

THE EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICS
OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

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PREFACE

(Section I)

Abstract

All across the globe women are assuming roles that were previously reserved for their male counterparts – be it at the lowest or highest echelon of political power. Unlike the rest of the world, the Middle East and Muslim world have been slow to come to terms with this changing reality, but they too are gradually succumbing to the changing culture of increased women's participation in politics. Various countries in different continents have benefited from the increased participation of women in politics and it may be argued that similar successes could also be replicated in the political arena of this part of the world. Lebanon, as an illustration, presents a mid-way position in the region in that it is more liberal and has a more advanced civil society, but women are yet to seriously penetrate politics.

In the larger context of low women's political participation globally, the Middle East suffers from even lower penetration of women in politics. As a medium towards development and international integration, women present a somewhat untapped resource in the social, economic and political arenas in the region, and this study aims to provide information and recommendations to show opportunities for increasing their political participation, particularly at the parliamentary level of government.

If the acknowledged political accomplishments of women in other countries are anything to go by, particularly post-conflict societies, the increased involvement of women in Middle East politics will benefit the region through better governance that would permeate other aspects of society. Thus, the argument being made here that women's political participation in the Middle East and Muslim countries cannot be achieved without the reassessment and implementation of the specified recommendations – *revising education, establishing quota systems and institutionalizing regional reform.*

Why This Study is Important

In the larger context of development and better governance, the study of how women's political participation can be improved is of the utmost importance, and this is just as true for the Muslim and Arab world as it is for the rest of the world. Not only does this topic warrant rigorous academic attention, the implications offer greater insight into the hindrances and benefits of increased penetration of women in politics.

“Increasing both the level and quality of their participation, especially at the political and policy levels, has been a major plank of the international women's movement, which has consistently drawn attention to it and lobbied for it at national and international forums.”¹ In short, a study like this is important because it could initiate a larger, concerted effort to better understand how women in the Muslim and Arab world could become greater players in the politics of their nations and help to conceptualize strategies for implementation.

Over the course of my research it has been difficult finding appropriate data and research material on some specific issue like the historical data on women in politics. This is primarily because the overwhelming amount of research done on women's issues either relate to human rights or education of women in the Middle East, and not on measures to better women's involvement in politics, “The collection and dissemination of statistics by Governments on women's participation in decision-making tends to be ad hoc and in response to specific demands... As a result, monitoring and analysis of

¹ Zoya Hasan & Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129.

women's participation in decision-making has been largely focused on the most visible senior levels in the public sector and in national politics."²

This is not to say that there are not ample resources to use for such a study but that there is significantly less secondary resources to use for such a study. Having resorted to obtaining information from different books and journals on women and politics the result has been an in-depth analysis of women in the region and the complexities involved in politics, as well as a series of recommendations to improve women's participation in regional and national politics.

It is also important that we avoid what Edward Said refers to as an *orientalist* approach to the region. What this means is that, in as much as is possible, we use objective lens to assess the situation or events being analyzed rather than judging them using another set of criteria or cultural assumptions –

Taking the eighteenth century as a roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it by ruling over it: in short, Orientalism, as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.³

This work is not prescribing what is good for women in the Middle East and Muslim countries; it is describing the necessary conditions for women to participate in what is gradually becoming the next phase of political advancement.

In terms of literature review, the four primarily books used for this research cover a range of issues that are germane to the theme of this work. That is, the books will help shed light on important elements of the thesis, some of which are gender

² United Nations Department of Economic & Social Affairs, *The World's Women 2005: Progress In Statistics*. New York, NY: United Nations Publication (accessed March 20, 2007), 82; available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/products/indwm/ww2005_pub/English/WW2005_text_complete_BW.pdf

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

issues, women in the Middle East, political participation, cultural and religious imperatives, and so on. A short listing and of synopsis of the major books are provided below:

1. *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation* (Afkhani & Friedl): This book is a collection of essays by various women academics. The central issue linking all the essays together is the UN World Conference on Women, which took place in Beijing in 1995, and where 189 nations signed an accord on women's status, referred to as the Platform for Action (PFA).⁴ The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) particularly ensues that governments do not use religion or culture to justify discriminatory actions against women, and the essays lay out cases in different Muslim countries.⁵ The essays also expand on the strategies that should be employed in seeing the extensive implementation of political and social reforms in Muslim countries. Last, the role of international organizations, particularly the United Nations and the World Bank, is examined in terms of their contributions to Muslim women.
2. *Women and Power in the Middle East* (Joseph & Slyomovics [Eds.]): This is another collection of essays by prominent women historians and academics focusing on gender and cultural imperatives of women in the Muslim world. While this book touches on cultural trends in twelve Muslim countries, it primarily focuses on the relationship between post colonial ideologies of Pan-Arabism/Islamism and the progression of Muslim women in politics. Factors like patriarchy⁶, the role of the family,⁷ civil society,⁸ the state, etc. are explored here. The essays survey political questions like how women view themselves in relation to the state, men, women, and their communities.⁹

⁴ Mahnaz Afkhani & Erika Friedl, eds., *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), ix.

⁵ Ibid, pg. xviii.

⁶ Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics, eds., *Women and Power in the Middle East*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 2.

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁹ Ibid, 14.

3. *Women in the Middle East in and North Africa* (Nashat & Tucker): This work looks at the gender inequalities in Muslim countries. The book takes a “non-Western” approach to the situation of women in the Muslim and Arab countries in North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰ The objective of the authors was to write a book that gave a new way of looking at gender issues in this region of the world, and employ a “Third World” view that gives further insight into the plight of women – instead of looking at them from a disadvantaged position. Subjects dealt with in this work include slavery, labor outside the home, health, and the arts.
4. *Women and Gender in Islam* (Ahmed): This book takes the approach of detailing Islamic history and the impact it has had on gender. It examines the discourses in Islamic Middle Eastern societies, especially in relation to early Islam and how they have helped shape contemporary attitudes towards women. The concluding part of the book centers on modern day interpretation of women in the Middle East, as well as an analysis of social and intellectual assumptions of culture, religion, and ethnicity.

Another major source used in searching information on the different parliaments in the world is taken from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) website. The IPU provides a database for the parliaments in all countries and breaks down the data by region, country, and even gender. For our purposes, we are primarily concerned with the gender breakdown of parliaments; that is, the three sections that deal with *Women in Parliaments*¹¹, *Women in Politics Database*¹², and *Democracy*.¹³ A significant portion of this work will rely on the information provided in these sections of the IPU.

¹⁰ Guity Nashat & Judith Tucker, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press), xxvii.

¹¹ IPU Online, *Women in Parliaments* (accessed January 18, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

¹² IPU Online, *Women in Politics Database* (accessed January 18, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/bdf-e/BDFsearch.asp>

¹³ IPU Online, *Democracy* (accessed January 18, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/iss-e/women.htm>

In addition, an ample selection of journals, articles (print and online), and references have been employed in the research of this work.

Scope of Study

The parliamentary level of government is attractive for the purposes of this work because it presents a level of government that is present in all the countries concerned. It is no surprise that the different types of government in the Middle East, everything from democracies to republics to monarchies to authoritarian regimes, are of various hues and calibers, but that they all share parliamentary elements in which the national law-making depends on.¹⁴ In addition, this study will primarily cover countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and Muslim countries in Africa and Asia. The societies and peoples in these countries are of a wide variance do to characteristics like geography and culture that gives the Muslim world its multifaceted character.

The choice to focus this study on Muslim women and women in the Middle East stems from the fact that there is a set of circumstances that make their situation unique, as is identified by Bassam Tibi: “The Middle East is the hub of culturally diverse Islamic civilization. Politically the Middle East is a formation related to the dissolution of the Islamic Ottoman Empire after the First World War. Both in its Arab and Islamic scope, the Middle East is a politico-cultural world in its own terms, even though it is not exclusively Arab, and is inextricably linked to the prevailing global structures.”¹⁵

Besides, I have found the research and level of scholarship wanting on the issue of the

¹⁴ This is not to say that the parliaments in many of these countries are the ultimate decision-making branches of their governments. Case in point, some countries have Councils that perform both executive and legislative functions; this was true of Iraq during the Saddam Hussein era, and also for present day Saudi Arabia.

¹⁵ Bassam Tibi, *Religious Fundamentalism, Ethnicity and the Nation-State in the Middle East* (London, UK: Sage Publications Pvt. Ltd), 201.

inclusion of women in the political arena in most Muslim countries. This is not to say that other groups of women in other parts of the world like Sikh, Hindu or Native-American Indian are any less deserving of similar research.

As far as my academic interests are concerned, the plight of women in the Muslim and Arab world is of great importance, not only in terms of political and social realms, but also because the Muslims populations of the world are currently undergoing overall introspection in light of contemporary matters likes underdevelopment, domestic and regional instability, religious and spiritual dissimilarities, ethnic frictions, and even terrorism. All these elements make the issue of increased women's political participation of paramount importance.

Furthermore, the recommendations to be made in the latter part of this work are to act as policy guides, rather than ultimate objectives that if not carried out or followed will spell disaster. This means that the recommendations made here, while comprehensive and functional, are not the only possible avenues to achieving the desired goal of incorporating women in a greater share of the decision-making processes of national governments in Muslim countries. This point must be understood because of the heterogeneity of the Arab and Muslim world, in that some recommendations will work better in some states than others.

Lebanon and other countries involved in this study

This work will focus primarily on the Muslim countries of the Middle East, and will occasionally use Muslim countries in other regions as reference and for comparisons. The issue of increasing women's political participation is by no means limited to Middle Eastern or Muslim countries, but the aim of primarily focusing on these countries is warranted by the reality that these are the countries in which women

have least penetrated the realm of politics.¹⁶ And though this point could be made of many other regions, the Middle East is of great importance because ongoing instabilities: the near civil-war situation in Iraq, the murky future of the Palestinians, Iran's nuclear ambitions, or the future of democracy in the region. In short, the case can be made that there is an overwhelming need to address the issue of empowering women politically here and in other Muslim countries because such empowerment could lead to better governance and increased stability in the Middle East.

It has been widely recognized that the lack of women actively participating in politics amounts to a significant deficit in regards to the harnessing of the potential contributions by a sizable proportion of its population, and Muslim countries of the region are no exception. To put this in perspective, women are roughly 50% of a nation's total population and their lack of active participation – be it in the workforce, intellectual or academic spheres, or politics – means that that country has deprived itself of what amounts potentially half of its human resources, “Yet, to an economist, women are not exploited enough: they are the world's most under-utilised resource; getting more of them into work is part of the solution to many economic woes, including shrinking populations and poverty.”¹⁷ This is the case for all countries that in one way or another limit the access of women, or other groups, for active participation in society, which also severely limits the overall contributions to that particular nation's welfare.

Approaching the issue of women's contributions to politics in the Middle East from this stand point, we can then say that there is a whole section of the population that has yet to make its fair share of involvement in the decision-making aspects of their

¹⁶ Herbert Bodman & Nayereh, eds. *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1998), 291.

¹⁷ *Women in the Workforce: The importance of sex* (accessed April 4, 2007); available from http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6800723

society. Even though only a relatively small proportion is involved in the political affairs of a nation, the impact parliamentarians have on the general society is very important since they are the ones who establish the laws of the land. Since these laws effectively benefit or affect all the people (at least in theory), then it can be concluded that women are generally absent from one of the most effective ways of governance that regulates their own lives. This is the case in most parts of the world, but it is the overwhelming state of affairs in the Middle East and Muslim world that women are a much less major part of the decision-making process that effectively directs their affairs.

The focus on Lebanon presents an interesting sample of the larger region and a sort of real-life experiment because of its unique position of having a very diverse society. The Lebanese people are as varied as the region in which it is located; in terms of religion, the two major faiths are Islam and Christianity, but they are by no means homogeneous sects. For instance, Lebanon's Christians are of various denominations: Maronite Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, etc. And the same is true for its Muslim populations who are Shia, Sunni, Druze, Alawite, and so on.

Furthermore, because of its troubled past with civil war, religious and ethnic conflicts, Lebanon also presents an interesting case study for a post-war country and how it has dealt with women in politics. One section of this work covers how women have been incorporated into politics in post-conflict societies, and Lebanon fits the model of such a society. In essence, the choice of Lebanon as a case study is appropriate for this purpose because it has both the elements of a diverse nation in which to analyze women's roles in politics, as well as being a post-conflict society that may or may not have benefited the evolution of women in politics in the region.

What this study *is* and what it *is not*

The overarching aim of this study is to show that political and economic stability are unreachable until women are actively incorporated into the decision-making processes of the governments in the region, as is becoming the case in other societies. It will also show that most Muslim countries and those in the region, in addition to having all the elements that contribute to women's low penetration of economics and politics, are characterized by a unique set of circumstances that further hamper the progress of women in these specified fields. Because the political aspect is the center of this study, the focus will be on the parliaments of the countries involved because they are the decision-making mechanisms of their governments.

What this study *is not* is a detailed analysis of why the Middle East countries are the way they are. The conditions in Middle Eastern countries are what they are today because of a unique set of historic and contemporary circumstances, and whether or not these circumstances are justified is beyond the scope of this work. What should concern us are the reasons for the current lack of women's involvement in the political decision-making processes and ways to enhance them. Though the arguments may encourage liberal ideas like democracy, constitutionalism, rule of law, it should be noted the goal is not to criticize the regimes in the countries discussed. The focus should be on how to involve women in the overall decision-making process of government, whatever that type of government or regime may be. It is also generally understood that certain political arrangements – particularly democracies and constitutional regimes – have a better record of incorporating women in this process, as well as establishing a more conducive atmosphere for inclusion.¹⁸

¹⁸ In his *Foreign Affairs* article on illiberal democracies, Fareed Zakaria makes the point that constitutional regimes and the rule of law (and not just democracies) are more important variables in ensuring the rights and privileges of a nation's citizens, of which women's political rights would fall under.

