

A long road lies ahead for women in Arab politics

By Rafiah Al-Talei

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Although women struggle to participate in politics around the world, the number is particularly low in the Middle East. Women have had some access to political office for decades, but progress, cheered on from the sidelines by many Western organizations, has been slow. What is holding women back from greater representation in the political sphere and what can be done to encourage their participation?

The results of the recent elections in Morocco brought the debate on female political representation back into the political arena there. Only 34 women won seats in the legislature's lower chamber, compared to 35 in the previous elections, a mere 5 percent of all representatives.

In Turkey, women won 50 out of 550 seats in the Turkish Parliament. Although this is still only 9 percent of the total, it is an encouraging sign since the number of elected women more than doubled from the last parliamentary elections. This percentage of female representation is the second largest in the region after Iraq, where there are 70 women in the 275-member Iraqi Parliament.

Women in the Middle East often suffer from very sensitive and complicated political, social and cultural conditions that restrict their ability to easily engage in the political arena. Many women shun political participation to avoid controversy. Conservative religious interpretations sometimes restrict female participation in public life, or prevent them from mixing with men or assuming public posts. There is also the family dimension to consider, with women still traditionally responsible for household duties.

Women are also often seen as less experienced in public affairs, and as a result, voters - both male and female - are less likely to vote for them. Consequently, women either refrain from running for political office or drop out early from a lack of local support. This usually helps explain why only a small number of female candidates run for public office. For example, of the 800 candidates in the October 27 Omani elections, only 25 were women.

In addition, there are other factors that serve as obstacles for women to run for political office. These include varying and often unsatisfactory levels of democracy, freedom of expression, pluralism, respect for diversity and open dialogue.

Although these factors affect both women and men alike, when coupled with social and cultural structures that favor men over women in the political arena, women are more severely affected. This tends to influence the development and growth of political awareness among citizens.

Advancing the effective participation and genuine representation of women in politics means raising the awareness of the role of women in public life, training women to assume public posts, and encouraging them to enter the political arena in order to enrich their experience, gain voter confidence and prepare future generations of women to participate in even greater numbers.

One means of improving women's participation is through a quota system, which allocates a percentage of seats for women. In countries where such measures have been adopted, such as Tunisia, Iraq and Jordan, we see more women in politics. Most recently, women fought for and won a 15-percent quota in the upcoming Yemeni elections.

In addition to adopting quotas, leaders of political parties and heads of civil organizations should be persuaded to nominate women to their election lists and assign them positions of greater authority. Promoting a culture of fundraising to support candidates is also an effective way to overcome the difficult economic situation that may hinder women's participation since in many traditional societies men handle much of the family's finances.

In most Middle Eastern countries, there exist several organizations concerned with women's issues and human rights. Networking among civil-society institutions concerned with the participation of women, whether in a single country or at the regional and international levels, would help to enrich and support women politically.

Many Middle Eastern countries have a women's affairs ministry. Though this appears to be a step in the right direction, these institutions often work independently of other ministries rather than taking advantage of the role each ministry could play in promoting a cohesive national strategy to increase female representation.

At the international level, a number of organizations have dealt with local organizations in the Middle East to train women for politics as well as help them overcome some of the problems they face. In past years, American non-governmental organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) have hosted joint activities, such as women's political training in the Levant, the Gulf and North Africa during recent election campaigns. NDI and IRI have also continued to organize conferences and workshops to help women gain experience in this field.

Joint coordination and networking among these organizations and individuals will help resolve obstacles to women's political participation at the grassroots level. Helping women realize the importance of their engagement in politics can lead to greater female participation on all levels.

The road to complete political gender equality is long but the struggle goes on. These small advances are signs that there are many people working behind the scenes to shift the balance in the future.

Rafiah Al-Talei is an Omani writer and program director of the Gulf Forum for Citizenship. THE DAILY STAR publishes this commentary in collaboration with the Common Ground News Service.