Case Study: The Arab States

The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation

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The Arab region, long characterized by political activity, whether in its anti-colonial movements, its own regional and internal conflicts, or the various wars it has witnessed, still lags far behind other regions in the world when it comes to the political status of its women. The Arab world is ranked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the second-lowest region in the world on the Gender Empowerment Measure, and by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) as the lowest region in terms of percentage of women in parliaments. The political status of Arab women is therefore a critical issue.

Space only allows for a broad presentation of the situation. This case study first provides an overview of the Arab region and focuses on the political status of women. A cautionary point should be made here: although there are many common socio-economic and political factors influencing the development of the Arab countries, each state's response to these factors is unique and depends on the internal dynamics within each country. Hence, when discussing Arab women, it should be remembered that the Arab world is not a homogeneous region and there is no single archetype for Arab women. In the second section, an overview of the key challenges that confront women in achieving decision-making positions is presented, drawing on experiences from three countries: Jordan, Lebanon and Yemen. The third section of the case study describes some of the mechanisms that have been used to tackle the challenges and promote Arab women's participation in parliaments, and suggests others that might be appropriate for the region.

A. Overview

The Arab region stretches from the Atlantic Ocean in the west to the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean in the east, comprising 22 states that are currently members of the

Arab League. Although there are wide variations among these countries, their Arab Islamic cultural heritage and common language have preserved a distinctive character for the region and its peoples. This section outlines the major factors that shape the socio-economic and political environment in the region and then focuses on the political status of Arab women.

Factors that Shape the Socio-economic and Political Environment

More than other regions, the Arab region is defined by a complex set of issues, including but not limited to the Arab–Israeli conflict and its repercussions, unstable economic conditions and trends, population-resource imbalances, undemocratic internal governance systems and environmental stress. Civil societies across the region are in different stages of development, but generally do not fulfil the role civil society has in other regions.

The Political Sphere

The four Arab–Israeli wars that took place in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973, as well as the three consecutive conflicts that took place in the east of the Arab world—the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the war that ensued, and most recently, the war launched by the coalition forces on Iraq and its subsequent occupation—have all taken their toll on the Arab world. Certainly, their impact on the different countries has varied depending on various factors such as proximity to the region of conflict and the number of refugees residing in each country. Nevertheless, these regional events have had a grave influence on civil and political rights.

The Arab 'freedom and democracy deficit' has gained much attention since the publication of the first *Arab Human Development Report* in 2002.[1] This fact has been highlighted for some time now by the Freedom House ratings of political rights and civil liberties in different countries of the world. During the past ten years, none of the Arab states has been classified as free. There are only seven Arab countries that are categorized as partly free, and the remaining 15 are categorized as not free.[2] Since 11 September 2001 it has been noted that the issues mentioned above 'have remained the same or worsened, and new stresses and strains have been superimposed on the region'.[3] It is further noted that many countries of the region have witnessed a regression in their human rights and political conditions, greater state control of citizens and sometimes even more repression.

Explanations for this abound in the Arab region. These range from unfavourable domestic conditions and underlying cultural, political and economic factors, on the one hand, to proposing that external pressures from the West, and more pointedly from the United States, have not been enough to cause a shift in democratic trends in the region, on the other.[4]

The Socio-economic Sphere

Although other regions of the world have moved towards democracy as their economies have developed (with improved services in terms of education, health and urbanization), the Arab region had until recently not shown such a tendency, despite having achieved noticeable increases in most socio-economic indicators. Arguments put forward to explain the situation have focused on the political culture of the region, highlighting tribalism as one of the predominant factors in shaping a context that is not conducive to greater freedom and democracy.

Tribalism has also been branded as a major factor hindering the development of a vibrant civil society in the Arab region. Yet one could equally argue that the inability of civil society to cater to the socio-political needs of citizens has led them to cling more to their tribal identities as a more plausible means of fulfilling their needs.

In the economic sphere, the Arab states are usually perceived as rentier states. Nonetheless, international indicators illustrate that, although most of the Arab states' economies are not embedded in industrial modes of production, they do vary between oil-rich countries, human resource-rich countries, and countries that are very poor on all indicators.

The issue of poverty continues to require further research in the Arab world. Only a few countries have officially established national poverty lines.[5] Yet the fact that several countries have had to undergo structural adjustment programmes, which entailed subsidy cuts and the curtailing of services in previously heavily state-controlled economies, has meant that there was no 'alternative, capable and dynamic private sector. Hence, the withdrawal of the state in many countries created a vacuum in the social services sector'.[6]