WOMEN IN POLITICS (Section II)

Putting the Issue in Perspective

The status of Muslim women in politics is a topic that puzzles many since it may appear almost paradoxical that Muslim women are even *allowed* to participate in politics. And while this view is indeed a misconception, there is definitely some truth to the statement that Muslim women, or women in Islam, have not yet attained a similar level of political involvement with their counterparts in other parts of the world. Women are roughly 50% of the world's population but only represent a mere fraction of their constituencies.¹⁹ Although the number of women in the world may be slightly higher than that of men, it goes without saying that women's proportional political, economic and social powers are abominably lower than that of men.

This has historically been the case and most civilizations and societies have placed great emphasis on the dominant role of men, and the secondary, supportive status of women. Any proposed changes to such engrained attitudes in society will definitely take a significant amount of work and time before such complexes can be overcome. The following excerpt on the differences and variations of women in the Middle East and Muslim countries shows exactly how divergent the status of women is in these countries,

In Egypt, long regarded as one of the most modernizing of Muslim states, women cannot serve as judges, and yet in Morocco more than 20 per cent of its judges are women. Women in Egypt and Malaysia have access to the best education and hold responsible professional positions in virtually every sector. Yet, like women in most Muslim societies, they need a family member's permission to travel.²⁰

¹⁹ CIA World Fact book (accessed October 21, 2006); available from <https://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/xx.html>

²⁰ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 130.

This excerpt shows how in some Muslim societies women are relegated to specific sector of the society. Politics, whether local or national, is usually the last aspect of society that women engage in, and is also one of the sectors that have the least penetration by women.

This claim is supported by information and statistics that are provided by various organizations that collect and analyze data and statistics on such topics. One such organization is the Inter-Parliamentary Union.²¹ The Inter-Parliamentary Union's (IPU) website shows that the percentage of women in 2006 in national parliaments is 16.6%, but the same figure for Arab states, one of its sub-categories, is 8.2% - the lowest figure for any region of the world.²² And though this figure represents only the Arab world, it would not be an exaggeration to say that most of the Muslim world does not fare much better. To this in perspective, below are the figures for women in three major societal aspects (education²³, labor²⁴, government²⁵) of the 22 nations in the Arab League. But in order to fairly evaluate this data, it should be understood that the numbers mean different things to the various countries; this is because certain Gulf countries like

²¹ The IPU, established in 1889, is the international organization of Parliaments of sovereign states and is the "focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and co-operation among peoples and for the firm establishment of representative democracy." (accessed October 24, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/english/whatipu.htm>

²² IPU Online, Women in National Parliaments (accessed December 5, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

²³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (accessed January 12, 2007); available from http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/Exceltables/education/Literacy_National_CurrentRel.xls

²⁴ World Bank Group, *Gender Stats* (accessed January 12, 2007); available from <http://devdata.worldbank.org/genderstats/genderRpt.asp?rpt=labor&cty=MNA,Middle%20East%20North%20Africa&hm=home2>

²⁵ Online, Women in National Parliaments (accessed January 12, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. These numbers are derived by adding the number of women in the upper and lower houses of the parliaments and dividing them by the total number of parliamentarians.

Yemen or Saudi Arabia are not directly comparable to others in the region since the women in those countries are a much smaller part of the workforce, for example.²⁶

Women's Participation in Education, Labor & Government in Middle East

Country	Literacy rate of Women*	% of in Women Workforce**	% of Women in Parliament***
Algeria	60.1%	30%	5.3%
Bahrain	83.6	19	10.9
Comoros	n/a	40	3.0
Djibouti	n/a	39	10.8
Egypt	59.4	22	3.8
Iraq	64.2	n/a	25.5
Jordan	84.7	24	7.9
Kuwait	91.0	25	1.5
Lebanon	n/a	30	4.7
Libya	n/a	26	7.7
Mauritania	43.4	40	20.9
Morocco	39.6	25	6.4
Oman	73.5	16	7.8
Palestine	88	13	n/a
Qatar	88.6	14	0.0
Saudi Arabia	69.3	15	0.0
Somalia	n/a	39	7.8
Sudan	51.8	25	16.4
Syria	73.6	30	12.0
Tunisia	65.3	27	19.3
UAE	n/a	13	0.0
Yemen	n/a	28	0.7

*UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS)

** World Bank Group, *Gender Stats*

*** IPU Online, *Women in National Parliaments*

The information presented in this table shows that there is a wide variance in women's penetration and participation in these three sectors, and would serve the purpose of assessing disparities, "The proportion of women in occupations that usually involve decision-making, such as legislators, senior officials and managers, can provide an

²⁶ The figures for the number of women in the workforce is unavailable for both countries, but the literacy rate in Saudi Arabia and Yemen are 70% and 30%, respectively. A significant proportion of these figures relate to Quranic learning, rather than conventional learning.

indication of gender differentials in access to decision-making.”²⁷ There are also a few paradoxes that, at first, seem baffling; while Qatar has the highest women’s literacy rate in the Arab region (88.6%), it also has one of the lowest proportion of women in the workforce (14%), and absolutely no women in parliament. On the other hand, Mauritania, which has a much lower proportion of literate women (43.4%), has 40% of its women in the workforce and 20.9% of its parliamentarians are women. These observations demonstrate the differences that are part of the region being analyzed, and the difficulty in using generalizations and oversimplifying patterns or conclusions.

Women are generally underrepresented in the political arena (there are a few exceptions like Sweden and Rwanda), but the picture has been changing over the past two decades.²⁸ “Women are often underrepresented in formal politics, as heads of state or parliamentary representatives or executive bureaucrats for example... Women are more likely to organize in other politics, in social movements, and in non-governmental organizations for example.”²⁹ That being said, the progress made by women in the Muslim world is somewhat less encouraging, but as with everything else, there are a host of reasons for the discrepancies in political participation.

What is meant by political participation here is more than just voting rights and duties; it refers specifically to the decision-making processes that guide the affairs of governments and affect the lives of the citizens of a country. The decision-makers being referred to here would include (in order of relevance): parliamentarians, regional

²⁷ United Nations Department of Economic & Social Affairs, *The World’s Women 2005: Progress In Statistics*. New York, NY: United Nations Publication (accessed March 20, 2007), 83; available from http://unstats.un.org/unsd/Demographic/products/indwm/ww2005_pub/English/WW2005_text_complete_BW.pdf

²⁸ Various countries in Africa and South America, like Chile and Liberia, have indeed led the way by involving more women in the decision-making processes of their governments. This may be attributed to the positive and untainted views of women politicians, post-conflict societies, etc.

²⁹ Jan Jindy Pettman, “Gender Issues” in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, eds. John Baylis & Steve Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 485.

representatives, governors, and heads of governments. Women are struggling to have their voices heard and be seen as a force to reckon with, and this is even more so for Muslim women, since it is an additional fight to represent themselves – they are sometimes doing so in societies that are either indifferent to their pleas or downright hostile to their political agendas.

The Scandinavian countries have traditionally led the way in terms of women's political participation. Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland have all been pioneers in this area not only because their laws have guaranteed women's rights but also because they have a long history of including women in politics since the early 20th century. These four countries are all ranked in the top six spots of women in the national parliaments with their average being 40.8%, and this region has always been known to be the most representative for women.³⁰ The America's comes in next at 21.4%, Europe at 18.2%, Sub-Saharan Africa at 16.7%, Asia at 16.5%, and the Pacific at 14.4%.³¹

This issue of Muslim women's political participation should be seen in the larger context of low women's participation in general politics. This is because women have significantly lower levels of political participation in most countries and because many of the obstacles that hinder participation are generalized in most societies. Again, according to IPU figures on the gender breakdown for both lower and upper houses of parliament, women are a total of 7,112 parliamentarians out of a total of 44,121.³² That is, women account for only 16.9% of parliamentarians in all countries!³³ (That being said, it should also be recognized that even this figure is quite an achievement,

³⁰ IPU Online, Women in National Parliaments (accessed December 5, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

considering that it has taken over a century to arrive at this point). This goes to show that the issue of increasing women's political participation is not restricted to Muslim or Arab countries; indeed, it is a global issue, even though the Middle Eastern countries are worse off than the average nation in terms of women's political participation.

This ushers us to the essence of the research topic: what is the current status of women in politics in the Muslim world and where do opportunities lie for increased political participation? *My argument is that Muslim countries, particularly the Arab countries of the Middle East, will enjoy better governance and greater levels of political stability once there is a reassessment of women's participation in the political decision-making process.* Close attention will be paid to contemporary and religious aspects of women's status in politics, as well as a focus on women politicians.

Women in 20th Century Politics

History is littered with the stories of women in powerful positions and women who have led their people and nations to great heights. Even monolithic faiths like Christianity and Islam (which are both known to be overwhelmingly patriarchal) have their fair share of references not only the exploits but also the high positions women have risen to. Examples of such women are (1) Eve, wife of Adam, (2) the Queen of Sheeba, (3) Mary, mother of Jesus, (4) Khadijah, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad.³⁴ Moreover, there have been Muslim women like the Egyptian Huda Sha'arawi who have made immense but unrecognized contributions to their societies.³⁵ And while the majority of women mentioned above have had major impacts on their peoples, there are

³⁴ References are made to the first three women in the Holy Bible while the Quran refers to all four. Both holy books have similar themes in relation to these women and how they are portrayed.

³⁵ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996), 102.

also a good number of Biblical references to women who have been instrumental to the downfall of God's men or his nation. Examples in the Old Testament are Delilah,³⁶ seducer of Samson, and Jezebel,³⁷ Queen of Baal.

Notwithstanding, the overwhelming number of people in leadership or governing roles in history have been men, even when women have been accorded suffrage rights, "Although the constitution gives women the right to vote and be elected, political reality only grants them the former."³⁸ Before the establishment of the modern state, women in power were either queens, or the wives of very influential men. Norway, in 1906, became the very first country to grant women full unrestricted political rights, which meant that women could not only vote but also be voted to political office.³⁹ And not until the second half of the 20th century did women begin to take a more active role in the running of their governments. But the history of women is not the story of elite women alone.

To understand the gravity of Norway's decision to grant women full political rights exactly one century ago, consider the fact that a country like Switzerland which is today recognized as a liberal and prosperous society did not completely grant women the right to vote until 1971,⁴⁰ while Albania had granted women their rights since 1920.⁴¹ Hence, it ought to be acknowledged that the matter of granting women's political rights is not restricted to developing or Muslim countries alone. Also, that the

³⁶ The Holy Bible (King James Version), Judges, chapter 16; (New York: Ivy Books, 1990), 258-259.

³⁷ Ibid, Kings, 1 chapters 18 & 19; 355-359.

³⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd,1996), 2.

³⁹ *Finland's trailblazing path for women* (accessed December 3, 2006); available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5036602.stm>

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Online Women in Politics (accessed December 3, 2006); available from <http://www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org/statistics.htm>

mere presence of such laws and rights for women do not necessarily or immediately translate into increased women's participation in the political decision-making process.

The first half of the 20th century is a period in which women generally played very limited roles in politics – “Austria was the only State to have elected a woman to the presidency of one of the Parliament's Chambers (the Bundesrat) before the Second World War.”⁴² Many today may think that the developed world was always ‘liberal’ but this short, but telling narrative shows otherwise, “Only in 1907 was the first woman of parliament anywhere elected, again in a country remote from the centers of European power, Finland. The exclusion of women from participation in politics persisted despite the efforts of women's rights groups, some increasingly vocal and militant, to compel a change. In England in 1903, the House of Commons had laughed down a bill giving the vote to women without even debating it.”⁴³ This could be seen as a result of restricted or non-existent women's rights, general indifference to the issue of human rights issues, colonial governments, the two World Wars, and so on.

In a Muslim country like Turkey, women were granted equal suffrage since 1933 and have had full political rights since 1935.⁴⁴ Moreover, Turkish women have since 1935 been elected to the Grand National Assembly (national parliament). Including women in the political decision-making process of Modern Turkey was a major objective of Ataturk, the founder of modern-day Turkey.⁴⁵ Even though the Turkish government was secular in nature, its inclusion of women in its parliamentary system at such an

⁴² Women Speakers of National Parliaments (accessed December 3, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/speakers.htm>

⁴³ Carter Findley & John Rothney, *Twentieth Century World*, (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002), 33.

⁴⁴ Ruth Woodsmall, *Women and the New East* (Washington D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1960), 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 27-28.

early period illustrates how women have since been representing their constituencies, and in a Muslim country too. Similarly, women in Pakistan have also been serving in the parliament since 1957 when the central government reserved 10 seats for women parliamentarians;⁴⁶ it was seen as a measure to help ensure their independent participation in the political process.⁴⁷

Throughout the 1980s and 90s it could be said that the most high profile woman in politics was Benazir Bhutto, the twice elected prime minister of Pakistan (1988-90 and 1993-96). Not only was she a well connected, highly educated, and charismatic executive head of state, she was also the first Muslim woman to have led a major Muslim country in the world – one that would eventually go on to become a nuclear power. Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, the former Palestinian spokeswoman and Palestinian advocate, is another fine example of a veteran woman politician in the region who has made a name for herself by campaigning for the improvement of the plight of the Palestinian people.

A third prominent woman leader was Margaret Thatcher, Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1979-1990, who was known as a savvy politician and head of the Conservative Party in parliament. Her talents for besting even veteran politicians and playing the male-dominated game of British and world politics became legendary. She was also the first woman executive head of state to lead a permanent member of the UN Security Council (which was also symbolically significant in the Cold War), and guided Britain to its military victory in 1982 in the Falkland Islands. In essence, it could be said that these three leaders ushered in a new era of high profile political leadership that

⁴⁶ Ibid, 132.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

sometimes, seemed larger than life, and/or had awe-inspiring personalities that eclipsed the nations they represented.

