In Search of Political Power – Women in Parliament in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon

Gehan Abu-Zayd

A study of Arab women parliamentarians reveals that 68 per cent of women MPs are unsatisfied with the current level of women's political participation. This is due to a number of factors, including: the low number of women MPs in the Arab world; women's minor role in economic and social development; and the lack of a strategic plan for women's participation. Arab women have developed a number of strategies and adopted various mechanisms to facilitate not only their entry into politics but also to enhance their performance within different political forums.

In examining these issues, first we provide some background on the conditions affecting women's participation in three Arab countries: Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon. Next we outline the obstacles to political participation women face in these countries, and in the Arab world in general. We examine the mechanisms women are using to tackle these obstacles, within parliament and within society at large. We also include a specific evaluation of women parliamentarians in Egypt. This study looks at women's participation during three terms of the Egyptian People's Assembly. It illustrates the factors that impact on women's participation, the issues women are most involved in, and the results they have been able to achieve.

Women's Participation in Parliament: A Brief Background

EGYPT

Despite the fact that women in Egypt were granted citizenship and full political rights in the 1956 Constitution, the social and economic environment in the country has worked against women exercising their political rights. Values encouraging the participation of women in public affairs have coexisted with more reactionary values, and the conflict between the two has varied over time. In the last two decades this conflict has become more intense, mainly due to the political and economic situation in Egypt.

The current economy is characterized primarily by the negative impact on women of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) recommended by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). This policy is based on two main elements: (i) the retreat of the state from social services, primarily health and education; and (ii) the privatization of state industries, transforming the economy into one based on market forces.[1] These policies have affected the situation of women in a number of ways. First, labour migration has left many women as the head of households, increasing their social burdens. At the same time, the state has retreated from its traditional role of providing welfare services. This has paved the way for Islamist groups (political groups who use Islam to justify their existence and their programmes) to establish their own social services and charities to meet the needs of society. Many argue that Islamists are using this network of services to push forward a political ideology hostile to women, calling for their return to the home. Finally, women's economic participation has declined and women have been marginalized into certain fields that do not allow them to reach senior positions or to acquire sufficient relevant experience. This is an ongoing obstacle to women's participation in political forums.

Values encouraging the participation of women in public affairs have coexisted with more reactionary values, and the conflict between the two has varied over time. In the last two decades this conflict has become more intense, mainly due to the political and economic situation in Egypt.

The current political environment in which women parliamentarians operate has been formed by two major eras: the era of the nationalist movement, 1919–1952 and the one-party state in the postcolonial period, 1952–1976. The women's movement became directly linked to the nationalist movement and was led by educated women and men from the upper-middle classes. Women became active in the nationalist movement through their family ties to male political activists. However, women were not regarded as pivotal members of the nationalist movement and had little access to decision-making processes. Women leaders did not put forward policies that demonstrated a true understanding of women's needs and problems. Women's political activities centred on acts of charity and providing social services; in fact there was little distinction between women's political activities and their charity activities.

Following the revolution of 1952, all political parties were abolished and a one-party system was introduced for almost a quarter of a century. The 1957 elections witnessed the participation of women for the first time, and Rawya 'Atiya was elected as the first woman parliamentarian in the Arab world. The regime, which espoused a socialist ideology, tried to encourage women's participation in all administrative and political positions. However, the culture of the one-party system did not promote an acceptance of political plurality. Therefore, when the multi-party system was reintroduced in 1976, political participation rates for women were low, as they were for society in general.[2]

This legacy has contributed, alongside the constitution and national legislation, to forming the current political environment in which women participate in public affairs. Different mechanisms have been used to facilitate the entry of women into parliament in Egypt, including the following four:

1. The allocation of seats for women: 30 seats in parliament were reserved for women according to a presidential decree in 1979;
2. Nominating women on party lists and abolishing the allocation of seats for women;
3. Women running as individual candidates in parliamentary elections;
4. Women appointed to parliament by the president, who has the right to appoint up to 10 members of parliament, a proportion of whom are always women.

These four mechanisms were evaluated based on the relationship between the number of women members in parliament, the number and kinds of issues they raised, and the techniques they have used to raise issues.

JORDAN

Women in the Kingdom of Jordan were granted the right to vote in 1974. Since parliament stopped working from 1968 to 1984, the first parliamentary elections in which women voted were held in 1989. Of the 10 women who presented their candidature in these elections, not one won a seat.