The Political Status of Women in the Arab Region

In a region witnessing such political ferment and grave socio-economic conditions, Arab women have had to create their own path into the public sphere. Women's participation in the labour force in the region is generally low, but their political participation—whether in appointed or in elected positions—is even lower. The regional average women's participation in Arab states is currently below 7 percent, less than half the world average. There have been some breakthroughs during the past decade in both quantitative and qualitative terms, as well as in terms of more concerted efforts to achieve increased participation, yet the obstacles such efforts face appear to be much greater than they are in other regions. The difficulties faced in aligning national legislation with the stipulations of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Arab states that have ratified the agreement stand out as the most striking example of the underlying tensions that exist regarding the advancement of women.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is still a major force hindering Arab women's advancement. A combination of patriarchy, conservative religious interpretations and cultural stereotyping has built a very strong psychological barrier among Arab populations regarding women's participation in the public sphere. The hierarchical, patriarchal tribal structure of several Arab societies may be another factor that contributes to this state of affairs. Ultimately, an acceptance of the status quo and possibly an unconscious fear of change have become a major challenge that has to be dealt with. Hisham Sharabi's concept of neopatriarchy[7] in the region aptly describes the conditions of patriarchy in Arab society that have been reinforced and sustained in more modernized forms. Sharabi contends that the drive towards modernity in the region has strengthened the patriarchal norms and values; hence he views the oppression of women as the cornerstone of the neopatriarchal system and their liberation as an essential condition for overcoming it.

Religion

Islam has often been cited as the main culprit behind the slow/incremental development of the status of women in the region. Delving into the various interpretations of Islam and Islamic feminism is beyond the scope of this case study; suffice it to state that Islam has not deterred women in non-Arab Islamic countries such as Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan from reaching top elected positions. It can also be added that some Islamist political parties in the Arab world have promoted their women members as parliamentary candidates. One can question whether Arab non-Muslim women have had better chances than their Arab Muslim sisters, or whether they all face similar challenges in their quest to improve their lot and advance their political careers. It has been rightly pointed out that 'what is at issue is not so much the religion per se, but a broader aspect of neopatriarchy… it is not culture alone that impacts on women's political participation, but a whole host of other factors combine to render the situation as it is'.[8]

The Public–Private Divide

Arab social norms and attitudes which have eulogized women's role in the private sphere while creating barriers to their participation in the public one remain an important obstacle. The World Bank sees gender roles and dynamics within the household as being shaped by a traditional gender paradigm that presumes that the most important contribution women can make is to family and society, as homemakers and mothers. While the World Bank put this paradigm forward to explain the low rates of female participation in the labour force, it can easily be applied to explaining their low rates of participation in political life or public life in general. This gender paradigm is based on four elements:

1. 'The centrality of the family, rather than the individual, as the main unit of society. This emphasis on the family is seen as justification for equivalent, rather than equal, rights . . '.

2. 'The assumption that the man is the sole breadwinner of the family'.

3. 'A "code of modesty" under which family honour and dignity rest on the reputation of the woman. This code imposes restrictions on interaction between men and women.

4. 'An unequal balance of power in the private sphere that affects women's access to the public sphere. This power difference is anchored in family laws.'[9]

Hence the paradigm presumes that the man's responsibility for supporting and protecting his wife and family justifies his authority over his wife's interaction in the public sphere and control over it. This stress on women's primary role in the private sphere to the detriment of their role in the public sphere has actually jeopardized their access to full citizenship rights. Recently, it has been rightly pointed out that 'on paper in many states, women are declared to be citizens, but there are many social rights and benefits that remain inaccessible to women except through the medium of the family'.[10] While women in many Arab states have acquired their full political rights as citizens, unless they acquire their full social and economic rights, their practice of citizenship will remain curtailed.

Recent research on Arab women's political participation has concluded that 'women are not active in politics because politics is not a safe and secure place', calling for a focus on human security to ensure that women can participate freely without threats and coercion.[11] While such a new angle for analysing Arab women's political participation could lead to certain improvements in women's levels of participation, it is rather simplistic to think that this would be enough to turn the tables and bring women's participation to its full measure.

Discourses

Despite certain improvements in the conditions of women in the region, a challenge has re-emerged more recently in that attempts to empower women are viewed with suspicion, as part of a 'Western agenda'. In the 1990s this claim came as a response to international conferences that highlighted women's human rights. The establishment of the US–Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) towards the end of 2002, and later the announcement of the Greater Middle East Initiative submitted to the Group of Eight industrialized countries (G8) Summit, only served to reinforce such apprehensions. In an attempt to prove that reforms should come from within, the Arab heads of state at their Tunis Summit (May 2004) committed themselves to 'promote the role of women, consolidate their rights, encourage their effective participation in development and their role in the political, economic, social and cultural fields'.[12] This was the very first reference to women in the history of Arab summits.