Leila Ahmed, a prominent scholar on Middle Eastern gender issues, sees the intricacies of women's involvement in society, as well as the potential for their increasing involvement to transform the formal and informal relationships,

In the second half of the twentieth century, the roles of Egyptian women underwent massive expansion and transformation. Women entered all arenas of white-collar and professional work, including aeronautics, engineering and big business, and politics—even becoming members of parliament. The only positions they have not yet occupied are judge and head of state. The nature and variety of their participation in the economy, in political life, and in the visible, dominant culture, are now enormously complex.⁴⁸

Recognizing the vital roles that these women played in the politics of their respective nations, one must also remember that they were the exception and not the rule because women constituted only a relatively small part of the overall political decision-making process in the 20th century.

Conversely, by the end of the 20th century, the percentage of women in parliament had increased fourfold from 3% in 1945 to 11.6% in 1995.⁴⁹ Though the slow pace of progress may lead one to think that we may have to wait another 50 years before we see women's participation increase to, say, 30 or 40%, it must be reiterated that the rate of increase of women in politics in the last decade has surged substantively. In short, all things being equal, the momentum generated in the 20th century by many countries on the issue of increasing women's political participation looks set to drastically increase the numbers of women in politics, and, in effect, transform "the face of politics." The changing face of politics could involve everything from national female

⁴⁸ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 208.

⁴⁹ IPU Online, *Women in National Parliaments: 50 years of history at a glance* (accessed December 3, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/history.htm>

spokespersons, parliamentary leaders, and even well-known first-ladies. Prominent examples are President Ellen Sirleaf-Johnson of Liberia (Africa's first female head-of-state) and Queen Rania of Jordan. We are already used to seeing women in the West fulfill these roles, but the emerging trend is that women in the developing world, including some Muslim nations, are assuming ever more noticeable political roles.

Contemporary Issues: Executive Women in Political Office

The news is littered with facts and figures of women increasingly taking the helm of the social, economic and political aspects of their nations. Notable high profile women in political and civil office include Asha-Rose Migiro (Deputy Secretary-General of the UN) and Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of US Congress), and these are only a few to mention. Women being elected and nominated for such positions are indeed a sign of the times we live in, for it is hard to imagine them occupying such offices a few decades ago. It is becoming the norm that women are increasingly taking such positions without societal uproars. It is equally notable that the credentials and abilities of these women are rarely challenged or questioned when they are chosen or elected for these positions. These developments should not be taken for granted since it has taken decades to reach this point and because many of these achievements are still restricted to mostly women in the developed world who are regularly in the media's limelight.

In terms of women heads of state, there are presently twelve who are heading their governments, either as presidents or prime ministers in Ireland, Latvia, Finland, Philippines, New Zealand, Mozambique, South Korea, Germany, Jamaica, Bangladesh, Liberia and Chile. These women leaders are at the highest echelon of political power and it may be said that it is reflective of the progressive nature of the changing times. Of

course, this number only represents 6% of the total number of countries presented in the United Nations. It is also another issue whether the policies of their governments are effectively sympathetic to the issue of women in politics. This is because the few women that do rise to top positions in their political parties do so through complex political maneuverings and log-rolling practices, which are privy only to those in tight political circles, bureaucrats, and lobbyists who are almost always men.

Moreover, countries in the Middle East are also benefiting from the presence of women in the national cabinets because appointments to this level of the executive branch have been on the rise in recent years. According to the IPU women have made headway in the cabinets of various countries in the region, especially where such progress would not have been expected only a few years ago – “Women are slowly emerging as political leaders in a region that has long been a bastion of male power. Where women have not been able to win direct election to Parliament, the political leadership has explored other avenues for increasing their participation, most notably through appointments, as in Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE. Once invisible, women are gradually realizing their political potential and their concerns are beginning to be addressed in the political arena.”⁵⁰

An opposing view would be that these women leaders, while holding the highest political offices, are the exception because their governments are by no means gender balanced, and their rise to power should not be confused with increased women’s participation in politics. Since looking at women at the top echelon of power is not a true reflection of women’s involvement in the political realm, exploring the contributions of

⁵⁰ *Women in Parliament in 2006: The Year in Perspective*, (accessed March 31, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmn06-e.pdf>

women at the parliamentary level is probably the best means to gauge their contributions to society. This is because national legislatures are responsible for the laws of the land, they are elected by the majority of the people, and the high numbers of parliamentary seats are more representative than any other branch of government (Judiciary and Executive). Thus, the parliament could be seen as an optimal forum for women to increase their political participation.

Another likely contender for measuring women's political participation would be the local government, but several problems arise from analyzing this level of government. The foremost difficulty stems from unreliability of the information on local governments and the male to female breakdown of the figures in many of the developing countries. The second difficulty is as a corollary of the first: even if we had the information, applying it in a consistent and comparable fashion would be extremely taxing because of the varying standards in countries. Third, is the trouble of different structures of local governments since some countries have districts, while others have provinces or states. However, All these problems are mitigated by using the legislative branch of government to measure political participation in the Arab and Muslim world – all have parliaments/legislatures, the parliaments can be compared using the male to female ratio of parliamentarians, and the parliaments are structured similarly.

On a different note, because the government is headed by a woman does not necessarily mean that the government is primarily comprised of women or even sympathetic to their views and interests, "Asking the question 'Where are the women?' can suggest different kinds of answers. For some it leads to 'the famous few'-to name

Indira Ghandi, Margaret Thatcher, or Golda Meir for example.”⁵¹ As a matter of fact, just asking this simple question, and thereby attracting much needed attention is the first step in addressing the problem. Though this may seem an obvious point, one should not take it for granted because Muslim states that have been headed by women,⁵² either as heads of state or women monarchs, have usually been figure heads with mostly ceremonial powers or have come to power by family connections.⁵³

It should come as no surprise that there is only one Muslim country (Bangladesh) in the list of countries with women leaders, for the Muslim world is currently dealing with other major issues that have driven women’s political participation to the wayside. Examples of some of these outstanding issues are economic development, Islamophobia, terrorism, political instability. Put in this context, it is understandable why the matter of women’s political participation has not been a major topic on the national agendas of most Muslim countries (but this is not to assume that women’s rights and political participation would automatically be thrust into the national agenda if these other problems were not pressing). That being said, countries like Morocco and Kuwait are making strides in this arena, even if from a rather low benchmark.⁵⁴

On the polar opposite of countries in the Middle East making advances in bringing women into the public and political life, there is Saudi Arabia. Mai Yamani is a prominent scholar on women in Saudi Arabia and the daughter of the former Saudi

⁵¹ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Introduction” in *Women, Islam & the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991) ,7.

⁵² Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996) 79.

⁵³ The best example of this is Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan. Though she was indeed qualified and capable of her position, her rise to the top of the Pakistan Peoples Party and the government would not have been possible without her status of being the daughter of a previous Pakistani premier, Zufikar Ali Bhutto, as well as the grand daughter of a key figure in Pakistan’s independence, Sir Shah Nawaz Bhutto.

⁵⁴ In the Moroccan parliament a party-imposed women’s quota is already in place, and Kuwait has a woman in its parliament.

Petroleum Minister, Ahmed Yamani. Dr. Mai Yamani notices the general absence of women from the public domain, as well as having a social life that is separate from that of men.⁵⁵ Essentially this means that women cannot become an integral part of the political landscape if they are not seen as an active and contributing group to the society at large. Educational opportunities have expanded to include women at the university level, although their career choices are severely limited; on the other hand, Yamani notes that “post-educational employment in widening spheres of the economy has for the first time become a possibility, and in some cases a necessity for the new generation.”⁵⁶ This new generation of young Saudis is not only better educated but also has good access to technologies and news that connects them to the outside world, which means that they will have better knowledge about the changes occurring with women in their region. It should also be expected that they will eventually push for changes in their own societies that would include increased political participation.

In the social and economic arena, women in a country like Bangladesh, through organizations like the Grameen Bank, have developed successful models for alleviating poverty (especially with women), and the results have greatly helped their local communities.⁵⁷ Not only has its socio-economic model proven successful in its core countries, it has also helped women in various countries, like Bolivia and Nigeria, on four continents.⁵⁸ The Grameen bank is a good example of what can be achieved when local institutions with local initiative and international assistance are employed to create

⁵⁵ Mai Yamani, “Muslim Women and Human Rights in Saudi Arabia: Aspirations of a New Generation,” in *Women and Islam: Critical Concepts in Sociology*, ed. Haideh Moghissi (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2005), 406.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 409.

⁵⁷ The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank, in October 2006 recognizes the achievements of this micro-credit institution and the good it has done, especially in rural low income communities in developing countries.

⁵⁸ Grameen Bank (accessed October 21, 2006); available from http://www.grameenfoundation.org/where_we_work/

synergies that can be further translated into economic and social empowerment for women.

Indeed, the Grameen Bank presents us with an interesting economic empowerment approach that could be replicated for political purposes. Such a political grass-root model has yet to be developed for transnational political participation of Muslim women around the world, and could be worth implementing. It would be interesting to see if a parallel political organization could galvanize the same interest and results when women's political participation is involved. This avenue to including women in the economic engine of a country and boosting its prosperity presents an unexplored alternative that may also lead to the same result of involving women in the political decision-making process in the Middle East.⁵⁹

The Case of Women Politicians in Post-Conflict & Developing Countries

Is there something to be said for the case of women in post-conflict societies and the political process? According to officials at IPU, women have been instrumental to the rebuilding and reshaping of many of post-conflict societies, and "women's rights can often be boosted as a result of more widespread political upheaval."⁶⁰ Whether or not this is a coincidence is an interesting issue (which we shall come to later) but is not directly related to the matter at hand. What is important is that there is a notable correlation between women entering the political arena right after the stabilization of internal affairs in many post-conflict societies.

⁵⁹ The counterargument that using the 'Grameen way' may be a better way to achieve results for increased women's political participation is raised here but not explored further because it would distract from the main thesis already proposed in this paper.

⁶⁰ *Finland's trailblazing path for women* (accessed December 4, 2006); available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5036602.stm>

In a few cases like Afghanistan and Iraq, this introduction of women into politics has been implemented by an external force (the United States in both cases), but the overall effect is still the same because women become part and parcel of the political process. Other countries like Rwanda and Liberia have experienced a similar trend, though the initiative was more localized and implemented by the people themselves. And because it has the highest level of women in parliament, Rwanda is seen as a model for what can be accomplished by women in the aftermath of devastating domestic and international conflicts.⁶¹ Indeed, the list of post-conflict societies in which women are actively taking part in the decision-making process is impressive. As the table below shows, the proportion of women in parliaments⁶² in post-conflict societies⁶³ have sometimes outpaced that of stable nations:

Women Parliamentarians in Post-Conflict Societies

Country	World Ranking	% of women MPs (lower or single house)*	Conflicts**
Rwanda	1	48.8%	1994-96
Mozambique	10	34.8	1977-92
Burundi	16	30.5	1993-2003
Uganda	18	29.8	1971-86
Afghanistan	25	27.3	1978-88, 2001-present
Iraq	28	25.5	2003-present
East Timor	29	25.3	1975-99
Eritrea	38	22	1962-91, 1995-2000
Ethiopia	39	21.9	1974-79, 1999-2000
Nicaragua	45	20.7	1978-87

*IPU Online, *Women in National Parliaments*

*BBC News Online

⁶¹ Rwanda, in addition to its political and economic instabilities, still suffers residual effects of its 1994 ethnic conflict that claimed the lives of about 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

⁶² IPU Online, *Women in National Parliaments (situation as of 31 October 2006)*, (accessed December 4, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

⁶³ These dates have been taken from the Country Profile section of the BBC News website. It should be noted that there were short and long periods of intermission in these conflicts.

It ought not to come as a revelation that the only two majority Muslim countries of Afghanistan and Iraq are the ones that were invaded by the United States in 2001 and 2003, respectively. What this shows is that no other Muslim country has taken the initiative to implement such a process on a large scale. The only other Muslim country that comes close is Bangladesh (15.1%) since it has 45 out of 345 seats reserved for women in its parliament.⁶⁴ The reservation of parliamentary seats, or setting quotas, is a scheme that has been adopted by other Muslim countries like Pakistan, and it is one that has been highly favored by proponents of women's increased participation.

It is obvious that these post-conflict (and conflict) countries have a much higher percentage of women's participation in parliament than many of their more peaceful neighbors. So what can account for the fact that women in many of the post-conflict societies play a more active role in politics than many non-conflict societies? Some rationales are stated below:

1. International Assistance: As opposed to cases like Iraq and Afghanistan, there are times when the international community, usually by way of an international organization, facilitates the re-institutionalization of the political structure in a post-conflict state. Stipulations of such international assistance would include the equal gender participation and the campaigning of women's rights – which could lead to a higher proportion of women's active involvement in the political process.
2. Credibility of Women: This emphasizes disapproval with the way male politicians have handled the affairs of the state. When men are perceived as corruptible and have perpetuated a conflict, women may be seen as neutral parties that are less corruptible and will not lead the country back to a war

⁶⁴ IPU Online, *Women in National Parliaments (situation as of 31 October 2006)*, (accessed December 4, 2006); available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

path. This also plays into notion of gender roles and that women are less conflictual than men and are better caretakers of the family.

3. Lack of Capable Men: This does not mean that women are any less capable than men, or that women politicians are only the second alternative. What this means is that the numbers and ranks of men are usually depleted in post-conflict countries that women are the best qualified people to take the helm of the government. The usually high number of deaths among the men in post-conflict societies also means that women are more readily available for key political positions vital to the rebuilding efforts. In other instances the male politicians that are available have been discredited or tainted by some sort of political fallout.
4. Electoral Reforms: There is never a better time than after conflict in which to initiate electoral reforms, and such an opportunity is not missed by those in power. Reforms can be in the form of mandatory registration of all adults for basic government services, increasing women's access to education, and creating quotas for women in government and its ministries.
5. External Influence: This has already been discussed above, and it refers to situations in which an external actor forcefully changes the political climate of another state and then initiates a system of political reform that incorporates increased women's participation at the parliamentary level.

