to be clearly heard to promote gender equality and ensure that the rights of women are respected and encoded in law<sup>30</sup>. Significant national initiatives related to women empowerment have emerged, led by the women, political figures, the public and local communities. Some countries adopted some form of affirmative action, such as party quotas or reserving seats for women in parliament to ensure their political participation, as in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Palestine, Mauritania, Sudan, and Somalia. Other countries do not adopt this measure; consequently, the average percentage of female participation in the Arab legislative branches is the lowest in the world. Despite this, as of September 2010 and according to the IPU, only 19.2% of the world's parliamentarians are women and the Arab region ranks weakest, with the inclusion of women in Parliament accounting for only 12.4% compared to 6.5% five years ago<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, *Women in Parliament: beyond numbers*, (Stockholm, Sweden, IDEA, 2005).  
[http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women\\_in\\_parliament.pdf#page=31](http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2005/women_in_parliament.pdf#page=31)

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

**Table 1: Women in Parliaments: World and Regional Averages**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Single House or lower House</b>	<b>Upper House or Senate</b>	<b>Both Houses Combined</b>
<b>Nordic countries</b>	<b>41.6%</b>	<b>---</b>	<b>---</b>
<b>Americas</b>	<b>23.1%</b>	<b>23.7%</b>	<b>23.2%</b>
<b>Europe-OSCE member countries including Nordic countries</b>	<b>21.9%</b>	<b>19.5%</b>	<b>21.4%</b>
<b>Europe-OSCE member countries excluding Nordic countries</b>	<b>20.1%</b>	<b>19.5%</b>	<b>19.9%</b>
<b>Asia</b>	<b>18.7%</b>	<b>17.0%</b>	<b>18.5%</b>
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	<b>18.3%</b>	<b>19.6%</b>	<b>18.5%</b>
<b>Pacific</b>	<b>12.6%</b>	<b>15.4%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>
<b>Arab States</b>	<b>12.4%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>11.6%</b>
<b>World Average</b>	<b>19.4%</b>	<b>18.2%</b>	<b>19.2%</b>

Regions are classified by descending order of the percentage of women in the lower or single House

Resource: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

Rwanda had the highest percentage of women in Parliament in the world (56.3%) followed by Sweden (45.0%) in 2010. In 2010, only 24 countries in the world achieved the target of at least 30% representation by women in parliament<sup>32</sup>.

While still under-represented in the parliaments, Arab women are rapidly increasing in political systems. In recent years, women in the gulf countries have achieved significant breakthroughs by participating in parliamentary elections and right across the Arab world. Kuwait has recently granted women the right to vote and run in elections, after street protesters demonstrate in favor of women's rights. In a short time after granting them the right to run in elections, four courageous women broke the foundries and won the election through tough competition with their fellow men. The debate about women in politics has become absolutely vital to public debate and a cornerstone of the Arab governments' economic and social agenda. The number of seats allocated to women in the Arab world varies in the different countries.

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

**Table 2: Women in national parliaments**

Rank	Country	Lower or single House				Upper House of Senate			
		Electio ns	Seat s	Wome n	%W	Electio ns	Seat s	Wome n	%W
31	Tunisia	10 2009	214	59	27.6 %	8 2008	112	17	15.2 %
37	Sudan	4 2010	446	114	25.6 %	5 2010	46	5	10.9 %
39	Iraq	3 2010	325	82	25.2 %	---	---	---	---
49	United Arab Emirates	12 2006	40	9	22.5 %	---	---	---	---
"	Mauritania	11 2006	95	21	22.1	11 2009	56	8	14.3 %
91	Syrian Arab Republic	4 2007	250	31	12.4	---	---	---	---
"	Jordan	11 2010	120	13	10.8 %	11 2010	60	9	15.0 %
"	Morocco	9 2007	325	34	10.5 %	10 2009	270	6	2.2%
"	Kuwait	5 2009	65	5	7.7%	---	---	---	---
"	Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	3 2009	468	36	7.7%	---	---	---	---
127	Lebanon	6 2009	128	4	3.1%	---	---	---	---
130	Bahrain	10 2010	40	1	2.5%	11 2010	40	11	27.5 %
132	Yemen	4 2003	301	1	0.3%	4 2001	111	2	1.8%
"	Oman	10 2007	84	0	0.0	11 2007	72	14	19.4 %
"	Qatar	7 2010	35	0	0.0%	---	---	---	---
"	Saudi Arabia	2 2009	150	0	0.0%	---	---	---	---
?	Egypt	11 2010	518	?	?	6 2010	264	?	?