Women's Movements

The patriarchal order that the Arab states share permeates civil society and is an obstacle to civil society becoming a major force for social change. Unlike other regions of the world, in the Arab world the women's movements have not been credited with helping women's advancement. Rather, women's organizations have been criticized for adopting patron–client patterns of leadership, thus emulating the patriarchal patterns found in their societies at large.[13]

With the exception of some scattered incidents when women activists or women's movements took the lead, most attempts at widening the scope of Arab women's participation in public life have been led by 'state feminism', a term coined by Mervat Hatem in the early 1980s. Ranging from literacy programmes to legal amendments in personal status laws that outlaw certain practices sanctioned by religion (e.g. outlawing polygamy in Tunisia), state feminism cannot be criticized for not benefiting women. The major criticism targeted at it is that its programmes served as part of 'broader state building and/or regime consolidation processes. Women were instruments or tools, and their "liberation" was part of a larger project of reinforcing control within a series of states that continued to be dominated by what are generically referred to as patriarchal structures'.[14] Certainly, earning international recognition has been a key factor for motivating Arab states to create mechanisms that advance women's status even if the impact of this process could contradict traditional patriarchal structures. However, the pace of change has not been rapid enough to warrant a showdown between such structures and governments.

Electoral Practices

Closely linked to the issue of the 'Arab freedom and democracy deficit' raised earlier are the electoral laws in force in Arab countries and the electoral processes that ensue. In the case of women, the questions that arise are how gender-sensitive processes and legislation are, and more importantly, whether they can be gender-sensitized in settings that tend to be non-democratic or in nascent democracies. The linkage between patriarchal societies, levels of democratization and the political status of women is very intriguing indeed, yet, regrettably, it has not been adequately researched in the Arab region. The electoral systems in Arab countries vary, but apart from the few cases where quota systems have been applied they are not generally women-friendly.

Arab Women's Participation in Legislatures

Mirroring the dialectical relationship of the various factors reviewed above, Arab women's representation in legislatures is the lowest in the world, with the world average standing at 16 percent while in the Arab world (excluding the Pacific region) it is only 6.5 percent.[15] In contrast to most other regions of the world, in the Arab countries women have generally been better represented in the upper houses of national parliaments than in the lower houses. This could be explained by the fact

that most upper houses in the Arab region are appointed.

It is evident from table 3 that the percentage of women in Arab legislatures has not yet reached the Beijing Platform for Action target of at least 30 percent in any country, which makes it difficult for those women who are present in national parliaments to effect any changes in legislation to benefit women. According to the ranking of countries in terms of women's representation, illustrated in table 3, the Arab countries do not fare well, with the exception of Iraq at 31 percent and Tunisia at 22.8 percent. Syria is in 71st position with 12 percent and Djibouti in 78th position, with 10.8 percent women, followed by Algeria and Jordan, while the Gulf states of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates share the lowest rank, i.e. 0 percent women.

There are two issues worth highlighting. First, despite certain positive amendments to legislation in various Arab countries, legal discrimination still remains a major obstacle to women's advancement. In one Arab country (Saudi Arabia) they still do not have the suffrage. More commonly, in laws governing social security, pensions, income tax, inheritance and criminal matters, women are not treated equally, nor do they enjoy all the benefits men do. The linkage between such discrimination and the low participation of women in legislatures, even in countries that have given women the full suffrage, has not been fully researched or recorded.[16]

The second issue is that of the electoral processes within each country. Although this paper does not review electoral processes fully, but focuses more on the various types of obstacle that hinder women from political participation, electoral processes as such have certain elements that do discriminate against women. This is exacerbated by the fact that the conditions in which elections are held seem to constantly shift and change within each country in response to internal and/or regional developments. Additionally, there are certain cases where electoral laws are passed as provisional laws, hence not allowing for public or parliamentary debate about the legislation. This does not allow for the planning and lobbying that are required to overcome any gender discrimination inherent in such processes.

Table 3: Women's Representation in Arab Legislatures, 2005

Country	Lower/Single House				Upper House				IPU Rank (1)
	Election Year	Total No. of Seats	No. of Women	% Women	Last Elections	Total	No. of Women	% Women	
Algeria	2002	389*	24	6.2	2003	144*	4	2.8	105
Baahrain	2002	40*	0	0	2002	40***	6	15	126
Comoros	2004	33	1	3.0					119
Djibouti	2003	65*	7	10.8					78
Egypt (2)	2000	454	11	2.9	2001	264**	18	6.8	120
Iraq	2005	275	87	31.6					15
Jordan	2003	110*	6	5.5	2003	55***	7	12.7	109
Kuwait	2003	65*	0	0					126
Lebanon	2000	128*	3	2.3					122
Libya	1997	760**							
Mauritania	2001	81*	3	3.7	2002	56**	3	5.4	117
Morocco	2002	325*	35	10.8	2003	270**	3	1.1	78
Oman	2003	38*	2	2.4	2001	58***	9	15.5	121
Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)	1996	85*	5	5.9					
Qatar	2002	35***	0	0					
Saudi Arabia	2001	120***	0	0					126
Somalia									
Sudan (3)	2000	360	35	9.7					85
Syria	2003	250*	30	12.0					71
Tunisia	2004	182*	21	22.8					27
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	1996	40***	0	0					126
Yemen	2003	301*	1	0.3					126

Notes:

(1) Ranked by descending order of the percentage of women in the lower/single house in 183 countries.

(2) 444 members elected, 10 appointed by the head of state.

(3) 270 directly elected, 35 representatives of women, 26 representatives of university graduates and 29 representatives of trade unions.