In spite of the explanations listed above, it is still unclear what the overall effect is on the political process. Nevertheless, the Economist shares a more optimistic stance of the outcomes of having women in politics – “More women in government could also boost economic growth: studies show that women are more likely to spend money on improving health, education, infrastructure and poverty and less likely to waste it on

tanks and bombs.”⁶⁵ But we should be careful to not use references of vague studies to guide our arguments on increasing the roles of women in politics because of the wide variance in the types of post-conflict societies in which women’s political participation occurs; each country will have to be assessed on a case by case basis. Otherwise we run the risk of oversimplifying the effects of women in government by saying that their presence improves the quality of the decision-making, whereas what should actually be articulated is that the increased participation of women in the process could lead to better governance under certain conditions.

On another note, it is highly symbolic that women are becoming an integral part of the political process in post-conflict societies. One way of seeing the trend is by explaining it as a rejuvenation of the political system of the nation. The Women politicians breathe new life into the political process and reinvent what was once a chaotic and destabilizing process. Besides, the phenomenon of women in politics is not new, but the way the women are viewed and how approach politics in conflict regions will be the deciding factor. The symbolism associated with women in post-conflict societies ought not to be underestimated, for the overall psychological effects to the populace tend to instill a sense of long overdue reconciliation and rebuilding.

Women Politicians in Lebanon

The Republic of Lebanon presents a peculiar case in the Middle East for various reasons. It is an interesting selection because it contains different elements that are, in one way or another, present in the other Middle Eastern countries. First, Lebanon is an Arab country with a significant Muslim population of about 60% that is split between its

⁶⁵ *Women in the Workforce: The importance of sex* (accessed April 4, 2007); available from http://www.economist.com/opinion/displaystory.cfm?story_id=6800723

Shia and Sunni religious groups, while Christians account for almost 40% of the rest of its population.⁶⁶ Second, Lebanon is a democratic state with several religious sects sharing and vying for political influence and power. Third, Lebanon would be included in the post-conflict society category because it emerged from a 15 year civil war (1976-91). Fourth, relatively speaking, Lebanon is a liberal society with widespread political and social freedoms that are not only recognized but guaranteed by its constitution. And last, Lebanon has a relatively affluent and sophisticated middle class that has adequate access to basic services like education and health.

Why is all this important? Lebanon's status in the Middle East is unique because it contains all these, and even more, differentiating elements that make it both coveted and troublesome at the same time. Political stability has never been a trademark of the Lebanese governments, especially with its history of political intrigue, sectarian conflicts, and high profile assassinations. Notwithstanding, it was until recently a mecca for tourism and has enjoyed considerable economic growth since the signing of the Taif Accords in 1991, which ushered in Lebanon's re-emergence into the world after its civil war.

The current political scene in Lebanon is of major concern because it is going through another one of its politically unstable phases. This is a result of the conflict in July 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah, a Shia organization that also happens to be a legitimate part of the Lebanese government as well as an armed group. Though the conflict ended in August, Lebanon is still feeling the repercussion since a good deal of its infrastructure has been destroyed by repeated bombings and its economic future is now

⁶⁶ CIA World Fact book, *Lebanon* (accessed December 4, 2006); available from <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/le.html>

in doubt. In essence, the argument could be made that the people have more important things to worry about than increasing women's political participation.

Lebanon presents an anomaly to the case made earlier for increased women's political participation in national legislatures, which is partly why the case of Lebanon is so unique. While other post-conflict countries have increased women's participation in politics, namely in the parliament, Lebanon has had no significant progress in respect to making women a political force. This case is certainly not restricted to Lebanon alone, for the Middle East itself is a region littered with post-conflict states that have not seen an increase in the number of women in politics. It could hence be said that the Middle East as a whole is characterized by the uncommonly low proportion of women in politics, and by extension the domain of law-making processes that regulate public life.

Nevertheless, Lebanon's unicameral legislative body (Majlis Alnuwab) is responsible for the decision-making process of the government. There are currently only six women in the Lebanese parliament, out of a total of 128 members. According to the IPU's ranking of women in parliament Lebanon comes in at 123, with 4.7%, while some of its other Arab neighbors like Syria, Jordan and Tunisia all score much higher. What could account for Lebanon's low figures when the five elements listed above would dictate otherwise? Lebanon is indeed an anomaly because it is a post-conflict society but with little in way of women's participation in politics.

The women in the Lebanese parliament are Strida Samir Geagea, Solange Bachir Gemayel, Gilberte Maurice Zouein, Nayla René Mouawad, Bahia Bahaeddine Hariri, Ghenwa Jalloul. Of these six women parliamentarians, Nayla Mouawad is without a doubt the most prominent. Not only is she a highly recognized figure in the Lebanese political scene, she is also the wife of the former President Rene Mouawad, who was

assassinated in November 1989. Furthermore, two of these women (Gemayel and Geagea) are wives of military commanders, and another two are wives of former presidents (Mouawad and Gemayel), and Zouein comes from a famous Christian family and her father was prominent member of the Lebanese parliament.⁶⁷

This raises the issue of 'patriarchal political hereditary,' (which is by no means restricted to the Middle East) and could be seen in both positive and negative lights. This phenomenon is not restricted to women alone, for even Saad Hariri, the son of assassinated Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, has risen to the position of leader of the parliamentary majority in the Lebanese parliament.⁶⁸

Without a doubt, many have criticized this particular approach of political heredity in the region. The reasoning behind such criticism would be that it recreates the traditional Lebanese customs into modern-day politics. On the other hand this may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially if the hereditary successor goes through the stipulated election process and is capable of assuming such a post.

More than anything, the circumstances surrounding the case of women in politics in Lebanon presents a challenge to the notion that women will take the helm of their political affairs if given the chance. But Marguerite Helou, a professor at the Lebanese University, explains this phenomenon in a 2001 study, "Female entry to parliament was not through free competitive elections with equal opportunities, as it was through the prevalent traditional social structures... The door to such structures is not opened to the woman except by the man or in his absence."⁶⁹ In short, this means that a woman's road

⁶⁷ As explained to me by Elias Sayegh, a fellow Fletcher colleague from Lebanon.

⁶⁸ *Hariri in bitter attack on Syria* (accessed December, 2006); available http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5259842.stm

⁶⁹ Alia Ibrahim, *Few Women Enter Lebanon's Parliament*, (accessed December 4, 2006); available from <http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1648>

to political office often lies in the hands of a well-known male figure or his unfortunate absence. This observation of the political climate in Lebanon is certainly not positive for advocates of increase women's participation, though it is a first step to understanding the predicament of women in the political arena in the Middle East, though similar circumstances are not restricted to this region.

The main point to take from all this is that even relatively liberal countries, whether in the Middle East or not, are not necessarily germane to having more women active in the decision-making process. The case of Lebanon shows that even though it may have more political freedoms for women and that it enjoys a better standard of living than its neighbors, women are still less involved in the politics, and that those who are involved are there as a result of a combination of factors, especially the importance of their family ties.

The Case For Muslim Women Politicians

What exactly is a Muslim country? Whether using a percentage of total population or the perceived spirituality of the people, a Muslim country should be one that classifies itself as such.⁷⁰ Thus, a nation with a significant Muslim population but which does not regard itself as Muslim cannot be called a Muslim country. Armed with the knowledge that not all Arabs are Muslims and that most Muslims are not Arabs, we can say that Muslim states display a wide degree of variance, in terms of culture, ethnicity, economic welfare, and even practice of the Islamic faith. This leads into the next issue of whether Muslim women are adequately represented in their countries.

⁷⁰ This leads me to ask the question why a country like Gabon, with a Muslim population of less than 1 per cent, is a member of the Organization of Islamic Conferences; available from <http://www.oic-oci.org>

As with most complex situations, the answer to this question is complicated and depends on who is answering the question. An alim (Muslim scholar) in Bahrain would most likely say yes, that women are indeed well represented because those at the top (mostly unelected and almost always men) have taken into consideration their interests, that they follow the Quran, and implement the Shariah (both which have already made special provisions for women). Conversely, a Moroccan female scholar may say no, that the laws of the land do not adequately reflect the rights of the woman, and that those in power do not resort to Islam unless it is in their interest. The truth is that each party could point to different facts to strengthen their individual claims, but this would lead us no closer to our goal of finding out why the divergence exists in the first place.

One of the main reasons why there is such a divergence of opinions in the Muslim world on this issue lies in the fact that different *apparatuses of measurement/assessment* are used to gauge women's participation and relevance in politics: the alim uses the Quran and Shariah as his measure, while the scholar makes use of modern day political concepts and theories. For our purpose, the percentage of women in parliament could be one starting point to gauge how involved women are on a political level. And as argued earlier, participation at the parliamentary level is an adequate level to measure political involvement because of reliable parliamentary information and comparability – as opposed to other levels of politics that are either too narrow (executive levels) or too divergent for satisfactory comparisons (local levels).

One major argument that has been put forward by advocates of increased women participation in politics and the decision-making process is that women are, by their nature, less prone to the corrupt ways of their male counterparts. That is, women have not been given the opportunity to show what they are capable of, which, at least in their

view, is worth a lot. “Women candidates say bribery and corruption will be less of an issue if women are voted into parliament. They say women are less susceptible to such underhand measures.”⁷¹ Whether this opinion is true or not is beside the point for our purposes; what is important here is that this claim cannot be proven or discounted unless women are given similar opportunities in the political arena.

Next, Fareed Zakaria, author of *The Future of Freedom*, takes note that what many think of Muslim countries is sometimes far from the reality. For instance he mentions that before the rise of the Taliban 40% of all doctors in Afghanistan were women and that Kabul was considered one of the liberal and intellectual centers for women in Asia.⁷² Furthermore, he makes an interesting observation that seems almost counter-intuitive when looking at the situation of women in the Muslim countries – “The most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia... has now embraced democracy (still a fragile experiment) and has elected a woman as its president. After Indonesia, the three largest Muslim populations in the world are in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India... Not only have these countries had much experience with democracy, all three have elected women as prime minister, and they did so well before most Western countries. So although some aspects of Islam are incompatible with women’s rights, the reality on the ground is sometimes quite different. And South Asia is not an anomaly with regard to Islamic women.”⁷³

Another important argument by the advocates of increased women’s political participation, and which is especially applicable to the Muslim world, is that those who

⁷¹ Julia Wheeler, *Kuwaiti women's time has come* (accessed October 20, 2006); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/5128284.stm

⁷² Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), 126.

⁷³ Ibid. Megawati Soekarnoputri, the female Indonesian Prime Minister referred to in the passage was replaced in 2004 by the incumbent Prime Minister, Mr. Susilo Yudhoyono.

now have the political power have done little to justify their claim to such positions. In short, if the decision making process was a meritocracy, men (at least the ones who have held power) would have very little place in politics. *So, why not give women a chance?* While this may not be the most convincing of arguments – even if a noble one – there is something to be said for the failures of the leaders and politicians of the Muslim world, particularly in the Middle East where successive governments have repeatedly fallen below the expectations of their own people.⁷⁴

The Case Against Muslim Women Politicians

There are those who take the opposing view and say that Muslim women in politics is an abnormality because Islam is inherently opposed to, or ill-suited for women leaders in contemporary world politics. As the argument goes: men have always held power in the Muslim world and that men, by their nature, are more capable of carrying out such duties and are better suited for the responsibilities and pressures of governing in an anarchic world. “Still others insist that the status and role of women in Muslim societies should be attributed primarily to socioeconomic forces rather than to religious belief. The explanations are as diverse as the Muslim world itself. Thus, charting the progress or regression of women, whether under secular or religious governments, is a tricky task.”⁷⁵ In addition, the welfare of women and their agendas are indirectly addressed because those in power make their decisions in conjunction with the stipulations of the Islamic faith, which already takes into consideration women’s issues.

⁷⁴ It should be noted that I am not singling out the Muslim or Arab countries, since political ineptness is not restricted to these countries. A large number of African, Central & South American, and Asia countries also fall under this category.

⁷⁵ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 130.

Such views are based on a classic/purist interpretation of Islam (taqhid), which emphasizes imitation of the early days of Islam and the ways of Prophet Muhammad and his followers. This is not a baseless claim since the Quran does specify that the woman is put under the care of the man, and that her general and economic welfare is directly dependent on the man.⁷⁶ What may be in doubt, though, is whether indeed men have adequately taken into consideration the needs of women and whether they believe they have been well represented by their male counterparts. And though the argument could be made that women are not as dependent on men today as they were during the Prophet's time, the reality remains that the overwhelming number of households in the world (and indeed the Middle East) are led by men.

Although there is no explicit verse in the Quran that excludes women from the political arena, there are other Islamic sources that lead to this conclusion. It is reported by Al-Buhari in one of the hadiths (sayings) of Prophet Muhammed that "A people who place women in charge of their affairs will never prosper."⁷⁷ Women scholars and historians like Fatima Mernissi recognize the significance of this statement and the impact of its unquestioned place in Islamic theology, "This hadith is the sledgehammer argument used by those who want to exclude women from politics... This hadiths is so important that it is practically impossible to discuss the question of women's political rights without referring to it, debating it, and taking a position on it."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *The Holy Quran*, surah 2, verse 228.

⁷⁷ Denise Spelling, "History Then, History Now: The role of Medieval Islamic Religio-Political Sources in Shaping the Modern Debate on Gender," in *Beyond the Exotic: Women's Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 7.

⁷⁸ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory*(London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996), 4.

Likewise, Ibn Hanbal reported that Prophet Muhammed is to have said “Men perish if they obey women.”⁷⁹ Strict interpretations of these hadiths show that women have no role in politics, be it through suffrage or representation, and that any attempt to bring them into politics would amount to bid’a (innovation, which is forbidden in Islam).⁸⁰ But such a strict interpretation is clearly out of favor with even the most prohibitive of Muslim and Arab societies. It should, however, be mentioned that hadiths are not of undisputable authority, though they are of esteemed value in Islamic traditions.