Resource: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

As shown in Table 2 about women in national parliaments, Tunisia has the highest percentage of women in Parliament (27.6%) followed by Sudan (25.6%) and Iraq (25.2%), United Arab Emirates (22.5%) and Mauritania (22.1%) and are all above the international average (19.4%). Interestingly, Iraq is the only Arab country that has the

women quota in its constitution in 2005 rather than the election law as in other countries. On the other hand, the rest of the Arab countries ranked under the international average. No women in the lower house of parliament in Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Interestingly, the quota system is still a debatable issue. However, the experience of Morocco, Tunisia, Sudan, and Jordan suggests that quotas are a good mechanism to increase women's representation in legislative bodies. The introduction of the quota system has led to an increase in the percentage of female MPs in Morocco from 1% in 1995 to 10.5% in 2010, bringing 34 women to the parliament<sup>33</sup>. Moroccan political parties who adopted a quota on their "party list" set an outstanding example for other Arab political parties. Many Arab parties tend to ignore women candidates on their lists based on the beliefs that women are not capable of winning seats in elections because they lack leadership skills, with the assumption that this might affect the party chances in winning elections. However, Political parties are still young in many countries of the Arab world and the majority of men in the Arab world do not rely on their parties, they largely use the community based structures of personal family networks and tribal or regional affiliations to rally support among voters.

Cultural factors usually intervene in elections of women candidates to parliaments. Furthermore, women's access to positions of decision-making and leadership, in the executive branches or others outside the legislature structure, is affected by the political will and its confidence in women's efficiency. Many Arab women have succeeded in proving their capabilities in these positions; however, some women have reached top leadership positions because of their kinship ties and connections with the regime.

As for Arab women representation in the executive branch, in 1990, eight Arab states had one to two female ministers (Algeria, Comoros, Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Sudan, Syria and Tunisia)<sup>34</sup>. By 2011, the vast majority of Arab countries have female ministers ranging from 2-6 women ministers in cabinet.

Women in some countries occupy other top executive positions, as in Jordan and Algeria, where women are appointed governors, and in Jordan and Sudan where women occupy top judicial positions, and Egypt where many women are working in the diplomatic corps.

As for the head of State position, three female candidates participated in presidential elections in Algeria, Mauritania and Lebanon with no luck. Definitely, there is still a long way to go before Arab women hold the same number of seats or occupy offices at the highest levels, such as presidents or prime ministers.

As for the development of civil society organizations, their status depend on the status and development of the people. The role of civil society organizations is no less important than that of political parties or parliaments, bearing in mind that civil activism and strengthening the role of civil societies means increasing women's benefits and

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<sup>33</sup> <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> and United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM). Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> Al Maaitah, Rowaida, a paper presented on Arab women and political participation at The Arab International Women's Forum 3rd Annual AIWF Conference At the Headquarters of the League of Arab States. Cairo, Egypt on "Women in the Arab World: Partners in the Community And on the World Stage", June, 6-9 2004

enhancing their capabilities to influence policy at the government level. The percentage of women in the boards of directors in the NGOs differs from one country to another with Lebanon on the top list (45%) followed by Palestine (41%). Egypt has a percentage of (18%) and Jordan (22%)<sup>35</sup>.

Finally, the differences between Arab countries in relation to women's participation in public and political life generally correlate with the percentage of educated females, the intensity of prevailing cultural and traditional gender norms, and the availability of a supportive environment<sup>36</sup>.

### **Challenges Impeding Arab Women Participation in Politics and Decision Making**

Although many measures have been taken by the majority of Arab countries to enhance women representation in decision-making positions, women's participation in public life and positions of power have not been achieved the desired level which requires further efforts from the governments, civil society and the private sector. Even in the presence of a strong political will in many Arab countries, cultural constraints may dominate and women are still represented a small percentage of the total elected legislators and officials assigned to the various bodies and institutions of society. The current reality in the Arab world refers to the deficiencies and shortcomings in the areas of empowerment of Arab women in politics because of many challenges which include:

### **Politics and Culture in the Arab World**

A prevailing attitude and a culture of discrimination against women still exists in the Arab region, in spite of the empowerment programs and national efforts to enhance women status and end this discrimination.