* Members are elected through direct elections.

** Members are elected through indirect elections.

*** Members are appointed by the head of state.

Sources: Compiled from information available on the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) web site, 'Women in National Parliaments', <http://www.ipu.org>, for all countries except Iraq, Oman and Qatar, which were compiled from information available on the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union (AIPU) web site, <http://www.arab-ipu.org/>. Information on the OPT available on the Palestinian Legislative Council web site, <http://www.pal-plc.org>.

B. Key Challenges at the National Level

This section identifies key challenges that confront women seeking decision-making positions, specifically in parliaments. In addition to the political environment outlined above, this section discusses the specific obstacles faced, such as the role played by political parties, tribalism, the women's movement and financial constraints, which are the key obstacles. Undeniably, mature and organized political parties have a crucial role in the political development of a given country and in preparing candidates to participate actively in decision making. Tribalism, often criticized for hindering women's advancement, appears to be co-opting any opportunities for women to its own advantage. Similarly, the role played by women's movements is expected to be a key factor in promoting women's access to decision making. Finally, financial capacity plays a crucial role in mobilizing resources to support any candidate.

Since the number of countries in the region makes it impossible to look at each country's electoral process individually, three countries will be highlighted here: Yemen, Lebanon and Jordan. It is important to note that, in addition to the regional conflicts mentioned above and their various impacts on each Arab state, both Yemen and Lebanon have had their own internal conflicts, which have ultimately shaped the political, economic and social contexts in these countries. Although these cases may not be representative of the entire region, they reflect issues that have resonance with neighbouring countries.

During the past 15 years, Yemen and Lebanon have had three national elections each, and Jordan has had four. The participation of women as candidates in these elections is summarized in table 4, which shows that in Yemen and Lebanon women's participation remains limited but Jordan has witnessed shifts and developments over the four elections, with a marked increase in 2003, attributed to the introduction of six reserved seats for women.[17]

Yemen

Table 4 illustrates the decline in the number of women in the Yemeni Parliament, to just 0.3 percent in 2003.[18] Different factors have contributed to this situation.

Illiteracy. The illiteracy rate among Yemeni women (76.1 percent)[19] is the highest in the region, which affects not only the processes of voter registration and voting, but also political awareness of the importance of electing women. However, the higher educational levels of women in Lebanon and Jordan have not yielded better results for women's broader participation in those countries.

Mobility. This is an important factor limiting women's opportunities to participate in Yemeni elections. Table 4 shows that the number of women candidates standing for elections has nearly halved since 1997. This is attributed to the stipulation introducedin the General Election Law, No. 13 of 2001, which states that an independent candidate has to be supported by at least 300 people from his or her constituency.

Table 4: Women's Participation in National Elections in Yemen, Lebanon and Jordan: As Candidates

Country	Election Year	No. of Women Candidates	Percentage of Women to Total Candidates	No. of Successful Women Candidates	Percentage of Women in Lower House
Yemen	1993	41	1.3	2	0.7
	1997	19	1.3	2	0.7
	2003	11	0.6	1	0.3
Lebanon	1992	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	1996	10	n/a	3	2.3
	2000	11	n/a	3	2.3
Jordan	1989	12	1.86	0	0
	1993	3	0.18	1	1.3
	1997	17	3.24	0	0
	2003	54	7.06	6	5.5

Source: Mashhur, Huriya, 2005. 'Political Participation by Yemeni Women', in International IDEA and Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), *Building Democracy in Yemen: Women's Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections.* Stockholm: International IDEA and ANND.

This was a difficult requirement for all candidates to fulfil, but is probably more so for women, who cannot afford to travel far and are less well known within their communities.[20]

The political parties. While political parties seem to have thrived in post-unification Yemen, women formed only 2 percent of their membership when they were established following unification in 1990. The major political parties do have token representation of one or two women in their higher echelons (either on the executive board or in the highest decision-making body of the party, which usually constitute around 20 persons), with the exception of the Socialist Party, which had four women in its 29-member political bureau in 2003. Reported reasons for this vary from women themselves refraining from party work to women feeling that 'they are not given serious tasks except to mobilize women to vote during elections'.[21]

Women who stood for the 2003 elections argued that they were not given any kind of financial or moral support for their campaigns. While traditional forces openly resisted women's participation, the resistance of the political parties was not so straightforward, but indirectly they pressured women not to stand. The ruling party, the General People's Congress (GPC), fielded only one woman candidate, whereas

the Socialist Party (which was previously the ruling party in the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) and was then noted for its pro-women policies) fielded two. Furthermore, their electoral platforms in 2003 did not commit these parties to support women to stand for election.

Tribalism. Exacerbating these factors, Yemeni women still have to confront the traditional forces of tribalism. Many have admitted that the regressive trend in women's participation has been a result of 'tribalism, its value system and its view of women. Even political parties, which should have effected change since they represent modernizing influences within the state, were themselves an extension of the tribe and of the tribal attitude that resists any advancement in the status of women'.[22]

Lebanon

As a result of the 2000 election, only 2.3 percent of parliamentary representatives are women. This is explained by different factors, including the following.

