



**Subject : WOMEN AND DECISION-MAKING
Transformative leadership**

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Source :
Washington Report
on the Middle East

Web Site :
grass-roots
campaigningwww.wrmea.org

Country :
Middle East

Date : 2008-07

N° & [P] :

Women: Politics and Leadership

THE WOMEN'S Learning Partnership for Rights, Development, and Peace (WLP) held a joint panel on April 3 with the Dialogue Project of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) titled: "The Politics of Participation: Women and Transformative Leadership."¶

Introductory remarks were made by *Reading Lolita in Tehran* author Azar Nafisi, who currently is a SAIS visiting scholar and the Dialogue Project's director. Noting that "Women have become the canaries of the mines,"¶ Nafisi added that, as such, their situation provides the best indicator of a nation's condition. Moderating the discussion were former Iranian Minister for Women's Affairs Mahnaz Afkami, now executive director of the Foundation for Iranian Studies and WLP's president/CEO, and Zainah Anwar, board member of Sisters in Islam and a free-lance writer.

The six panelists are exemplary international activists working toward ensuring women's empowerment and political participation: Chibogu Obinwa of Nigeria, program officer of Baobab for Women's Human Rights; Malena de Montis of Nicaragua, founder of the NGO El Fondo para el Desarrollo de la Mujer; Rose Shomali of Palestine, director general of Women's Affairs Technical Committee; Masuma Hasan of Pakistan, former ambassador to Austria and a member of the board of governors of the Aurat Foundation Lahore, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, and Pakistan Institute of International Affairs; Tolekan Ismailova of Kyrgyzstan, director of the Human Rights Center/Citizens Against Corruption and founder of the Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society; and Aminetou Mint El Mokhtar of Mauritania, president of the Association des Femmes Chefs de Familles (AFCF).

Each woman briefly described her agency's operation and the level of female participation in her country's municipal and national governments. The latter is primarily the result of the implementation of quota systems that guarantee women positions of political importance. Pakistani women now hold 74 of 342 parliamentary seats, Hasan pointed out, but higher levels of mobilization are still needed to encourage more women "to step out of the home"¶ and cast votes. Shomali described Palestinian women as historically

having high levels of participation in civil society. However, she noted, a “balance between the national struggle and the struggle for women’s rights, without having one take importance over another”¹ has not yet been achieved, citing the Israeli occupation. Obinwa described the Nigerian campaign “50 by 11,”² to have 50 percent female participation in national politics by 2011.

The panelists agreed that on-going women’s rights efforts require a combination of grass-roots campaigning, professional education and training for women, economic aid for participatory campaign fees, and lobbying of governments. A call to “rethink feminism”³ was made by Montis, who argued that feminist agendas very seldom break through the status quo because women in power commonly “negotiate our agendas”⁴ to please their male-dominated political party.

When the activists were asked to cite one obstacle women face, their replies included “religious and cultural fundamentalism,”⁵ “gender roles,”⁶ “insecurity and instability,”⁷ and “poverty.”⁸ Asked what needs to change, the panelists replied, “mentality and traditions,”⁹ legislation, having more women in policymaking roles, partnership, equal representation in government between men and women, and placing “feminist women”¹⁰ in positions of high authority.

—Nina Hamedani