The Arab culture is still characterized by a male dominated culture and patriarchal in nature and is driven by tribal customs and tradition that are mostly unfriendly and reluctant to the involvement of women in politics<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, power and authority resides in the hands of men as they are supposed to control the decision making position in the legislative, executive institutions and the judiciary. This is evident in the lower number of women in politics and in many practices such as the conduction of primaries within many tribal groups to guarantee their electoral seats and voices in the parliament.

The lack of clarity in cultural and social concepts about roles, functions and rights remains an obstacle to the rise of women. Like in most countries, politics in the Arab world is identified with the 'public' sphere which men occupy and continue to dominate. The culture of many Arab countries still set a dichotomy between the personal and public

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<sup>35</sup> Abu Zeid, Arab women: Past, present and future, Proceedings of the seminar held in Cambridge University, UK.19-20 September 2005, P147

<sup>36</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM), Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Azza Karam, Strengthening the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Arab Region: Challenges and Options, <http://www.undp-pogar.org/publications/gender/karam1/karama.pdf> and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), Status of Jordanian Women: Demography, Economic Participation, Political Participation and Violence, (Amman, Jordan, UNIFEM,2004).



sphere. The personal sphere focuses on women responsibilities for the family in the household while the public sphere is the men world. Therefore, women are not allowed to work in the public sphere in general and in political life specifically. According to Gomaa in 2001, unlike women problem in the industrialized countries regarding the glass ceiling in professional mobility, Arab women suffer from a thick wall that prevent them from moving from the private to the public sphere. The Arab woman has to prove herself many times in all aspects of work and life before she can gain the acceptance of her peers<sup>38</sup>. However, the report of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance on Women in Parliament: beyond numbers in 2005 revealed that 'woman's place' is a worldwide problem "Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology of 'a woman's place'. According to this ideology, women should only play the role of 'working mother', which is generally low-paid and apolitical. In addition, in some countries, men even tell women how to vote."<sup>39</sup>

This is a real impediment to the achievement of gender relations in the Arab countries, and makes the tremendous efforts of women's empowerment programs strategies in the Arab aspirations difficult elusive.

It is worthy to note that, the permeability of the boundaries between the public and private spheres has been argued by women activist and supporters<sup>40</sup>. This permeability provides a mixed zone between the private and political spheres leading to the fact that every area of interaction is a political sphere which involves power and authority.

### **Women's Organizations and NGO's**

Although, the advocacy of women's organizations and NGO's have succeeded in initiating positive modifications in some laws, albeit gaps still exist. Women's organizations and NGO's support women females to participate in politics, by providing awareness-raising programs, helping women with funds and strengthening their skills in managing their election campaign as Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain and other countries. These programs, however, need to be modified for better effectiveness/efficiency at the national and regional levels. It was reported that the work of women's organizations and non-governmental organizations have moved slowly towards awareness-raising activities and advocacy, training and building human and institutional capacity<sup>41</sup>. There are areas that need more serious efforts from the Women's organizations and NGO's especially with regards to media.

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<sup>38</sup> Gomaa, Towards the Empowerment of Arab Women in Decision Making Positions, Paper presented in the First Arab Women Summit. (Arab League. Cairo. 2001).

<sup>39</sup> International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, Women in Parliament: beyond numbers, (Stockholm, Sweden, IDEA, 2005). Page 44

<sup>40</sup> Azza Karam, Strengthening the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Arab Region: Challenges and Options, <http://www.undp-pogar.org/publications/gender/karam1/karama.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> United Nations Development Program, Arab Human Development Report 2005: *Empowerment of Arab Women*, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2005).

The stereotypical media messages on the role of women in the society, poor use of the media, Lack of solid public information programs at the grass roots aimed at changing the stereotyped image of women, have all contributed negatively to women involvement in decision making and politics. The lack of media attention to women's contributions and potentials, results in the lack of a constituency for women. Women's organizations and NGO's are social agents of change and they should dissolve the negative stereotyped images that seem to always be projected about women in the media. Another area that needs more serious investigations and support from the women's organizations and NGO's is concerned with the Arab women's lack of confidence in female candidates as well as the lack of confidence of women in themselves to lead. In some countries, such as Jordan women comprised more than 50% of all voters which means that men maximize their winning opportunities by overwhelmingly women's vote. Moreover, in some countries, men even tell women how to vote.

A study released in March 2007 by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) attributed women's failure to obtain seats in Parliament to social and political factors, including a lack of trust in Jordanian society that women are capable of working in politics<sup>42</sup>. Women's low self-esteem and self-confidence are endorsed by certain cultural patterns, family upbringing which discriminates between the male and female in matters of freedoms, responsibilities and rights.