The political parties. The results of the three successive parliamentary elections do not reflect the advancement of Lebanese women in several other areas, such as education, the economy and culture. The civil war can be blamed for stunting the political advancement of women in various ways. Prior to the civil war, women were quite active in the political parties, and even during the war certain parties specifically sought women's participation. Recently, however, the situation has regressed, and women's wings or sections in the 18 political parties have in some instances been reconstituted as non-governmental organizations (NGOs). 'Some civil society actors feel that women's sections of political parties have in effect been marginalized and "pushed aside" into these NGOs, and thus it is more an indication of the lack of incorporation of women into party politics than genuine attention to women's issues.'[23]

Men dominate the leadership of political parties, and among six major parties women's participation at the highest levels of decision making ranges from zero to 10 percent.[24] According to personal testimonies, women face difficulties within the political parties, they question the internal democracy of the parties, and they argue that there is an obvious division of labour based on gender within the parties' general activities.[25] In addition, financial constraints stifle women aspirants, and without party and financial support electoral campaigns become prohibitively expensive.

Patronage and family ties. Although tribalism does not exist in Lebanon, the political scene is governed by other factors that carry within them similar patriarchal overtones, including powerful families that have dominated political life. In short, the system governing Lebanese politics could be termed a sectarian, family-based system. The effect on women's political participation has been negative and is often criticized.

Lebanese women parliamentarians have been branded as the women 'dressed in black'.[26] The first two women to enter parliament, in 1963 and much later in 1992, 'inherited' their seats—the first from her father, and the second from her

assassinated husband—thus explaining the black mourning dresses they wore. The current situation is not much improved, since the women parliamentarians have not had political careers as such, but their socio-political status is still derived from a male politician, either deceased or alive.[27] Yet it can also be argued that women politicians in Lebanon, given the more liberal family structure within Lebanese society, might have had sufficient exposure, especially in politically influential families, to ideologies, know-how and techniques to support them in their future political careers.

Jordan

The 2003 elections showed a marked increase in women's parliamentary representation, from zero to 5.5 percent. This was attributable to the adoption of six reserved seats for women in the parliament, which were introduced to overcome the barriers to women's participation.

Tribalism. Tribalism is a major force in both Jordanian politics and society. It is interesting to note in this respect that, of the six 'winners' of the reserved seats for women, five had the support of their tribes and were fielded as 'tribal candidates', while only one was a partisan candidate. In contrast to the situation in Yemen, where tribalism is seen as debilitating to the advancement of women, the quota system seems to have suited smaller tribes whose male candidates would not have stood a chance in open competition with candidates of larger tribes. Some simple calculations assured the smaller tribes that the quota system would give them much better opportunities; hence they used it to their advantage.

The political parties. With the resumption of political liberalization in 1989 and the passing of a new political party law, Jordan now has 32 registered political parties. The membership of women in these parties does not exceed 8 percent, and there are very few women in the higher echelons. An analysis of the discourse of political parties and gender equality has revealed that their general commitment to the advancement of women is very much of a token nature, since none of the parties appears to grasp the nature and magnitude of such issues, and they address major challenges such as poverty, unemployment, health and education in a totally gender-blind fashion.[28]

Women's linkages. After the election of six women through reserved seats, an emerging challenge is the relationship between women members of parliament (MPs) and the women's movement. It is argued that women MPs are an 'obstacle' in securing gender equality and are not articulating women's interests in society.[29] While this charge points to an important challenge, there are certain structural and financial deficiencies that put women MPs at a disadvantage, including the view that MPs' role in Jordan is much more tilted towards being a 'service MP'.[30] This reflects what most critics of Jordanian MPs maintain—that they do not fulfil their proper legislative roles as they seem more preoccupied with securing special services from government (e.g. high-level appointments or cash assistance to a poor family) for their constituents.

Equally challenging is the question what the women's movement is doing to ensure

the increased political participation of women. The symbiotic relationship between women's movements and legislatures that characterizes several Western democracies is non-existent in Jordan, or is rather of a hostile nature, as the Jordanian press has reported over the years.[31] Traditionalist parliamentarians have invoked 'preserving our cultural norms and traditions' against the onslaught of the 'Western agenda'. The relationship between women MPs and the women's movement did not begin cordially either: MPs criticized some women leaders, and women activists stated that the women MPs were not fulfilling their aspirations.[32] While there is no research on the Jordanian women's organizations to corroborate the patron–client patterns cited earlier, some expert views are highly critical of the Jordanian model, stating that the six reserved seats are being used by women not for the advancement of women in general but for self-advancement or other self-serving interests.[33]

C. Mechanisms to Promote Arab Women's Participation in Parliaments

The above examples provide a snapshot of some of the main obstacles facing women in three Arab states. In contrast to Lebanon and Yemen, Jordan has maintained a stable internal political environment with no internal conflicts. Nonetheless, the three countries share similarities when we look at the role of women in public life. Furthermore, whatever the contextual and historical differences between the political parties in each country, it is clear that the position of political parties, being crucial to women's political empowerment, has fallen short of realizing that role.