Another counterargument to women’s participation is the introduction of alien traditions and concepts into Muslim cultures that may be perceived as incompatible with Islam. Deniz Kandiyoti, a Middle East scholar, states –

The interest in liberating oppressed Muslim women produced in the minds of many Muslims, a close association between feminism and cultural imperialism. Any attempt to change the position of women could henceforth be imputed to imperialist or neo-imperialist designs, the local collaborators of such a project being tainted with cultural inauthenticity, if not outright betrayal.⁸¹

These arguments would have been accepted up until the first half of the 20th century, but today prove woefully inadequate because women, even in the Muslim world, are continuously making strides in politics. It is not a political fluke that women are part of parliament and cabinets in Arab countries like Syria, Kuwait, Palestine, Iraq, Morocco, Jordan and Tunisia - something that could not have been imagined twenty years ago.⁸²

⁷⁹ Denise Spelling, “History Then, History Now: The role of Medieval Islamic Religio-Political Sources in Shaping the Modern Debate on Gender,” in *Beyond the Exotic: Women’s Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 7.

⁸⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996), 5.

⁸¹ Deniz Kandiyoti, “Introduction” in *Women, Islam & the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 7.

⁸² *Arab women increase MP presence* (accessed October 23, 2006); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4314211.stm

Obstacles to Women's Participation in Politics

The claim that women are now being freed of their political bonds and assuming roles that were previously restricted to men is, for the most part, true; but it would be foolhardy not to recognize that there are still numerous hindrances to the plight of women's representation in Middle Eastern politics. As has been noted earlier, there is a double 'whammy' for women in the Middle East – first, because women are generally underrepresented in politics and, second, because regional, cultural and religious elements combine to further limit the roles of women in politics. It is generally expected that attempting to change the order – especially when those patterns have become societal imperatives – will either lead to a clash of opinions, friction and even conflict. Quoting the 16th century political theorist, Niccolo Machiavelli, we can see how initiating such change could cause such friction in a society – “We must bear in mind, then, that there is nothing more difficult and dangerous, or more doubtful of success, than an attempt to introduce a new order of things in any state. For the innovator has for enemies all those who derived benefits from the old order of things, whilst those who expect to be benefited by the new institutions will be but lukewarm defenders.”⁸³

Universally speaking, many of the political hindrances to women in the Middle East are not restricted to this region alone. Women all around the world are subject to many of the same problems in the Middle East, especially in terms of the political decision-making process. Hence it must be understood that although this region may suffer some of the harshest consequences of lack of political participation and representation, it is by no means unique in this struggle. Nevertheless, some of the

⁸³ Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*. (London, UK: Wordsworth Classics of World literature, 1997), 21.

major hindrances to women's general political participation include, but are not restricted to, the following,

- a) Lower levels of education, including civil
- b) Stigmas associated with women in politics
- c) The view of politics as men's domain
- d) The view that women are less capable and competent in politics
- e) Inadequate research and data on the contributions of women in politics

This last point is particularly important because it became obvious that there is very little in way of research done of the positive or negative effects of women in politics.

That is, questions such as (1) has the quality of the decision-making process improved as a result of increased women's political participation in the region, and (2) will the removal of the obstacles improve the political process in the Middle East, and so on.

Moreover, the authors, Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon, make mention of numerous obstacles that have hindered women's political involvement in their study on Muslim women in India, "The proportion of those who take no interest in election campaigns is uniformly high, with no substantial differences across social classes. One reason for this could be male domination of the political process and public sphere, the exclusion of women from leadership positions in party organizations, restrictions on women's movement outside the home, widespread literacy, and above all, lack of mobilization by political parties and organizations."⁸⁴ Although these obstacles refer specifically to Hindu and Muslim women in India, they could also be generalized to other countries and cultures, including in the Arab and Muslim world.

The many obstacles that hinder increased women's political participation vary from region to region but there are general themes that permeate most societies. The

⁸⁴ Zoya Hasan & Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219.

obstacles are by no means restricted to the Middle Eastern countries, and a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, list of some of impediments to women's political involvement in the region is as follows:

1. Cultural Differences: The argument could be made that the overall culture of the Middle East is one in which women are not favored for political office since all the countries have patriarchal structures. Culture, according to William Kymlicka, a prominent political and cultural philosopher, is that "which provides its members with meaningful ways of life across a full range of human activities, including social, educational, religious, recreational, and economic life, encompassing both public and private spheres."⁸⁵ In addition he acknowledges the primary role that geography and language play in relation to culture.⁸⁶ And while patriarchal structures are present in other parts of the world, they are more pronounced in this region. Other cultural differences would include men (and not women) being actively engaged in activities outside the home, women not being assertive in the public domain, women being seen as individuals and not separate from their families.
2. Religious Differences: It would too simple to say that Islam is the cause for women's low level of political participation in the Middle East because there are other Muslim countries that have done a significantly better job at incorporating its women into their nation's political structure. That being said, religion in the Middle East does play an important role in why women have not reached similar levels of political participation as their non-Muslim counterparts – "State legislators, as well as fundamentalists, claim that their ideal model of the politically passive women, barred from the public sphere and totally secluded and estranged from society in which she lives, is derived from and legitimated by this history and tradition."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ William Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 76.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996),

3. **Women's Attitudes:** The potency of how women view other women in politics should not be underestimated. Women themselves are in many cases opposed to the idea of other women politicians. This may be justified on the grounds of religious or cultural traditions that have existed over centuries. Though it may seem surprising, such views have a following not only with men but also women – “The majority of [Yemeni] women neither vote nor want to talk politics, which they regard with justifiable skepticism as a violent male domain. Their conversations dwell on marriage, childbirth, and, increasingly, the loss of earnings...”⁸⁸ It is also an interesting observation that in some cases women do not vote for other women because they believe in traditional roles where women are domicile, and that politics is no place for a woman.
4. **Female Workforce:** Women are in many cases seen as incapable of carrying out political and economic duties outside the home because they lack the required skills and knowledge.⁸⁹ There are wide variations in the region in terms of cultural differences, with the North African countries being more inclusive and having higher female education and workforce, while the Gulf countries are at the bottom with little female penetration of the workforce and politics.⁹⁰ For instance, the female workforce of the United Arab Emirates is 15%; Saudi Arabia is 16% and Tunisia 31%.⁹¹ These numbers would lead one to believe that women's active participation in politics will be an uphill battle since women are not even actively participating in the regular workforce. “In other parts of the region, particularly in the conservative states of the Arab Gulf, women still struggled for basic political rights, including the rights

⁸⁸ Sheila Carapico, 'The Dialects of Fashion: Gender and Politics in Yemen,' in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 186.

⁸⁹ Lois Beck, "Women Among Qashqa'i Nomadic Pastoralists in Iran" in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 353.

⁹⁰ UNDP, *Programme on Governance in the Arab Region* (accessed December 5, 2006); available from <http://gender.pogar.org/countries/gender.asp?cid=16>

⁹¹ Ibid.

political participation.”⁹² This is just one dimension of the complex issue of the status of women in the Middle East.

5. Inferiority Complexes: This primarily refers to the way women are viewed by their male counterparts, especially in the political arena. Women are viewed as less assertive and ill-equipped for politics since there are the more docile of the sexes. This perspective was once preached in societies that are today seen as progressive, so the Muslim world ought not to be completely condemned for such views. Muslim countries around the world are increasingly realizing that such beliefs are becoming evermore irrelevant and baseless, especially since there is little evidence to support these claims.

⁹² Guity Nashat & Judith Tucker, *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: Restoring Women to History* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press), 119.

MIDDLE EAST – WOMEN & POLITICS (Section III)

Status of Women in Politics

Among other things the role that law plays in many Muslim countries cannot be discounted in the larger context of political development. In their book on *Women and Power in the Middle East*, editors Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomovics recognize that the relationship between women and their role in society is greatly affected by their status in the laws of a nation.⁹³ Strictly speaking, family law in most Muslim countries is solely in the realm of religious institutions, and not in separate legal entities like a national court. As a matter of fact, Joseph and Slyomovics argue that this pattern of having family courts and religious institutions as one powerful entity may indeed be a serious impediment to the development of women's status in Muslim societies: "By placing family law in the domain of religious institutions, most Middle Eastern and North African states have given control over issues that dramatically affect women to institutions that are gender biased. Clerics – Jewish, Christian, or Muslim – are all male, and their hierarchy is quite patriarchal."⁹⁴ This essentially means that the status of women in many of these societies is molded by predominantly male-dominated institutions that govern all aspects of women's lives, including politics.

This is an important argument in that it sheds light on the status of women in most Muslim countries because it shows that the laws that govern women in Muslim countries overwhelmingly favor the conventional male-dominated legal system. This should come as no surprise since this was also the predominant system in the rest of the

⁹³ Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics, 'Introduction' in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

world before the advent of more liberal and open legal systems that became the hallmark of the 20th century. Notwithstanding, the lesson that we should take from this observation is that the legal systems in many Muslim countries have indeed failed to keep abreast of what we have come to expect of the laws of contemporary states. Case in point, Tunisia and Turkey are the only two Muslim countries in the region that have a separate civil family code.⁹⁵ This means that family law is not within the scope and authority of religious institutions, but by civil courts specifically established to handle such cases.⁹⁶

The advantage of having religious institutions separate from civil courts are numerous but the major one we are concerned with stems from what may be referred to as a division of power. This division of power means that each institution will have the time, expertise and resources to carry out its responsibilities to the best of its abilities because it enjoys a sort of monopoly on its particular specialty. This translates into having a civil court that specializes on laws and rulings that relate to the status of the family within a society, and religious institutions that deal specifically on matters on spirituality.

We must also recognize that an argument could be made that Islam as a religion permeates all aspects of society (including law and the family) – “Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in [Islamic cultures].”⁹⁷ It would be worth pointing out that history shows

⁹⁵ Bouthaina Cheriet, ‘Fundamentalism and Women’s Rights: Lessons from the City of Women’ in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 40.

that such concentrations of power have in the past led to extensive abuses of power, especially when there is little or no accountability of institutions or offices. Indeed, by lumping religious institutions and civil courts together we run the risk of centering too much responsibility and power in one entity, which tends to lead to an inefficient allocation of resources that lead to less than beneficial results. We see this in many Muslim countries where blanket rulings are made in respect to women without due consideration for specific cases.

Obstacles to Women in Middle East Politics

Although many of the obstacles to increasing women's political participation in the Middle East and the Muslim world have already been spelt out in previous sections of this work, they are by no means complete. But rather than provide an exhaustive list of all obstacles this section will provide a broad range of hindrances to active women's involvement in representative political offices.

Suad Joseph and Susan Slyomivics make note of a similar but varying phenomenon in which not only the essence of the woman is defined through the men in her family, but she is also expected to implicitly or explicitly cater to the interests of the men, but, sometimes, also to the detriment of her own interests:

The relational construct of self is encouraged in both men and women (although other notions of are also supported). The implications for women, however, are somewhat different from those of men... Women, more than men, are expected to put others before themselves and to see their interests as embedded in those of others, especially familial others. In practice this means that women are particularly encouraged to see their interests linked to their male kin. This often has the effect of reinforcing patriarchal hierarchy.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics, 'Introduction' in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 7.

Again, it must be noted that this phenomenon is not unique to the Arab world and that such family structures vary throughout the Muslim world. What is being inferred here is that for various cultural and religious circumstances may actually stress the pressures on women to adhere along patriarchal lines in their lives. It should hence come as no shock that such patriarchal patterns are replicated in the political arena in the Middle East, and act as another barrier to the women's increased involvement in politics.

Changing the Perceptions of Female Politicians

As mentioned earlier, it would be too much to expect that women in different areas of the society should be accepted willingly by all. The perceptions held by most today have taken centuries to shape and have long since marinated in the psyche of the people. In 1978 when Nadia Youssef wrote an article on the status of women in the Muslim world there was wide spread skepticism as to the improvement of the plight of women, primarily because this was period was turbulent for the Muslim world – “I do not foresee in the immediate future the growth of a multi-class feminist movement in the Muslim world. The very women who could provide the leadership for a feminist movement, those with education and high social standing, generally are little inclined to do so since they suffer the fewest disabilities at present.”⁹⁹ Times have changed since this passage was written 29 years ago, though not as fast as some may have hoped for.

Another important aspect of the changing perceptions of women in politics is how long they have had suffrage rights and exercised them. There is a correlation between the number of women who actually vote or run for elections and how long women have been exercising such rights. The longer women have had the right to vote,

⁹⁹ Nadia Youssef, “The Status and Fertility Patterns of Muslim Women,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 96.

the larger we can expect the percentage of women who vote to be (at least relative to their male counterparts), and the more headway we should therefore expect women to have in national politics. Thus, the year of female suffrage extension should be inversely related to the proportion of legislative seats held by women.”¹⁰⁰ There is also a stark correlation with women who actively participate to the workforce and greater political participation, which could be explained by a heightened sense of independence and confidence.¹⁰¹ In short, it could be said that perceptions in the Middle East and Muslim countries is directly related to how long women have had suffrage rights and whether they contribute to the labor force because there is a greater possibility that they would actively participate in the political process, including running for office.

Indeed, the perceptions are the very essence of many of the identities that we share in a society, and it may be too much to ask for sudden and drastic changes, especially when such changes are perceived as alien to that community. Whether we like to acknowledge it or not, societies in general have their biases, and the inclusion of women in different areas of is almost certain to warrant unwelcome and sometimes antagonistic attitudes. This is the case with most nations in the Middle East and indeed the Muslim world in general, and we should not expect anything short of a long, testing challenge because no people can easily change such perceptions, even when the rest of the world seems to have taken such steps. Nonetheless, signs of change can already be seen on the horizon.

¹⁰⁰ Lane Kenworthy & Melissa Malami. “Gender Inequality in Political Representation: A Worldwide Comparative Analysis.” September 1999. Accessed April 3, 2007. Available from JSTOR, 239.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 240.