«*Women who find it difficult must not say that it is difficult. The lesson to be learned is that a woman can choose not to give up and not to be underestimated just because she is a woman.*»

Tujan Al-Faysal

During the second legislative elections in 1993, only two women ran for parliament, and one, Tujan al-Faysal, won a seat. Despite the fact that Faysal had no previous involvement in politics (although she was active in the media), she ran on an integrated political platform not presented by many of her male competitors. Her platform was based on the concept of human rights, and it was therefore logical that she stood as an independent candidate. She nominated herself as an independent candidate for the legislative elections of 4 November 1997, but did not win any seats. In fact, not a single woman won any seats in these elections. The reasons for this are among those that have been discussed in this handbook, including:

- The male political culture which militates against women's equal participation in the political sphere;

- Lack of party support and backing;
- Lack of media support;
- Lack of confidence among voters that women can actually deliver on their election promises;
- Stunted democracy which allows for manipulation of electoral processes and results and
- Lack of networking and cooperation between women's organizations and women MPs.

Tujan al-Faysal's standpoint for arguing in favour of women's rights on the basis of human rights was repeatedly demonstrated in her parliamentary debates. She asserted that she did not gain her popularity by presenting issues related to services in parliament, but through her political discourse, which was understood and supported by her constituents. They also supported the bills that she has presented to parliament, which mainly revolved around the promotion of democracy. She described the nature of her performance within the Jordanian Parliament by saying, "I am trying to present a new form of parliamentary work, a type that offers radical solutions to political issues".[3]

Faysal's independent political discourse provoked the religious and conservative trends within parliament, but her passionate belief in democracy and human rights and her knowledge of Islam earned her respect among some sections of the public and enmity from the ruling establishment. As an MP, she played a key role in revealing corruption and irregularities. According to her, "women who find it difficult must not say that it is difficult. The lesson to be learned is that a woman can choose not to give up and not to be underestimated just because she is woman".[4]

There are a variety of strategies used by Jordanian parliamentarians to make an impact. The ones mentioned frequently by Faysal, for example, include the following: collecting and studying information relevant to the issues under discussion; presenting their case forcefully, and at the right time; forming a pressure group with other sympathetic MPs for the hearing of new legislation; cultivating and relying on support from outside parliament, and in particular from the media, with which a good relationship must be developed.

LEBANON

Lebanese women have been in parliament since 1992, following the 17-year civil war that destroyed many democratic practices. In the 1992 elections, women won three seats, that is, 2.3 per cent of total seats.[5] This was the first time women arrived in parliament and it constituted a fundamental transformation, since women were only present in parliamentary life twice between 1952–1962. In the 1992 elections, one woman from the north, one from the south, and one from Mount Lebanon won seats. Women entered the elections with the aim of challenging the political discrimination against them. However, this undertaking did not win the level of support from women that was expected, despite the fact that women are economically very active in Lebanese society.

The decline in the number of women MPs in parliament was a challenge to the three who won seats, and they had to struggle to create a channel through which women's issues could be heard. This resulted in a positive environment that contributed to the development of legislation relevant to women. The women MPs participated in political events, especially those related to Israeli occupation, and were active in the field of social services, since this was important to Lebanese society after years of destruction of their infrastructure and the ensuing economic crisis.

> «*We have not been able to create any women's solidarity body; we have not reached a ministerial position; and we haven't succeeded in eradicating discrimination between women and men in personal status legislation. This is despite the fact that we have been successful in other professions, but not in politics.*»
>
> *Maha al-Khuri and Bahaya al-Hariri*

However, the three MPs were not satisfied with the extent of women's success, saying that they still needed to work on broadening their support networks and on establishing a joint solidarity movement to unify efforts. They noted that women had not yet reached ministerial positions, had not yet eradicated discrimination between women and men in personal status legislation. Whilst being successful in other fields such as administration, business and commerce, women were not as effective in politics.[6]

Restrictions Facing Women Parliamentarians

An analysis carried out in 1995 based on the testimonies of Arab women who participate in public affairs, indicated that women are capable of achieving their political goals in more than 80 per cent of their attempts, if they have a clear vision and goal. The obstacles they face are mostly social, cultural, and material, and are not linked to the actual presence of women within parliament.[7]

The following is a brief listing of these restrictions according to their political, economic and social nature.

Political Restrictions

1. Restrictions on political parties have led to a weakness in democratic participation, and this in turn is an obstacle to greater women's political participation.
2. Low rates of literacy for women, and as a result low political awareness, can lead to women's votes being used by others.[8]
3. Traditions force women into roles that lead to their exclusion from direct decision-making processes.[9]
4. Political support for women is inconsistent and linked to the international agenda.
5. Reactionary powers influence society and push for the marginalization of women and the restriction of their role, opposing their political participation, whether inside or outside parliament (e.g., in Jordan).[10]
6. Lack of legislation to promote and ensure women's participation in parliament, despite many amendments.
7. Emergency laws stunt democracy and political development, which in turn impacts on political awareness. In the Lebanese experience, all women parliamentarians are somehow linked to a certain male figure and are considered an extension of him, even if he is dead.
8. Politics has become linked to parliamentarians' abilities to provide services, rather than any ideological considerations. This applies to both women and men.
9. Women's political role has been ignored in times of crisis, preventing the development of their political experience and leading to frustration (e.g. in Lebanon).