It is clear that in the Yemeni case illiteracy rates pose a specific dilemma. Certainly, while this issue may not appear as forcibly in other countries, it is clear that specific measures to address such constraining factors are essential if the inclusion of all members of society is to be ensured.

Electoral systems have not been touched upon in detail in this paper because of space limitations but are discussed in detail in chapter 3.

In sum, the factors that hinder the promotion of Arab women in the public domain are complex and intertwined. The small windows of opportunity available vary between countries, and consequently there is no blueprint for the promotion of women that can be applied across the Arab world, given the different contexts and experiences of each country. However, the examples given here illustrate certain common obstacles that are shared by women, and to a lesser extent some mechanisms or general recommendations that could be implemented to overcome these obstacles. The following section addresses four groups of recommendations: general strategies that target women's advancement (grouped into state-level and political party actions); and specific recommendations about electoral processes, categorized into pre-election measures and measures during elections.

General Recommendations and Mechanisms
State Level

The non-democratic systems or nascent democracies in the Arab world need further political liberalization. In the Arab world such attempts have not always been conducive to women's advancement,[34] yet one cannot underestimate the benefits of democratization in patriarchal structures that prevail not only in the state apparatus but also within families and societies at large.

With further democratization, it could be assumed that the legal impediments facing Arab women should be amended, and that Arab states parties to CEDAW[35] will undertake a major overhaul of their legislation to align it more closely with the stipulations of CEDAW. This would overcome the lack of full citizenship rights for women that prevails over the whole region, as highlighted in the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) *Progress of Arab Women 2004.*

The opportunity to capitalize on existing high-level political will, which seems to have had a significant impact on women's political participation, is one that should not be ignored. In Jordan, the support came from the king and other members of the royal family. In Yemen, the support came from the major political parties, while in Lebanon it came from leading male politicians. Other examples underlining the key role of such support, although not discussed here, include Tunisia and Morocco, where positive changes to the legislation became possible. Obviously, in patriarchal settings such support needs to be constantly drawn upon and women's movements should continue to create strategic alliances with these policy makers.

The establishment of national mechanisms could be viewed as a factor facilitating women's participation, despite views that they are tools of 'state feminism'. The Jordanian National Commission for Women, the oldest in the Arab world, and the Yemeni Women National Committee have become more effective over the years. The much younger Lebanese equivalent may play a significant role in the forthcoming elections.

A final observation is that the relationship between women politicians and the women's movement must be further developed into a mutually collaborative one. Mechanisms to improve and enhance this relationship need to be further studied and developed.[36] Within the Arab region, examples from North African countries such as Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria can be used to highlight how women politicians responded to legislative amendments demanded by the women's movement. However, given that in most Arab countries women politicians have not yet reached a critical mass, both women politicians and women's movements need to strategize together on how best to effect change within each country's set of priorities, opportunities and challenges.

The Political Parties

As indicated earlier, the political parties' development in general and in relation to the role of women within them needs to be seriously revised and considered. Women's

tokenism is much more apparent in the political parties than in state institutions; this is apparent not only in quantitative terms but also in terms of policies, where state policies often appear to be more gender-sensitive than those of the political parties. Hence the political parties need to identify gender issues in their platforms, institutional set-ups and internal procedures.[37]

One country in this case study, Jordan, has been seriously considering giving financial incentives to political parties that engage more women in their party membership and leadership.[38] In countries that adopt proportional representation systems, one strategy might be to give incentives, such as public funding for election campaigns, or providing more air time for campaigning during elections, as has happened in Timor-Leste, to parties that place women in winnable positions on their party list.[39] Another mechanism could be the implementation of quotas for women, with strict sanctions for enforcement.

Electoral Processes
Pre-election Measures
Patriarchal structures are entrenched within the Arab states' social fabric. Certainly there is an immense need to challenge the patriarchal authority in the private and public spheres. As discussed elsewhere,[40] voter education and civic education in general seem to be rather rudimentary and sporadic in the cases reviewed. Projects to design country-specific gender-sensitive programmes have been initiated to overcome this.[41]

Certainly, women's limited political exposure and experience have minimized their chances as candidates. Skills training and individual consultations for women candidates and their campaign managers on issues such as time management, targeting voters, recruiting volunteers, communications, fund-raising, and formulating and implementing field strategies have been used with varying success.[42] Such training programmes could be further developed based on evaluations of previous activities.

The role of the women's movement in supporting candidates has not been as successful as its role in bringing attention to women's issues in general. This could be attributed to various factors such as legislation that prohibits all NGOs from dealing with political issues, or patriarchal structures such as tribalism or political families, whereby women's support for candidates is automatically geared towards the family candidate. These factors, together with the impermeability of patriarchal structures within the political parties themselves, also inhibit the women's movement in pressuring the political parties to nominate more women.