On the other hand, the increasing number of women organizations and NGOs creates a serious competition for resources and weak coordination between institutions because there is a heavy reliance on government support and international donors. The ESCWA report on women's movements in the Arab world focused on the lack of coordination, and conflict in some cases, among women's groups and institutions at the national level<sup>43</sup>.

In addition, the AWO report in 2006 reported that all women projects and programs in the Arab region suffer from the absence of strategic vision, poor strategic planning, poor follow-up, monitoring and evaluation, poor coordination among stakeholders, inadequate and imbalances in the implementation and funding at the level of governments and civil society institutions and the private sector<sup>44</sup>. Therefore, women's organizations and NGO's should react to address these gaps, improve measures, and confront cultural and legal constraints that impede women participation in politics and decision making.

### **Women Empowerment Strategies between the Elite and the Grass Roots**

It is known that the national strategies to enhance women development in the Arab countries has been drafted by mainly the elite group of women, and often endorsed

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<sup>42</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM), Jordanian women's participation in political life: An analytical study of the performance of women MPs in the 14th Parliament, (Jordan: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2007).

<sup>43</sup> Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), "Status of Arab Women 2005: History of Women Movements in the Arab World", (Bairout, ESCWA, 2005).

<sup>44</sup> Abu Zeid, Projects of Arab women empowerment: current status and future progress, Arab Women Organization, (Cairo, AWO, 2008).

by the "political will higher up". To some extent, women at the grass roots have remained in isolation in terms of planning, development and evaluation of project and programs focusing on women issues. They have become recipients of services and programs designed by the "elite", therefore, there is no sense of ownership for many strong initiatives for women development in the Arab world. This is evident with the high number of the Arab women votes that go to men candidates to parliament.

#### *Skepticism about the Agenda for Women Enhancement and Development*

Unfortunately, policies and actions target the progress of Arab women are not only encountered by many difficulties and challenges related to cultural and other issues, but also there is a suspicion on the agenda for women development where some people perceive gender equality as a western imposition that is inappropriate to the religious and cultural context of Arab states. Many Religious extremists have suspected the rights already gained by women who have led women and supporters to clarify their stand through strong debates and clarifications about women's rights in Islamic thought as well as the CEDAW from the perspective of Islam<sup>45</sup>. The Skepticism of the Religious extremists and their supporters about the agenda for women development is growing, in some countries calling for the restriction of the woman's role to the household. Therefore, women's movements in the Arab world must be continued without losing sight of Arab and Muslim history, culture and religion. It is worthwhile mentioning that obstacles to women in politics do not lie in religion, since other Islamic countries have had women in top leadership positions—i.e., as presidents: Benazir Boto in Pakistan, Megawaty Sokamo Potry in Indonesia, and Khalda Zeya in Bangladesh.

#### *Shortcomings in the Institutional and Legal Frameworks to Implement Policy*

Despite certain positive amendments to legislation in various Arab countries, legal discrimination still remains a significant obstacle to women's advancement. There are existing gaps and discrepancies between legislation, implementation and social practices. For instance, in various countries, there are still problems related to the legal age of marriage, divorce, alimony, custody, visitation procedures, inheritance rights, female genital mutilation (FGM), and violence against women<sup>46</sup>. A gap also exists between policy formulation and strategy implementation in many Arab countries due to lack of solid qualitative and quantitative data about women in the Arab world, lack of clear performance indicators for monitoring and evaluation of progress and results,

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<sup>45</sup> United Nations Development Fund for Women/ UNIFEM), Progress of Arab Women, (Egypt: UNIFEM Arab state regional office, 2004) and United Nations Development Program, Arab Human Development Report 2005: *Empowerment of Arab Women*, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> UNIFEM , Beijing +15, The Shadow Report, Madiha El Safty, <http://ngocswny.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/beijing-15-final-completed-versionto-new-york-with-cover-all-another-version.pdf> and A report Forwarded to CEDAW Committee on Shadow NGO Report to CEDAW Committee Jordan Evaluation of national policy, measures and actual facts on violence against women By a Group of NGOs July 2007, [http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/39\\_shadow\\_reports/Jordanian\\_SR\\_2.pdf](http://www.iwraw-ap.org/resources/pdf/39_shadow_reports/Jordanian_SR_2.pdf)

budgetary limitations to implement programs, and lack of effective means to link the efforts of mainstreaming gender with other national policies and plans.