Economic Restrictions

1. The same study indicates that economic obstacles constitute 75 per cent of the problems faced by women MPs, in terms of the high cost of living and the need to manage their income for their families.[11]
2. The study found that 64 per cent of women said that economic difficulties left them with insufficient time to be interested in public affairs. In addition to this, women lack the resources that would enable them to participate politically, since the cost of political and social work is high.[12] Women's financial independence alone is thus not a sufficient condition to enable them to participate in parliament. She must also possess a high enough level of financial resources to allow her to carry out her parliamentary role, especially the role of providing services. This is the principle obstacle agreed upon by Egyptian and Lebanese woman MPs.
3. Economic policies have negatively affected women in terms of their standards of living, incomes, and unemployment rates. This has weakened their abilities to compete, since women are prevented from access to suitable educational and training opportunities and women continue to be economically dependent on their husbands.

Social Restrictions

1. Illiteracy among women makes it difficult for women MPs to reach out to other women, limits women's political awareness, and leads to the majority of women not being registered on the electoral register.
2. The study showed that 44 per cent of women MPs interviewed said that, due to their household responsibilities, they did not attend parliamentary sessions as often as male MPs.
3. Legislation constitutes one of the main social obstacles facing women. Women are still discriminated against in laws concerning the family, nationality, the right to travel, and the right to work. This makes women unable to participate independently in public life.
4. The political environment plays a major role in supporting reactionary values at one moment and enlightened values at another moment, and this, in turn, affects women's rights. The current political environment in Egypt and Jordan does not support women because it recalls reactionary values and traditions from the past which are a major

obstacle to women MPs and women in general.

5. The prevalence of certain traditional notions in some communities, like the Bedouins in Egypt or some tribes in Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon, sometimes prevents women from going out or from mixing with men. An Egyptian woman MP reported that the head of a certain tribe told her that he would mobilize his entire tribe to prevent a woman from running in the elections. A Lebanese woman MP said that the most important obstacle facing Arab women is the fact that traditions make women regard themselves as second-class citizens.

6. The public lives of MPs are defamed and, according to a Jordanian woman MP, this issue is more sensitive for women MPs.

Mechanisms Used to Tackle These Restrictions

The first step in confronting the obstacles faced by Arab women is to acknowledge these difficulties and to understand the circumstances that created them. In interviews, women MPs showed a great awareness of these obstacles and have resorted to various strategies in their attempts to overcome them. These can be divided into two groups of mechanisms: those from within the parliament and those from outside parliament.

Mechanisms outside Parliament

1. Woman MPs are gradually working to change traditions that restrict women, especially in tribal communities. A woman MP said that providing women-only transportation and polling stations enabled some of the tribal women to vote.

2. Women have used moderate behaviour in presenting their opinions and positions so that they do not conflict with society's traditions. This includes the way they talk, the way they dress, and their personal and public relations.

3. Cooperating with women's organizations that work on raising women's legal awareness regarding their voting rights. For example, in Jordan, women MPs understood the importance of women's votes and are working to lobby women's organizations.

4. Cooperating with male leaders in local communities in order to persuade them to support their position. Egyptian women MPs have used such techniques.

5. Using all available means of communication/media to expand their support in local communities.

6. Using statistics and other data to carefully plan their campaigns.

7. Learning about experiences of other women and using these lessons to improve their performance.

8. Standing their ground against personal attacks and attacks based on ideology or gender.

9. Stressing the positive values and strengths inherent in society, especially when they have been calling for change. That is, they have indicated that what they are calling for is in harmony with society's basic values and a continuity as opposed to importing alien cultural norms and patterns.

Mechanisms within Parliament

1. Women MPs have said that their role in parliament consists of two stages. The first stage is to learn and become familiar with the rules and guidelines of the political game, formulating strategies based on this knowledge; and second to undertake targeted lobbying. Jordanian women MPs, for example, have indicated that they have been in confrontation with both conservative forces, as well as some government MPs. They believe that the above mechanisms are not specific to women but to all politicians. They also believe that although there is a degree of gender specificity when referring to obstacles outside of parliament, these obstacles do not exist within parliament and women MPs are treated within parliament as MPs, not as women. Therefore, the mechanisms they use are the same as those used by male members of parliament. However, they also say that they are always careful to be accurate in collecting and analysing information in order to avoid being seen as careless or inefficient due to their gender.