Measures During Elections
Taking socio-economic and cultural specificities into account in electoral legislation has paid dividends in a country like Yemen. To overcome the illiteracy barrier, symbols or logos were adopted for each candidate on the ballot papers. Establishing women's committees in each electoral district charged with the registration of female voters and

overseeing polling on election day also facilitated women's roles as voters and increased their turnout rates.[43] Both Yemen and Jordan have separate polling stations for men and women, which respects the traditional tendencies in those societies. Additionally, in the 2003 elections, Jordan allowed voters to use any polling station within their district, rather than specifying a polling station for each voter. This provided easier access for women voters, whose freedom of movement is more restricted.

In the case of Yemen, the provision introduced in the 2003 elections that requires each independent candidate to have the endorsement of 300 voters in order to register seriously hindered women.[44] Such procedures constitute indirect discrimination against women and need to be eliminated.

The representation and inclusion of women in electoral commissions is expected to have an influential impact on women's political advancement. Yemen had only one woman on the 1993 electoral commission and none on subsequent ones. Jordan had only one woman on the women's quota subcommission in 2003 (which is responsible for counting the votes and announcing the winners of the quota seats). The committee which drafted the suggested quota mechanism had an equal representation of men and women, yet women have not served on the electoral commission proper. Ensuring equal representation of women in electoral commissions may facilitate the process.

Finally, one should note that sex-disaggregated statistics regarding election processes are not easily available in many Arab countries. If such statistics were made available this could facilitate the process of improving women's participation by highlighting the strengths or weaknesses of electoral arrangements from a gender perspective.

D. Conclusion

'The women's movement…is the detonator which will explode the neo-patriarchal society from within. If allowed to grow and come into its own, it will become the permanent shield against patriarchal regression, the cornerstone of future modernity.'[45]

It is often the case that discussions on the political status and representation of Arab women tend to highlight the difficulties and challenges at the expense of presenting the more positive aspects or breakthroughs that have occurred during the last ten to 15 years. This positive momentum is gaining strength; even over the short time span of writing this case study, changes were taking place that promise a more prominent role and presence for Arab women. If Arab societies are to benefit fully from the winds of political reform that are currently sweeping the region, then women have to become an active part of these processes by asserting their full potential as the harbingers of a better future.

Notes

1   United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2002. *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*. New York: UNDP, p. 2.

2   According to Freedom House ratings, the 'partly free' countries are Bahrain, the Comoros, Djibouti, Kuwait, Jordan, Morocco and Yemen. The category of 'not free' includes Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Oman, the Occupied Palestinian Territories (both Israeli- and Palestinian Authority-administered), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates. Freedom House, 2004. *Freedom in the World 2004: Freedom in the World Country Ratings*, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2004/countryratings/>; and *Freedom in the World 2004: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/survey2004.htm> (accessed 27 October 2004).

3   Khouri, Rami, 2004. 'Politics and Perceptions in the Middle East after September 11'. Social Science Research Council/Contemporary Conflicts (accessed 27 October 2004) available at <http://conconflicts.ssrc.org/mideast/khouri/pf> (accessed 26 October 2004).

4   Gambill, Gary C., 2003a. 'Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit: Part I'. *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin.* Vol. 5, no. 2, February/March, available at <http://www.meib.org/articles/0302 me.htm>; and Gambill, Gary C., 2003b. 'Explaining the Arab Democracy Deficit: Part II'. *Middle East Intelligence Bulletin.* Vol. 5, no. 2, February/March, available at <http://www.meib.org/articles/0303 me1.htm> (both accessed 26 October 2004).

5   Karam, Azza, 1999. 'Strengthening the Role of Women Parliamentarians in the Arab Region: Challenges and Options', available at <http://www.pogar.org/publications/gender/karam1/karama.pdf>.

6   Ibid.

7   Sharabi, Hisham, 1988. *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society.* New York: Oxford University Press.

8   Karam 1999, op. cit.

9   World Bank, 2003. *Gender and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*: *Women in the Public Sphere*. Washington, DC: World Bank, pp. 8–9.

10 United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), 2004. *Progress of Arab Women 2004*. Amman: UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office, p. 126.

11 Ibid., pp. 271, 287.

12 Hamzeh, Alia, 2004. 'Leaders Adopt Reform Plan'. *Jordan Times,* available at <http://www.jordanembassyus.org/05242004001.htm> (accessed 24 October 2004).

13 Joseph, Suad, 1997. 'The Reproduction of Political Process Among Women Activists in Lebanon: "Shopkeepers" and Feminists', in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds). *Organizing Women.* Oxford: Berg, pp. 51–81.

14 Brand, Laurie A., 1998. *Women, the State, and Political Liberalization: Middle Eastern and North African Experiences.* New York: Columbia University Press, p. 10.

15 Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 2005. 'Women in National Parliaments: Situation as of 31 January 2005', available at <http://www.ipu.org>.

16 Linkages between legislation (covering such areas as family laws, social security, etc.) and labour force participation are discussed in World Bank 2003, op. cit. One can draw comparisons between constraints on labour force participation and political participation.