The agenda for women's advancement requires long-term investment in resources and sustained partnerships across sectors. The Arab national councils for women or related institutions, are relatively small institutions, but have a huge task as the "government's reference points" on all issues relating to women's advancement. These councils/institutions find difficulty in monitoring/following up the implementation of the policies/plans they make, because they lack the mechanisms that enable them to perform the task, and have no administrative authority over the executive agencies for this responsibility. This requires the national councils for women or related institutions to have strong teeth and arms in all strong ministries and related institutions to support them to discharge their responsibilities; however, this cannot be functioning without improving their legal, power and executive status.

### **Political Parties, Elections and Tribal Primaries**

Women are usually marginalized in political party life which is evident in the lack of party support of women who have been largely absent from the party leadership there.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, women representation in politics in the Arab region is still low. In some Arab Countries, political parties have introduced measures to promote women's representation in parliament by allocating a specific percentage of women in their party lists which definitely promotes women's representation in parliament.

In addition, the electoral processes itself is another issue for women participation in politics in the Arab region as it possess certain characteristics that discriminate against women. This is evident in the practice of Tribal Primaries. Many Tribes in many Arab countries organize Tribal Primaries which aims at ruling out weak candidates with the least opportunity of winning in order to concentrate on strong candidates with better winning opportunities. This practice provides "a safety net" for the tribes to survive in a challenging political environment in some Arab countries such as Jordan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, and Bahrain. Given the rising cost of running an effective campaign and the lack of confidence in women candidates, these pose other serious hurdles for women in the Arab countries.

Interestingly, the last few year have showed a shift in such practices. For example, Jordan election in 2007 and 2010 showed a breakthrough in the electoral system when female tribal candidates received tremendous tribal support in many zones of the country including the Bedwins zones. Another breakthrough was witnessed in Kuwait with the success of four women in the parliament. This reflects the emergence of a "comfort Zone" for women that need careful evaluation to examine the contributing factors for this change in two Arab countries that are well known for their tribalism (Jordan and Kuwait) and Islamism (Kuwait). Women should learn and reevaluate their strategies to invest in this "comfort Zone" and build bridges among themselves and develop coalitions with existing political forces such as tribes, religious group, parties and community.

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<sup>47</sup> See: Majed, Ziad (ed.), 2005, Building Democracy in Jordan: Women's Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections; [http://www.idea.int/publications/dem\\_jordan/index.cfm#toc](http://www.idea.int/publications/dem_jordan/index.cfm#toc).

## **The Road Ahead**

Despite certain positive achievements of the Arab women in education and health fields in many Arab countries, women participation in economic and political life is still low, which is considered to be an impediment to progress towards genuine participation of Arab women in sustainable development<sup>48</sup>. Challenges facing women in politics are immense. They require the consolidation of all efforts with great belief in women's capabilities as human beings who are able to lead and shoulder the responsibility in the building of their nations.

The integration of women in public and political life requires solid political interventions aiming at empowering women and raising the awareness of men and women in the Arab world about the value of women role not only in the private but also in the public sphere.

The Arab countries need to guide future actions taken by governments to address existing gaps and challenges and contribute to gender equality and the advancement of women in all development sectors; economic, social and politics. Of more importance, the Arab countries need to continue revising the existing legislation in line with international conventions and conferences and ensure the public awareness and understanding of legislation and the importance of law enforcement. In addition, Equal opportunity must be embodied in law and policy. Therefore, bridging the gap between private (family) and public (political domain) is essential in enhancing women role in politics. Arab Women and their advocates should push for more Gender Sensitive Policies to Enhance Women's Participation including Positive discrimination measures for women and reforming the electoral systems as well as Building the capacity and skills of women in politics and leadership.

The road ahead requires the advancement of human capabilities and development of solid multilayered Strategies to Enhance Arab Women's Participation in Public Life. These strategies should cover all paths of development (socioeconomic, politics, legislation, Supportive Environment, government and NGOs, media, youth; males and females etc..) and target individual, family, and community at large. The empowerment of women forms a fundamental basis of these paths. Another crucial issue is to ensure the participation of women from bottom up in planning, executing and evaluating the programs and services provided for them, to assure their relevance to their need/priorities as well as to consolidate the relationship among various stakeholders (governments, women movement, nongovernmental organizations and the private sector) to ensure better coordination and collaboration to fully implement of strategies and action plans for women advancement.