The Role of Lebanese Civil Society in Struggle for Women in Politics

In most Western scholarship the role of civil society has become akin to that of an antithesis to the power of the state, especially in despotic and authoritarian states.¹⁰² There are two varying notions of the role civil society can play in a country. As the first argument goes, civil society can provide the necessary grassroots will and support to topple governments that, in some shape or form, are not representative of the interests of the people, all the while using non-violent means. “The rise of studies of civil society in the Middle East has trapped the discipline in yet another false dichotomy of states versus civil societies, which is not at all different from weak states-strong states, center-periphery, base-superstructure, and East West dichotomy.”¹⁰³ Many have criticized this claim because no form of political organization has satisfactorily challenged the role of the nation-state, and that no society has shown signs of any such civil society entities that exhibit anything close to an effective political and/or social structure. Nonetheless, Hezbollah – Lebanon’s political and social organization – has shown itself more than capable of fulfilling some of the requirements that are spelt out in this defense of civil society.¹⁰⁴

The second argument, a variation of the first, advocates the role of civil society because it not only supplements the work of the state, but that given the right environment and circumstances it can eventually lead to a situation in which it can mobilize resources for the betterment of society, and that such mobilization could

¹⁰² Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics, ‘Introduction’ in *Women and Power in the Middle East*, eds. Suad Joseph & Susan Slyomovics (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 11.

¹⁰³ Mamoun Fandy, “Political Science without Clothes: The Politics of Dress; or, Contesting the Spatiality of the State in Egypt,” in *Beyond the Exotic: Women’s Histories in Islamic Societies*, ed. Amira El-Azhary Sonbol (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 382.

¹⁰⁴ In the summer of 2006 Hezbollah not only managed to withstand the combined forces of the Israeli military attacks, but it also gained widespread grass root support for its cause. It has subsequently forced the coalition in the Lebanese government into a standstill that is yet to be completely resolved.

possibly challenge that of the state. “[Civil society] fill a void that thus serve, in some countries, an implicit indictment on the government’s ability to provide adequate services, in particular for the nonelite sectors of society.”¹⁰⁵ And while the empirical evidence may or may not support either of these arguments, they will serve our purpose well because we can analyze the role of civil society in Lebanon and its effects on increasing women’s political participation in the region.

While there are numerous scholars and academics that focus on the Middle East, few have taken notice of the importance that civil society plays in ensuring that stable and representative institutions guarantee for citizens. One such scholar is Jon Esposito and his book, *Unholy War*, comments at the topic of the potential of civil society in this region,

The most pervasive and vibrant example of the push from below for greater democratization and power sharing is the growing presence and implementation of Islam in nongovernmental institutions and associations (NGOs). The development of a strong civil society is a critical ingredient for building democratic institutions. It incorporates and inculcates the principles and values of power sharing: greater political participation, representation, self-determination, government accountability, the rule of law, and social justice.¹⁰⁶

Here we see that civil society is one avenue for ensuring that the rights of people in a society are not only protected but also championed by this entity that has become so ‘pervasive’ around the world. In short, an adequately functioning and effective civil society sector can enhance the cause of women’s political participation. This may be done through the spreading of knowledge, workshops, support groups, private funding, lobbying, etc. – all instruments that make civil society a force to be reckoned with any society. Such civil societies that focus on enhancing the role of women in politics do in

¹⁰⁵ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 146-147.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

fact exist but their effectiveness is hampered either by regimes that implicitly or explicitly object to their cause or by propagating an unfavorable atmosphere in which such activities cannot be carried out. Besides, women's groups and organizations have recognized the potential of political parties to take advantage of the votes of women without addressing their needs or by offering adequate representation¹⁰⁷ – something that civil society goes to great length to educate the most vulnerable groups like the rural, uneducated, and women.

The monumental CEDAW conference in Beijing in 1995 was hailed as a cornerstone in the struggle to put women's issues on the map and it is no coincidence that it is recognized as the starting point for the global concerted to push women's political and social rights.

One post-Beijing trend that seems to be growing in most Muslim societies is the proliferation of women's NGOs. These may constitute old and established women's organizations or groups newly emerging in the preparatory process for the world conferences. Many of them seem to be determined to implement gender-sensitive development projects; to secure egalitarian legal reforms; to expand access to education, health care, gainful employment, and decision-making positions; to reconstruct gender-related cultural norms, including positive women's images in mass media; to reshape double standards in sexuality; and, in a word, to safeguard women's rights as human rights.¹⁰⁸

Hence, it should come as no revelation that civil society in countries like Lebanon and Morocco are at the forefront of consolidating the drive to enlighten women and work to ensure they become integral players in the decision-making branches of their governments.

¹⁰⁷ Ruth Woodsmall, *Women and the New East* (Washington D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1960), 133.

¹⁰⁸ Nayereh Tohidi, "The Issues at Hand," in *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity*, eds. Herbert Bodman & Nayereh Tohidi, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 1998), 292.

Opportunities for Increased Political Participation

In relation to the previous section, civil society presents a particular opportunity for playing a much greater role in enhancing women's political participation in the Middle East. This is because civil society, especially in the Middle East, is still very much in the nascent stages of formation, in addition to sometimes having to operate in less than favorable (and sometimes hostile) environments. Moreover, civil society organizations are prohibited in many societies where their services and support are sometimes needed the most. In essence, opportunities lie in the fact that civil society can act as a catalyst for involving women in the political process – first with awareness, suffrage, campaigning, and then active political participation in the form of representation.

A major reason for optimism in the area of opportunities for increased participation focuses on the redefinition and reinterpretation of many of the religious and social aspects of women's lives. The best example is that of women's roles in Islam and how scholars, both men and women, are continuously reinterpreting basic roles in Islam, and arriving at different perspectives. This is in response to the strict interpretation of the main Islamic texts – the Quran, Sunnah and Hadith – which have usually been restricted to the realm of religious scholars, and not academics, intellectuals, or even policy makers. "Rather than breaking with tradition, female reformers are that their religious activism today reclaims an ideal forgotten by later generations. As a result of this new approach, increasing numbers of women have an

alternative model that enables them to broaden their expectations both inside and outside the home.”¹⁰⁹

Recommendations!

This section discusses possible recommendations that will improve the overall levels of women's political participation in the Middle East, especially at the parliamentary level of government. These recommendations, though, could also act as a model for other regions that have low levels of women's involvement in politics, principally in Asia and Africa. In the context of low levels of women's political participation, it may be said that these recommendations are applicable to more than just the Middle East and Muslim countries, but taking into consideration the particularly low figures in the region the importance of these recommendations take on an even greater importance that makes their implementation even more imperative.

The recommendations are divided into categories that cover the three levels/units of analysis: domestic, national and international. The decision to focus on three categories lies in the fact that no amount of research and detail can adequately cover all possible solutions to complex issues. Moreover, an exhaustive list of recommendations is not the goal here but to provide a framework in which we can, first, conceptualize the matter of increasing political participation and, then, assess ways and methods in which to address this overarching problem. The recommendations are as follows:

¹⁰⁹ John Esposito, *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 133.

1). Education

“While voting requires little education, in general, education is a vital tool for effective participation, that is, making informed choices, contributing to public debates, or signing petitions, for example.”¹¹⁰ This excerpt sufficiently conveys the message of why education is so vital to achieving the goal of bringing women into the political arena. The role of education in any society is without question vital to the development of that society – both in terms of individual and collective intellectual capacities. In 1995 the World Conference on Women declared that “investing in formal and non-formal education and training for girls and women, with its exceptionally high social and economic return, has proved to be one of the best means of achieving sustainable development and economic growth.”¹¹¹ Education could then be said to possess ‘spill-over’ effects that carry over to other sectors.

In essence, in order to improve the role of women in the political arena there will need to be a complete overhaul of the way education is not only implemented, but also the way it is conceptualized. The reason for this lies in the truth that a major part of having women in the political arena requires that they are taught the same critical type of education that men and boys enjoy in these same societies. The issue of education in the Middle East and many Muslim countries is a threefold problem: lower than average levels of education, low levels of girl’s education, and lack of critical education for girls.

The first difficulty of low overall education in the region stems the verity that most girls do not receive any education or receive very little in the way of a formal education. The following excerpt on Algerian could also be taken as a general illustration of education and labor in other countries in the region, “Given the high rate of

¹¹⁰ Zoya Hasan & Ritu Menon, *Unequal Citizens: A Study of Muslim Women in India*, (New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 2004), 219

¹¹¹ United Nations Report, *The World’s Women 2005*, 35.

unemployment and underemployment in Algeria, however, it is felt that men must be given priority when a new job opens up. On the economic level, Algerian society as it is now constituted thus needs women to stay home.”¹¹² Most countries now provide school enrolment data by sex and report it to the United Nations, which makes the information available for research purposes.¹¹³ The general rate of illiteracy in the Arab states is 16%, 21% of all women in Arab states are illiterate, the same figure for men is 10%.¹¹⁴ This clearly shows the disparity in terms of access to education (though illiteracy rates are much higher in Sub-Saharan Africa).

Education in its strict sense should include more than just literacy rates or levels of conventional education (primary, secondary, and tertiary) – “Muslim women’s emancipation needs to be approached from another direction besides education, namely, perceptual and attitudinal change. The implications of this statement are more far-reaching than a critique of a misleading interpretation of the Arabic word *taqwa* [consciousness of Allah].”¹¹⁵ Education should include another critical factor that is either lacking or discouraged in many Middle Eastern and Muslim countries – *critical learning*. This term, as used here, will refer to the “*the attainment of skills and knowledge necessary to challenge concepts and ideas in order to engage and stimulate intellectual vigor*.” In essence, the argument posed here is that while women in Muslim and Arab countries may indeed have relatively high literacy rates and educational levels,

¹¹² Juliette Minces, “Women in Algeria,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 167.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, 37

¹¹⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (accessed March 20, 2007); available from http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=4960_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC

¹¹⁵ Nimat Hafez Barazangi, “Muslim Women’s Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right” in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami & Erika Friedl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 46.

they still lack the necessary skill-set of *critical learning*, which would enable them to engage their communities in ways that are new, refreshing and even provocative.

This is not to say that these countries lack women academics, scholars, intellectuals, or professionals, but what it does mean is that critical learning is not an integral part of the academic curricula in which many women are either trained in vocations or in formal schooling. The lack of critical learning would imply that women are not given the tools (or the right) to critically assess their immediate societies, as well as the reasoning that lies behind the functioning of the social systems in which they live in. Another reflection of this is the fields in which women are ‘steered in’ when entering the job market as nurses, traders, and other menial positions. “The repudiated wife is still unprotected against destitution. The right to work is, to be sure, recognized for women, and numerous women are now employed, but with rare exceptions they occupy only subordinate and menial posts, such as maids and hospital attendants, and such higher posts as secretaries in administrative offices.”¹¹⁶ Such fields, consciously or unconsciously, ensure that women are not in a position to challenge the status quo of society.

The one major professional exception to this rule is women professors, who are not only empowered with the necessary skill-set of critical learning, but are also in the powerful position of shaping the minds of both young men and women. An excellent example of such a person is Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan scholar and historian, who has taken on the task of imparting knowledge of Muslim women’s past, with the hope that it will encourage women to revolutionize their respective communities.¹¹⁷ Fatima Mernissi

¹¹⁶ Juliette Minces, “Women in Algeria,” in *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. Lois Beck & Nikki Keddie (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 166.

¹¹⁷ Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996).

came to prominence in 1975 after her book, *Beyond the Veil*, shed further light on the role and status of women in this part of the world, especially in respect to patriarchal structures in society.¹¹⁸ She is also responsible for what some may label as an awakening because of her efforts to open up and expand research on women's issues, as well as her work on the development of civil society in Morocco.¹¹⁹

Anouar Majid, a scholar of feminism in Islam, examines Mernissi's view on how women have been marginalized from politics – “If parliaments in Islamic countries are harems that exclude women from any meaningful political participation and that allow men to decide the fate of women, their roots are in the beginnings of the caliphal state, legitimized by the aristocratic principle of *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance), in which the caliph is “veiled” from the people he governs...”¹²⁰ This quote provides a powerful imagery that explains a genesis for problem we may face today.¹²¹

Of all the effects and consequences of the lack of deficiency of critical learning that we are concerned with, the major corollary of its adverse impact on women's political participation. The recommendation put forward is thus: *the introduction of the critical learning aspect of education should be re-examined and strategies for implementation for the youth (especially the girls) will impart the future intellectual, civic, and political skills for effective political organization.*

Civil society has to some extent been successful in filling the gap with critical learning and educating women on the necessary skills sets. This is because the whole

¹¹⁸ Marvinne Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 161.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 162-163.

¹²⁰ Anouar Majid, “The Politics of Feminism in Islam,” in *Gender, Politics, and Islam*, eds. Therese Saliba, Carolyn Allen & Judith Howard, (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 62.

¹²¹ It is noteworthy that Anouar Majid, in this chapter, actually criticizes most of Mernissi's portrayals of women and feminism in Islam.

informal sector of civil society and NGOs involves empowering the populace with knowledge and skills in order to shape society in a way that improves their lives. That being said, the role of civil society is absent in many Middle Eastern countries, and even those countries where they are present severe restrictions are occasionally placed on their activities. This may be due to a matter alluded to earlier: the mere presence of an active civil society or informal sector could be seen as a challenge to the state's monopoly on the mobilization of its people – something that is extremely detested and shunned by authoritarian regimes.

The first recommendation of reinvigorating the educational needs of these countries by including critical education is a measure that will, if implemented, set the stage for long-term strategy for incorporating women into the decision-making process in the Middle East and Muslim countries. Because of the variance in the educational systems and societies being analyzed, this recommendation may require anything from regular adjustments with curriculum structures to complete overhauls of the educational institutions in some countries, which would include primary, secondary and post-secondary levels.