17 A more detailed review of women and the electoral processes in these countries can be found in Sabbagh, Amal, 2004a. 'Electoral Processes in Selected Countries of the Middle East. A Case Study'. Presented at UN Expert Meeting: Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-conflict Countries, Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) and Department of Political Affairs Expert Group Meeting, New York, January, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/meetings/2004/EGMelectoral/epl-sabbagh.pdf>.

18 Mashhur, Huriya, 2005. 'Political Participation by Yemeni Women', in International IDEA and the Arab NGO Network for Development (ANND), *Building Democracy in Yemen: Women's Political Participation, Political Party Life and Democratic Elections.* Stockholm: International IDEA and ANND.

19 UNDP 2002, op. cit., p. 151.

20 Mashhur, Huriya, 2003. [Political participation of Yemeni women]. San'a: National Women's Committee (unpublished report, in Arabic), p. 7.

21 Ibid., p. 15.

22 Ibid., p. 14.

23 Centre for Research and Training in Development (CRTD), 2003. 'Gender Profile of Lebanon 2003', available at <http://www.crtd.org> (accessed 12 January 2004).

24 Ibid.

25 Bizri, Dalal, 2000. [Democracy and women's political participation], in Hussein Abu Rumman (ed.), [Arab women and political participation]. Amman: al-Urdon al-Jadid Research Centre, p. 342 (in Arabic).

26 CRTD 2003, op. cit.

27 International Union of Local Authorities (IULA), 2003. 'Focus: Women in Local Government in the Middle East', available at <http://www.iula-int.org/iula/web/news.asp?L=ENJD=168> (accessed 16 December 2003).

28 Sabbagh, Amal, 2004b. [Women in the discourse of Jordanian political parties]. Amman: Jordanian National Commission for Women (unpublished paper, in Arabic).

29 *al-Ghad*, 2004. [Women parliamentarians an obstacle in achieving women's interests in society]. No. 69, October, pp. 3, 8.

30 Sabbagh, Amal, 2004c. [Cooperation between elected women and women leaderships in Jordan]. Paper submitted to the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation Fourth National Forum for Rural Women, 7 October (unpublished paper, in Arabic).

31 *al-Arab al-Yawm*, 2003. [Women's victory in the governorates embarrasses women of Amman]. No. 2227, 7 July, p. 2; *ad-Dustour*, 2003a. [Al-Khoulu' battle resumes in Parliament]. No. 12966, 31 August, p. 16; *ad-Dustour*, 2003b. [Immediately required: A women's party]. No. 12904, 30 June, p. 21; *ad-Dustour*, 1999. [Parliament likely to reject amendment to article 340 of Penal Code]. no. 11589, 15 November, p. 17; *al-Ghad*, 2004; and *Jordan Times*, 2000. 'Press Stays Away from House Debate on Elections

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[32] See *al-Bilad*, 2003. [Adab Saud opens files and reveals all]. No. 524, 10 September, p. 5; *al-Arab Al-Yaum*, 2003; and *ad-Dustour*, 2003.

[33] Focus group discussion attended by the author on 4 August 2004. The discussion was held at the Jordanian National Commission for Women to discuss means of implementing the National Plan of Action which was adopted at the National Conference on Political Development and Jordanian Women.

[34] Brand 1998, op. cit., pp. 256–8.

[35] Sixteen of the 22 Arab countries have so far acceded to or ratified CEDAW. These are: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen. All of these countries have made reservations on certain articles of the Convention. (UNIFEM 2004, op. cit.)

[36] See Karam 1999, op. cit., and Sabbagh 2004b, op. cit.

[37] Sabbagh 2004b, op. cit.

[38] *al-Arab al-Yawm,* 2004. [Daoudieh: Parties are national institutions that will be supported]. No. 2596, 14 July, p. 23.

[39] United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), 2004. UN Expert Meeting: Enhancing Women's Participation in Electoral Processes in Post-conflict Countries. OSAGI and Department of Political Affairs Expert Group Meeting, New York, January, available at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/meetings/2004/EGMelectoral/finalreport.pdf>.

[40] Sabbagh 2004a, op. cit.

[41] The 2004 National Conference on Jordanian Women and Political Development developed the National Plan of Action focusing on the importance of designing such curricula with the participation of major stakeholders such as women's NGOs and political parties. The Jordanian Prime Minister, Faisal al-Fayez, endorsed this Plan of Action at the close of the conference on 1 August 2004 and preparations are under way to start with the design of each measure outlined in the Plan of Action. The role of women's NGOs will not be limited to the design of these programmes but will also include their delivery. Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), 2004. National Plan of Action. 'Political Development and Jordanian Women: Discourse and Mechanisms'. JNCW: Amman. 3 July–1 August.

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[43] Mashhur, 2005, op. cit.; and Colburn, Martha, 2002. *Gender and Development in Yemen.* Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung.

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[45] Sharabi 1988, op. cit., p. 154.

Further Reading

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