2. Women MPs interviewed have said that they need to learn more about women's position within the relevant religions and legislation in order to be able to defend women's rights. An Egyptian Christian woman MP has said, "I had to understand Islam and Christianity in order to defend the law on childhood and motherhood".

3. Lobbying other women MPs or sympathetic men MPs in order to gain support for their bills in parliament.

4. Some women MPs have indicated that increasing access to information and skills in putting their points across also help women to participate in public life and open up new fields to them.[13]

Conclusion: Making an Impact

Women MPs have developed a variety of tactics and adopted many mechanisms which attempt to facilitate not only their entry into politics, but also their performance within the different political forums. These mechanisms, despite the different levels of emphasis, have tended to have many common elements: the need to learn about the political process itself, and the intention and attempts to use what is learned to effect some changes which would be brought about in ways that are harmonious with the overall cultural and social dynamics.

Another recurrent point among Arab women MPs is the need for education in general, and access to information and data in particular. Also, almost all women MPs interviewed, insisted on the advantages of developing links within the communities they were serving: whether with women's organizations, or with local community leaders, men or women, although they tend to be the former. Another interesting factor (and one directly relevant for the purposes of this handbook) has to do with the expressed need to learn about and share experiences with other women who are in similar positions around the world. Last but not least, the awareness of forming constant links (and lobbying) with colleagues, particularly male colleagues, in parliament was repeatedly emphasized. It is hoped that further sharing of experiences and persistent effort will enable a more equitable and efficient representation of women in Arab parliaments.

Endnotes

1. Saad Eddin Ibrahim. 1996. *Al-Mar'a Al-Misriya wa-l-Hayat Al-Ama* (Egyptian Women and Public Life). Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies. pp. 17–41.
2. Al-Baz, Shahida. 1995. Al-*Quyud Al-Iqtisadiya wa-l-Ijtima'iya wa athariha 'ala Al-mar'a* (The Economic and Social Restraints and their Impact on Women). Cairo: Al-Jeel Center. p. 55.
3. Personal interview with Tujan Al-Faysal, Cairo, 1994.
4. Personal interview with Tujan Al-Faysal, Cairo, 1994.
5. In the 2000 election, three women were again elected to parliament, with the total remaining at 2.3 percent of the total seats. See *www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm*.
6. Personal interviews with Lebanese Members of Parliament Ms Maha Al-Khuri and Ms Bahaya Al-Hariri, Cairo, 1994.
7. Al-Hadidy, Hana'. 1996. "Research on Public Participation of Arab Women". In *Al-Hadidy. ed. Al-Mar'a Al-Arabiya wa-l-Hayat Al-Ama* (Arab Women and Public Life). Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Center. p. 59.
8. Hana' Al-Hadidy. 1996.
9. Hana' Al-Hadidy. 1996.
10. Interview with Tujan Al-Faysal, June 1995.
11. Hana Al-Hadidy. 1996. p. 60.
12. Hana Al-Hadidy. 1996.
13. Moussa, Ghada A. 1997. *Political Systems and the Open Door Policy: Its Impact on Women's Participation – A Case Study*. MA Thesis, Cairo University.

Further Reading

Al-Baz, Shahida. 1996. *Al-Quyud Al-Iqtisadiya wa-l-ijtima'iya wa athariha 'ala Al-Mar'a* [The Economic and Social Restraints and their Impact on Women]. Cairo: Al-Jeel Center.

Al-Hadidy, Hana'. 1996. "Research on Public Participation of Arab Women". In Al-Hadidy. ed. *Al-Mar'a Al-Arabiya wa-l-Hayat Al-Ama* [Arab Woman and Public Life]. Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Center.

Al-Naqash, Farida. 1994. *Tatawur Al-Musharaka Al-Siyaziya li-l-Mar'a Al-Misriya* [The Development of Women's Political Participation]. Cairo: Cairo University Faculty of Political Science and Economics.

Ibrahim, Saad Eddin. 1996. *Al-Mar'a Al-Misriya wa-l-Hayat Al-Ama* [Egyptian Women and Public Life]. Cairo: Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies.

Moussa, Ghada A. 1997. *Political Systems and the Open Door Policy: Its Impact on Women's Participation – A Case Study*. M. A. Thesis, Cairo University.

Wahbi, Azza. ed. 1995. *Al-Mar'a Al-Misriya wa-l Ajhiza Al-Tashri'iya* [Egyptian Women and Legislative Mechanisms]. Cairo: Markaz Al-Buhuth wa-l-Dirasat Al-Siyasiya.