2). Quotas & National Legislation

The debate surrounding quotas is never a dull one, especially when a significant group or element stands to lose something in the process. This is usually the case in domestic politics because interests have been entrenched in various sectors of society and establishing a quota system may be perceived as eroding the power or influence of that group. The same argument has been used in respect to establishing a quota system for women in parliaments and the discourse is far from being resolved. Quotas are essentially legislative stipulations that allocate a certain percentage of parliamentary

seats to a specific group – usually one that has up to that point been covertly or overtly excluded or discriminated against in the decision-making process. They may be groups based on ethnicity, religion, race, culture, region, or, in this case, gender. However, quotas are against the democratic spirit because they impose an artificial reserve system on the parliament. For instance, Egypt had in place a quota system for women from 1979 to 1986, after which it was ruled as unconstitutional because it was a form of reverse discrimination; the proportion of women in parliament subsequently fell from about 9% to 2.2%.¹²²

Regarding women in the political sphere the notion of a quota system for including women in parliament is a particularly attractive for various reasons:

1. **Legitimacy**: With the authority of the state behind them the quota system, it ensures that women will not only have the legitimacy of the state behind their involvement, but that they will be recognized by the public. The legitimacy of the state is vital because it shows the government recognizes the importance of women's contributions to the political arena, and that the government is willing to take what may amount to unpopular but necessary steps to realize that goal.
2. **Scope**: The quota system is the most comprehensive and far-reaching way to incorporate women in parliaments because it has the ability to change the very way the state operates since it now has an additional level of interests of a significant portion of its population. Rather than relying on conventional methods of campaigning that may discriminate against women, quotas provide a way of introducing women, en masse, into parliaments.
3. **Progressive Nature**: In contemporary political thinking, the adoption of a quota system gives a great deal of positive publicity to most countries because it shows, at least, an attempt to initiate what many consider liberal and progressive reforms. However, this should be seen as a positive corollary but not be a motivation for establishing a quota system.
4. **Proven Model**: The quota system suggested here is a tried and proven model that is being adopted in many different countries (including Arab and Muslim countries). Both developing and developed countries have tried this approach and the results have proven positive.
5. **International Support**: It has been the case that the active participation of women in the political arena was a precondition/incentive for future

¹²² Mervat Tallawy, "International Organizations, National Machinery, Islam, and Foreign Policy" in *Muslim Women and the Politics of Participation*, eds. Mahnaz Afkhami & Erika Friedl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 133.

international assistance from international organizations and donors. Rwanda is one instance where the international community required its new constitution incorporate a 30% quota stipulation for women. This is particularly suited for post-conflict societies where such stipulations can be incorporated into a new constitution.

Of course, it should also be noted that there are several arguments against the establishment of a quota system in parliaments, some of which include: that the political culture will be unsuitable for the inclusion of a large group without due caution, inefficiencies may arise because incapable women may be used to fill parliamentary seats, and the inclusion of a significant group could destabilize the functioning of the legislature. While these are indeed legitimate concerns when ushering in a new group into and political organization, they are not enough to reasonably deter the process of the inclusion itself. This is because these concerns/fears can be mitigated using proven methods that require long-term adjustments. First, it is true that the overall political culture will experience initial friction in parliament because such interactions between the sexes are not the norm in many Muslim and Arab countries. The changing of the political culture could be assisted by another authority such as the executive, probably through an unequivocal national decree.¹²³

Second is the concern that the quota system would warrant filling parliamentary seats with inexperienced and incapable women. This would be a legitimate concern with countries either in the Arab and Muslim world where women's education is low, where women are not part of the formal society, or where women have not played a significant role in political organization. Nevertheless, there are only a handful of countries in which women have not yet reached such positions, or are completely incapable of

¹²³ Something similar to this occurred in early 2007 when King Abdullah of Jordan called on parliamentarians to initiate parliamentary reforms that would be more streamlined and inclusive of different groups, including women; available from http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070322/wl_mideast_afp/jordanpoliticswomen_070322180042

carrying out such political activities. And in these countries the major reason why only a small number of women exist to adequately represent themselves is due to restrictive policies that limit women's involvement in civil society and political organization. This argument is mitigated by the fact that in most Muslim and Arab countries there are more than enough capable women who have the experience and abilities to represent their people in parliaments. Additionally, this same argument could in fact be posed not only to women but also many men who are elected to parliaments around the world.

Third, the defense against a quota system because the inclusion of women would lead to the destabilization of the functioning of a nation's parliament is spurious. There have been several examples of countries instituting similar systems and not suffering any major meltdown of their legislatures. As a matter of fact, Morocco, an Arab and Muslim state, has employed an informal quota system without any major conflicts erupting. Although not every country will present its own unique set of challenges to finding a non-conflictual and harmonious way of incorporating women into their parliaments, the Moroccan case does show that it can be done when the political will is present (more will be discussed in an upcoming section).

Hence, this recommendation requires that the introduction of a quota system through national legislation, with the support of other branches of government, can achieve the desired result of increasing women's political participation in parliaments.

As mentioned earlier, this suggestion has already proven successful with different countries in the region, it has the legitimacy or sanction of the state, its scope is comprehensive in nature, it presents a sense of modernization, and it may even gain international support. These are some of the main reasons why such a system would

achieve the objective of ushering in or increasing the participation of women in the decision-making organs of the governments in the Middle East and Muslim countries.

3). Regional Reform (Diplomacy & The Arab League)

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) institutionalizes the status of women as one of equality and upholds their of basic rights.¹²⁴ The Convention came into force in 1979 and today has today been ratified by a total of 185 countries, although some states also have reservations.¹²⁵ Most Muslim countries have ratified the convention, and of the 22 members of the Arab League, 19 are signatories of the convention, with Sudan, Somalia and Qatar opting out altogether.¹²⁶ The significance of this treaty stems from wide scope of human rights including legal and civil, in which all signatories have recognized and vowed to uphold in respect to the equality and non-discrimination of women – something that up until then had never been done before.

In respect to our main concern with political participation in the Middle East and Muslim countries, article 7 of the convention clearly stipulates the following;

States parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

- (a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;
- (b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;
- (c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

¹²⁴ *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (accessed March 22, 2007); available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>.

¹²⁵ Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, UAE, and other Muslim countries like Bangladesh, Niger, Pakistan, and Turkey all have made reservation with CEDAW. Nevertheless, none of these countries made any specific reservations to article 7

¹²⁶ *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (accessed March 22, 2007); available from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>.

This article shows that the above mentioned states have recognized and accepted (at least in theory) the rights of women in respect to complete, unrestricted political involvement in society. In short, a globally recognized framework already exists for the participation of women in national decision-making process.

This leads to the next major point in which we can adequately frame the recommendation. The CEDAW treaty is nothing more than a general agreement in which its signatories agree to abide by its resolutions, but the actual execution is left to the individual governments. While many of these countries may have ratified the CEDAW treaty, its actual implementation is clearly lacking in these countries, but with varying degrees. Nonetheless, the Arab League, as a representative of its 22 member-states, can provide the necessary implementation strategies that are necessary to bring article 7 of CEDAW to realization in the region.

The Arab League is uniquely suited for the task of setting up a more regional framework for its member-states than what was originally provided in CEDAW. First, the League has legitimacy because it represents the views and opinions of its members, and this ensures that its authority is recognized more than that of a universal treaty. Second, the League can cater to the specific needs of its member-states than any other international organization or treaty can; this means that although CEDAW already provides a broad structure for the political inclusion of women through non-discrimination, the League will do a better job assessing the specific needs of its states and how to apply the general framework for women's political participation.

This effort is necessary because of the wide variance in women's political involvement in the decision-making process across the Middle East and the Muslim

world. For instance, women in a Muslim country like Pakistan or Morocco are significantly more involved in politics than any of the Gulf States in the region.

At a time when women are being trained as professionals like engineers, doctors, politicians, lawyers, and where many are performing at the highest levels of government in many developed and developing countries, this region is missing out on an immense opportunity to harness the abilities and talents of its women. It would indeed be an understatement to say that most societies are yet to recognize the importance of bringing women into their administrations and institutions. It should be the prerogative of the Arab League to usher in the 21st century by changing not only the structure of the Arab League itself by updating its mission, but also its integral composition.

In order to get the process moving and to set an example for its member states, the League should initiate a quota system in which 25% of its own workforce, including its committees and the new Arab Parliament, be reserved for women. The 25% quota will affect all departments and organs of the League and should be gradually phased in within the next few years. Provisions should also be made on a country to country basis encourage the sending of women delegates to the meetings and committees of League. The League ought to see it as its duty to facilitate the inclusion and integration of women into its inner most workings and operation if it is to successfully carry out its mission in an ever evolving international system. Article XII of the Arab League Covenant, states that “The League Council shall create internal administration machinery to deal with the functions of the Secretariat-General and matters of personnel,” should therefore be modified to reflect allocations for women.¹²⁷ A majority

¹²⁷ The Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Documents on Regional Organizations Outside Western Europe (1940-1949)* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1950), 16.

opinion or vote is all that is required by the Council to effect this amendment to the Covenant.¹²⁸

As the regional body representing the interests of its members, The Arab League does have the leverage to influence its members, as well as its neighbors and other Muslim countries. For a country such as Morocco, in terms of diplomatic representation, about 4% of all Moroccan ambassadors are women and they also represent about 15% of the total number of diplomatic staff in the various embassies.¹²⁹ As for the international organizations women are 25% of the delegates that represent Morocco at such bodies.¹³⁰ This shows that women are already assuming important positions in these international bodies that serve as hubs for international diplomacy and law-making.

Reserving a quarter of all positions for women should not be seen as the League doing women a favor, but as a sign that the League will no longer take their contributions to the region for granted. Though this number in no way represents the total number of women who are capable of carrying out the League's duties, it should be viewed as an initial step that will hopefully lead to more progressive reforms within the institution itself. It is recognized that this change is a fundamental one and that several obstacles could potentially derail its implementation. Notwithstanding, it is expected that opposition would present itself in either religious or ethical grounds to this development.

¹²⁸ The Royal Institute of International Affairs, *Documents on Regional Organizations Outside Western Europe (1940-1949)* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1950), 17. Article XVI of the Covenant of the League of Arab States says "... a majority opinion will suffice for the Council to make effective decisions on the following subjects: - (1) Matters (relating to) personnel..."

¹²⁹ *Report on Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Morocco* (accessed April 4, 2007), 30; available from <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/563/69/PDF/N0656369.pdf?OpenElement>

¹³⁰ Ibid.

Though it is not the intention of the League, it would be a welcome deed if the governments of the member states adopted similar policies for their domestic use. Such actions would go a long way to show the world that the Arab states have recognized and accepted the significance of having women as a pivotal force in the decision-making process. Of course, the implementation and effects these policies will vary from nation to nation, but this not be seen as excuse to delay this measure. It would also be advisable that as part of the regional political framework for women the League should ensure that members consult with it and other international or regional organizations like the UN or African Union on setting up a comprehensive system.

The Arab League can be used as an instrument to ensure that the majority of Muslim countries initiate regional reform in respect to women's inclusion not only in its own parliament and administration, but also encourage its members to initiate similar initiatives. Thus, it is recommended that *the Arab League set up and monitor a regional framework for its member states to adopt reforms in order to ascertain that the national governments establish political structures for bringing women into the political decision-making process.* By taking the first step and making women part of the administration of the Arab League, it will set the precedent for its members to take similar steps.

Furthermore, the need for laying the ground work for educational reform is necessary because much of the progress that has already been made is not as a result of policy planning or government foresight. This point is reiterated by Fatima Mernissi in the following passage,

Women have gained many rights that were denied them before, such as the right to education, the right to vote and be elected, and the right to use non-domestic spaces. But an important characteristic of this nascent 'liberation' is that it is not the outcome of a careful plan of controlled nation-wide development. Neither is it the outcome of the massive involvement of women in the labour markets, coupled with organized women's movements. The partial, fragmented acquisition of rights by women in Arab-Muslim countries is a random, non-planned, non-systematic phenomenon, due mainly to the disintegration of the traditional system under pressures from within and without.¹³¹

It is thus the objectives of these recommendations to ensure that whatever policies emerge in Arab and Muslim nations are in fact as a result of careful state planning that is, expectantly, done within a regional framework.

This matter also brings other issues into perspective because of the capacity and willingness of states to carry out such actions. Education, culture and national legislation are all themes that should be taken into account when considering such changes, since they are intertwined: women's education in certain fields yields their entry into governance, culture determines the people's perceptions, and legislation can act as a catalyst for societal change.

Of the three recommendations put forward here, education presents a long-term, while quotas and regional reform are short-term solutions that can be implemented as long as the collective political will of the states to carry out such reforms is present. Another attractive feature of these recommendations is that they are in no way incompatible with or contradictory to Islamic beliefs, which further stresses their applicability to resolving these outstanding issues.

¹³¹ Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Revised ed. (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987), 169

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS (Section IV)

The 'So What' Test

The importance of this section comes from the realization that there is already a great deal of work done on many of the issues covered here, and that sorting through endless data and information may prove more unnecessary than useful. The purpose of the 'so what' test is to ask of what importance is this thesis, particularly in light of the numerous studies that have already been done.¹³² The 'so what' test also asks other questions like how has this work contributed to the general scholarship of international relations, diplomacy, and women's studies.

To the extent that one can claim his research and analysis is objective and comprehensive, the information in this work shows that several strategies could be employed in order to ensure women in this particular part of the world become an integral part of the political organization and legislative branches of their states.

But 'so what' if women become a vital part of the political process through parliaments in their respective countries? Does it make that much of a positive difference and why should we go through all the trouble of reforming education, creating controversial quotas, and establishing expensive and untested regional frameworks to realize this goal? In other words, is it worth the trouble to carry out these suggestions and what benefits will they provide to the countries involved? These are not rhetoric questions but indeed legitimate concerns that challenge the fundamental thesis of this work.

¹³² The suggestion for this section was made by the Assistant Professor of International Accounting, Shirley Hunter. I subsequently decided to include it because it would put the study in perspective.

The answers to these questions lie in the realization that the information and analysis provided in the first three sections show that these recommendations will serve the following purposes or benefits,

- * Provide a framework for countries to come up with ways of incorporating women into the decision-making process – especially where none existed before.
- * Mobilize women to organize and vie with their political peers for parliamentary positions, which lead to better governance through competition and accountability.
- * Initiate regional dialogue among the state authorities on strategies for restructuring their public systems – something that has already been started by women in the civil society organizations.
- * The improved public image of such countries that begin such procedures to bring women not only into the public sphere but also active government offices.

