

Female Arab scientists urge defence of women's rights

[KUWAIT CITY] A conference of female Arab scientists has called on policymakers and science organisations to help them network within and between countries and safeguard hard-won [women's rights](#), which they see as under threat in the wake of the Arab Spring.

Attendees of the [International Conference on Women in Science and Technology in the Arab Countries](#), held in Kuwait last week (21–23 April), stressed that it was increasingly important to develop strong ties among women scientists due to the region's political flux and threats to women's empowerment.

"Political instability in some nations [has] raised questions over whether the gains of recent years could be reversed," the conference's closing document said.

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Heba Handoussa, managing director of the Egyptian Network for Integrated Development, said that, in the decade leading up to the Arab Spring, civil society in most Arab states advocated women's empowerment and right to work.

"But, although the new constitutions in the Arab Spring countries confirmed gender equality, this aspect has rarely been translated into straightforward laws, policies and practices that are responsive to women's rights," she said.

While the Islamist parties now running many Arab countries say they support women rights, in practice they are reversing many of these rights, Handoussa added.

But women are fighting to keep existing rights and gain even more.

In Yemen, they are trying to do this through discussion with the government rather than protests, said Rokhsana Ismail, a chemistry professor at the country's Aden University.

"The [political instability](#) is affecting all developmental plans, not only in the field of science and technology," Ismail tells *SciDev.Net*. "Our battle now is to strengthen the legal and policy frameworks governing women's workplace rights to promote the participation of women scientists in the workforce."

Accordingly, the conference recommended that national policies should be crafted to support women's progress, for example by funding scientific research by women. Policymakers should continually review these policies to recognise changing conditions and needs, it said.

One method highlighted at the conference for women to gain greater recognition and [funding](#) for their work was to improve networking among women scientists.

"Arab women scientists often lack long-standing professional networks," Samira Omar, vice-president for the Arab region at the Organization for Women in Science for the Developing World (OWSD) and director of the Kuwait Environmental Remediation Program, told *SciDev.Net*.

Omar argued that networks should be developed dealing with specific national or regional priorities as these might find it easier than individuals to overcome obstacles to funding.

According to Omar, the formation of national chapters of organisations such as OWSD — as the conference document recommended —and the World Academy of Sciences would be a good way to develop communication between scientists, not only in the region, but with developed countries.

The conference's recommendations are due to be presented to the World Science Forum in Rio de Janeiro in November.