This involves the formulation of the right methodology to help women become integrated in the public and political life, which cannot be realized except when we translate slogans into work plans, and take drastic measures to realize real participation and involvement of women in all aspect of development social, economic and politics. This suggests "going back to the grass roots" and formulation of educational programs that instill the concepts of, equality, equal opportunities and women's rights as full citizens including their rights in sharing the public sphere with their men fellows.

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<sup>48</sup> Katbi, Ibtisam, factors affecting Arab women participation, a paper presented at the workshop for the Regional office for the Arab countries of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on women and political development in Abu Dhabi 2003.

Therefore, the governmental and nongovernmental institutions must work together to promote dialogues and actions to ensure that the issue of women's rights becomes synonymous with the issue of human rights. Collaboration and coordination among all women related institutions should be strengthened and scientific criteria should be established to measure the success of these institutions in carrying their main responsibilities.

Education fosters women's economic, social and political empowerment. The education system in the Arab world should be the changing tool of our culture, for instance, it needs to promote and influence culture and the public attitude in choosing their representatives based on merit rather than other considerations, and promote the view that the right representative in a democratic process could well be a woman.

In addition, Arab countries should promote and intensify the awareness raising campaigns on the importance of women's role in sustainable development: social, economic and political, through educational institutions, media and non-governmental organizations, to achieve the desired goal. The Awareness raising campaigns should be strengthened and evaluated and equally important will be the effective integration of legal literacy programs into awareness raising campaigns at all levels, including in school curricula as well as providing women with information as to their rights in all spheres.

The media at the national and regional level has a responsibility to bring more constructive attention to women's issues. It should project a more positive image of Arab women and their participation in politics and in all decision making positions in all sectors.

As mentioned before, Arab leaders, for the first time, discussed the issue of advancing Arab women as an essential element of the political and economic development of the Arab world. Now it is the responsibility of Arab women who should seize this precious opportunity and participate in the realization of the political reform in their countries. Another opportunity for women is the establishment of the Arab Women's Organization (AWO). Women in the Arab world must invest in the enthusiasm and energy of the First ladies who are advocating for women's rights and eager to transform the current status of women.

As for the availability of information about Arab women, most of the studies on political participation of women are focused on quantitative studies assessing the percentage and numbers of women in decision-making positions rather than qualitative studies. The numbers and percentages are usually used as two faces for one coin depending on the subject under discussion, they are used to provide a negative view of women's under representation in politics, or provide a rosy view about women in politics in the Arab world. Therefore, qualitative research and studies are needed to gain insights on women experiences and views regarding the challenges and obstacles to politics to provide in depth analysis of women status in the Arab world.

For women in politics, qualitative data is needed regarding the dynamic nature of political participation and power among women in higher decision making positions. In addition, the outcomes and impact of women empowerment programs as well as positive discrimination measures for women should be studied in terms of real changes in the lives and status of women. However, the challenge remains in integrating findings of research into future policies and programs. In addition, serious efforts are needed in the



area of developing gender-sensitive indicators to measure the gender outcomes as well as establishing a solid gender-relevant monitoring and evaluation mechanism. Until now, indicators for women development and the monitoring and evaluation systems are two main unsolved chronic issues in the Arab world. Monitoring of results is a critical aspect of the progress made in promoting gender equality.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for Arab women, occupying public and political posts is a major achievement that must be preserved and acknowledged. Fifteen years after the Beijing Conference we are still revising and articulating our strategies and action plans for women development and empowerment in the Arab countries. One fact that should be noticed with this regards, is that sustainable development cannot be achieved in the Arab countries unless women play a full role in society and this cannot happen if women are not given their full rights. The strengthening of democracy in the Arab world as well as freedom, equity, equality and transparency will help to enhance the safety, security, and liberty of all people, particularly women who face great challenges in participating in the political sphere.

The argument of women's advancement and development reflects one reality, women are a major and vital component of the development process aimed at realizing a progressive and prosperous society, namely because women make up half of the productive potentials in their societies. There is no advancement without human development and Human beings are the real treasures of any nation. This requires a great degree of transparency, credibility and dedication, not only on the part of women, but also men and all sectors of the society.

The Arab Human Development Report in 2009 on Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries called "on policymakers and other stakeholders to move away from a traditional, state-centric conception of security to one which concentrates also on the security of individuals, their protection and their empowerment."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> United Nations Development Program, Arab Human Development Report 2009: Challenges to Human Security in the Arab Countries, (New York, USA: UNDP, 2009). Page 1.