The next question would be to ask if the costs of implementing these three recommendations are worth not having the benefits listed above. Some of these costs could be measured financially: educational overhaul and reforms could be an expensive option for any government. Or it could be a political cost: what will be the political fallout if an influential and powerful group, say an Islamic party, opposes the establishment of a quota system. Using the decision-making tool of a cost-benefit analysis, the answer on whether it is worth implementing these recommendations depends on whether one thinks that the benefits outweigh the costs involved.

Reiterating the concept of objectivity, the inherent purpose of this study is to show that the benefits of not only including women in the political decision-making structures but also increasing their numbers, without a reasonable doubt, outweigh the costs associated with initiating such a paradigm change. Using this simple analytical model we can unequivocally state that the three levels of recommendations presented here will serve the countries that choose to walk along such a path, and that they are

indeed worth executing, in spite of the political and financial costs that may be involved.¹³³ Naturally, this is a calculation that would have to be made by each individual government on a case by case basis, but the evidence provided hitherto shows why the governments of these countries would, at least, seek to explore these avenues.

Changing Social and Political Perceptions of Women – the Moroccan Example

Without a doubt, the Kingdom of Morocco has undergone the most social, cultural and political change of any Arab or Muslim country. As the most westerly located Arab country it also has a close relationship with European countries like Spain and France, in addition to having a relatively strong civil society component.¹³⁴ Apart from having one of the highest numbers of women in parliament in the Middle East, the women had succeeded in increasing their parliamentary numbers from 2 to 35 in a single election.¹³⁵ Morocco has even applied for membership in the European Union (though this is more of a symbolic gesture than a real ambition) and is often viewed as culturally close to the West, even though it is an Arab nation with a Muslim majority.

Notwithstanding, Morocco has been on a path of modernizing its economy, society, and its politics, but this is not without its own controversy. In a speech made in 2003 by King Mohammed VI of Morocco before parliament, he placed clear emphasis on the role of women ought to perform in the Moroccan society,

How can society advance while the rights of women - who form half of it - are squandered and they are subjected to injustice, violence and marginalisation despite the deference and fairness accorded to them by our true religion?...

¹³³ Countries like Morocco and Tunisia have made similar calculations in face of momentous opposition, and have come to the conclusion that the benefits of initiate similar policy recommendations were worth the problems.

¹³⁴ Joel Krieger, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 559.

¹³⁵ Marvine Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 243.

These reforms... should not be perceived as the victory of one side over the other but rather as gains for all Moroccans... The aim is to draw up a modern Family Law which is consistent with the spirit of our tolerant religion. The Family Law should not be considered as a law designed exclusively for women but rather as a code for the family: father, mother and children. The proposed legislation is meant to reconcile lifting the iniquity imposed on women, protecting children's rights and safeguarding men's dignity. Would any of you tolerate seeing his family, wife or children being thrown out of their homes into the street or his daughter or sister being ill-treated?¹³⁶

Naturally, such views were not always the case in Morocco, for women's movements since independence were usually so small and catered only to the interests of the few elite (and usually French) women, rather than the interests of the typical Moroccan woman.¹³⁷ In 2004 the Mudawana (Moroccan Family code) was revised and passed by the Moroccan parliament in order to reform what many had considered to be an outdated family code.¹³⁸ The Mudawana reformed what was directly related to the affairs of women in Moroccan society – marriage (polygamy), inheritance, sexual harassment, child custody, and other human rights. These are all important issues that act as precursors to women's active involvement in politics and the decision-making processes of the government. This is because Mudawana has institutionalized a system that protects women inside and outside the home and lessens the potential obstacles that could prevent them from active participation in society. Key to the success of the Mudawana was its support by King Mohammed IV, who also holds the executive power in the Morocco.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ *Morocco boosts women's rights* (accessed March 31, 2007); available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3183248.stm>

¹³⁷ Douglas E. Ashford, *Political Change in Morocco* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 401-402.

¹³⁸ The King has the power to dissolve parliament and is the de facto leader of the parliament. The Mudawana has not been without controversy; religious authorities have opposed it saying that it is against Quranic teachings.

¹³⁹ John Laurensen, *The most powerful man in Morocco* (accessed March 31, 2007); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/4794188.stm

Morocco does not have any stipulations in its constitution for women's quotas and there are no reservations in parliament, "The 2002 Organic Law on the House of representatives, however, did not introduce a quota system. The political representation of women in the House thus depends more on the moral commitment of political leaders than on the voting procedure itself."¹⁴⁰ However, various political parties have self-imposed quotas for women (including Islamist parties), and this puts Morocco in the unique position where the drive to include women in the decision-making process of the country is actually initiated and executed by the legislature itself.¹⁴¹ This drive was begun in 1997 when a civil society group, Center for Women's Leadership, took the helm of the matter by getting more women elected to councils, which was a response to the abysmal performance of women in elections up until that point.¹⁴² Without a doubt this drive was also vital to pushing up the number of women in the lower house of the Moroccan parliament.¹⁴³

With 35 out of 325 (10.8%) parliamentarians in the lower house and 3 out of 270 (1.1%) parliamentarians in the upper house being women, Morocco is far from the goal of having significant numbers of women in the decision-making seats of the nation. But the numbers can easily obscure the reality of women's increasing role in politics, as the following excerpt by Amina Ouchelh, a Moroccan women parliamentarian, shows:

The fact that 35 women have entered parliament will ensure that questions like literacy and education, the family, the status of women and that of abandoned children, as well as violence against women and children, are given priority rather than being viewed as minor issues. These questions are essential to the social and economic development of Moroccan society. I do not mean that Moroccan women MPs should focus exclusively on

¹⁴⁰ *Report on Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, Morocco* (accessed April 4, 2007); available from <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N06/563/69/PDF/N0656369.pdf?OpenElement>

¹⁴¹ Marvine Howe, *Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 163.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 164.

these fields - we are the militants of political parties which have their own social projects. We must therefore show an interest in all fields, but the family and women's place in society must be tackled urgently... Moreover, we hope to establish contacts and exchanges with other MPs from democratic countries, who believe that women's participation in politics is important for social progress.¹⁴⁴

Ouchelh was elected in the 2002 parliamentary elections and is of a pioneering breed of women parliamentarians that is addressing Moroccan issues in new ways that are germane to women, as well other groups. Indeed, theirs is a voice worth hearing. She also reiterates this point because quotas, even if not a democratic measure is certainly a path leading to it.¹⁴⁵

These events have helped to modify the perception of women in the Moroccan society and have also assisted in greasing the road into the political arena. This example is not only a model for Arab and Muslim countries, but also serves the purpose of illustrating to women in other countries that there is much to gain from including women in public and political landscape. Although it may be argued that Morocco is an anomaly in the Arab world, such an observation would be missing the point. Morocco is an ethnically and racially diverse country that emerged from a turbulent colonial history, and still struggles with economic and developmental problems; certainly, the same could be said of most Muslim and Arab countries. The only reason why such progress is a reality in Morocco, and not other places, is because the collective political will of the people, as well as the stark and unwavering support of the institution of the Moroccan monarchy. The fact that women are increasingly assuming academic,

¹⁴⁴ *Are quotas necessary to have more women in parliament?* (accessed April 1, 2007); available from <http://www.ipu.org/news-e/8-3.htm>

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

professional and political roles outside the home is another contributing factor to this evolving vista of women in the Moroccan society.¹⁴⁶

Additionally, it seems that Jordan may be the first Middle East country with a political party headed by none other than a woman. Mona Hussein, a former chemistry professor, has been approved by the Jordanian interior ministry to start her own political party, the *Centrist National Jordanian Party*.¹⁴⁷ And though it is definitely not the first time that such an attempt has been made, it is the first time the government of a country in the region has given its official blessing for the establishment of political party headed by a woman. This is in spite of the fact that the Jordanian parliament recently presented a draft law that will raise the registration requirements for political parties in Jordan.¹⁴⁸ This case provides further evidence of the changing perceptions of women in the Middle East and that such progress is already taking place.

The Role of the Media

As an undeniable part of modern society, the role media plays in the discourse to bring women into more mainstream political offices is a vital one. A free press will only flourish if the necessary environment allows it to carry out its functions without hindrances from the government, its institutions or agencies. While the government should provide general oversight and regulation for the communications and technological sectors that comprise mass media, its role should not be one that disrupts the process. For the most part the mass media in most Middle East countries is either partly or completely owned, managed or controlled by the government, which means

¹⁴⁶ Raphael Chijioke Njoku, *Culture and Customs of Morocco* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 106.

¹⁴⁷ *Jordan gets first political party with woman leader* (accessed March 22, 2007); available from http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20070322/wl_mideast_afp/jordanpoliticswomen_070322180042

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

that there is little room for an objective, unaffiliated view on the affairs in the state. The mass media in a country like Morocco has more leeway in reporting private,¹⁴⁹ non-government views while other states like Libya, Egypt or Syria have more control of what the media reports.

With the advent of such technologies as satellites, internet, and cellular phones, the government's control of the public's consumption of information has been seriously diminished. Fatima Mernissi acknowledges the potential gains for women is the power of the mass media is harnessed properly to reflect their needs and aspirations, "The incredible developments in telecommunications and the take-up of television by the masses indicate that it is these technologies we should look to develop our future strategies."¹⁵⁰ It could be affirmed that technology has a democratizing effect because it decentralizes the access and dissemination of information through ever more popular and affordable means, and this trend looks only to continue.

One must also be careful not to assume that because of the attention the issue of women's rights or the increasingly obvious women politicians around the world that we have now reached a point where women are fully included in the political process. There is always the danger of the media trumping up specific cases of women coming to power and confusing it with a larger level of political participation that may not necessarily be the case. In short, it is essential that while the media does draw attention to the improving plight of women in parliaments and other levels of government, that they do not give the false impression to the public that women have come of age in a nation's politics.

¹⁴⁹ Raphael Chijioko Njoku, *Culture and Customs of Morocco* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 51.

¹⁵⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Women's Rebellion & Islamic Memory* (London, UK: Zed Books Ltd, 1996), 59.

This point should not be taken lightly because different governments could easily compel the nation's media to portray an image of women in politics that may not truly reflect the reality in the political scene because it may somewhat help the image of the government. State control of the media could also lead to this same problem because many countries in the Middle East have national media organizations that are either controlled or subsidized by the governments. In such countries the media could become, (or already is) an apparatus of the state that specializes in patronizing the government, and extending such services to the issue of women would do a serious disservice because of the phony impression of superficial progress in the political arena, when not much has actually changed. This problem, however, could be addressed through private, non-aligned ownership of mass media tools like newspapers, magazines, radio, television and the internet.

Future Head of State or Parliament?

Without seeming unrealistically optimistic, hope should not be abandoned as to the possibility of having a woman lead either the executive or legislative branch of government. The case could be made that most women leaders have been ceremonial leaders rather than executive heads, as is the case in a few developing or developed countries. As noted earlier, having a woman as the head of the parliament or presidency should in no way be confused with the issue at hand here: penetration of a considerable proportion of women into the executive and legislative bodies in Arab and Muslim countries. In the larger realm of things, having a women head of parliament is periphery to the ultimate goal of increasing the number of women in the political decision-making arms of their governments.

As a matter fact, several Muslim states like Pakistan and Bangladesh have at one time or another in their histories had women leading their governments, with the full blessing of the parliament and people. However, no Muslim or Arab country has ever had a woman heading either house of parliament. This could be attributed to the truth that such a position is in essence one of the most powerful political posts in any government, and that women have not yet reached the ideal point of being seen as fully capable and worthy of such a post. To be exact, having a female executive or legislative leader is a feat in any country since only a handful of states, developed or developing, have actually accomplished this. The countries in the Middle East and other Muslim states are even a longer way off since women are yet to make significant headway in achieving substantive numbers in their national parliaments.

Postscript

Without sounding contradictory, we must not associate numbers alone as a sign of successfully incorporating women into national parliaments in the Middle East. This point is noted by Bayan Tlabar, a three-time elected women member of the Turkish parliament, “The number of women in the [parliament] is not a final criterion of progress. The election of eight women after hard personal campaigns... indicates more advance than the election of sixteen women through the special selection basis of the former one-party system.”¹⁵¹ This shows that the impetus to increase women’s political participation is not an absolute goal in which we can neglect other modern political principles like rule of law, separation of powers, and popular governments.

¹⁵¹ Ruth Woodsmall, *Women and the New East* (Washington D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1960), 29.

While sympathy for women's causes may be noble and even considered progressive, it is still not enough to justify the case for increased women's involvement in politics without an interactive and thorough intellectual discourse. What is needed is a clear set of criteria, as well as the costs and benefits of political participation in order to further solidify this argument. It is equally important that both men and women in politics be assessed and judged by the same standards, for establishing separate measurements could easily lead to further working and ethical complications.¹⁵²

One way to approach this issue is to see women as an untapped resource that could help solve many of the underlying problems in the Middle East. And while women will not assume such political roles overnight, it should be noted that they have since been playing important roles in the region since time immemorial, even though they have been more in the background. Also, the path leading up to the full integration of women in the political decision-making process is one strewn with controversy, difficulty, and mutual misperceptions, so no straightforward argument or solution should be expected to win over all parties.

In essence what I have outlined in this work is the case for increased women's participation in the political decision-making process in the Arab and Muslim world. This has been done while acknowledging some of the hindrances that hamper improvement, as well as the increasing opportunities for women in the realm of politics. The emerging global trend is towards increased women's political participation and the results are all but negative because it enhances the quality of the decision-making process itself, while at the same time making for a more representative society. In short,

¹⁵² Using Islam as a baseline standard, the Quran recognizes man's dominion over women (surah 4, verse 34). The Quran also acknowledges the differences between the sexes.

if the Arab and Muslim countries can take a cue from other nations that have already engaged on such a path, then they too are set to benefit from the increased involvement of women in parliament and the general political process.

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