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## Yemeni women fight for greater representation

**Sana'a, Yemen** - After years of activism, Amal Basha's demands for guarantees of greater representation for women in the political system has finally edged closer to reality.

"Women have been fighting for it for a long time," said the prominent Yemeni human rights advocate, referring to the more than decade-long battle she and others have waged to secure women representation in public office in Yemen.

In the aftermath of the country's 2011 uprising, and over the course of the nation's 10-month National Dialogue Conference (NDC), Basha and other pro-quota NDC delegates were able to **secure the endorsement of an article** for the nation's new constitution - planned to be ratified later this year - **recommending that at least 30 percent** of those serving in government should be women.

This quota, proponents have argued, could rectify Yemen's poor track record of female representation in politics and potentially chip away at negative stigmas of women holding positions of power.

Currently, there is only one woman **in a 301-member parliament and three out of 35 ministers** are female. The country continues to **rank extremely low** on many international measures of gender equality.

"Most women have come to the realisation that we will not be represented unless there is a quota - even those from the more conservative parties," said Jamila Ali Raja, an independent NDC representative.

But given Yemen's already shaky record of commitment to the inclusion of women in serious numbers on post-NDC committees, there is worry that the measure could fall victim to political wrangling and fail to make it into the constitution.

The Constitutional Drafting Commission (CDC), the presidentially appointed group assigned to write the

constitution, was one member short of reaching the minimum margin of 30 percent, with only four women sitting on the 17-member panel.

Julie Ballington, a political participation adviser at United Nations Women, warned that quotas are often undermined if there are no sanctions in place to ensure compliance.

"Quotas are an electoral measure. They can reshape the makeup of the political institution, but other complimentary strategies and measures are needed for women to have an impact and have results," Ballington said.

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A gender quota became a rallying point for the majority of women at the NDC, taking on typically conservative and religious factions opposed to the measure, NDC representative Raja explained.

**Yemen is one of the more than 90 countries worldwide** to have adopted or be in the process of adopting a gender quota in government, according to figures from Ballington at UN Women. Ballington told Al Jazeera that quotas are a key driver in the increasing number of women in decision-making positions worldwide.

"Having gender equality guarantees in the constitution, like temporary special measures or quotas, is particularly important in countries where the rights of women may be undermined in national legislation," she said.

But it has not been an easy ride in forcing gender parity in a male-dominated political arena. "The woman's cause is on the sidelines," said Bahia al-Saqqaff, who represented the al-Hirak party at the NDC, a group composed of southern secessionist factions. Gender equality in politics is considered less important than issues like greater autonomy for the southern governorates, Saqqaff explained.

While the participation of women in the **NDC reached 28 percent** in March 2013, and three of the conference's working groups were headed by women, not all agreed that a gender quota was in their best interests.

Huda al-Yafai was the only female NDC delegate representing the Rashad Union, a Salafi political group that supports the implementation of Islamic law in Yemen. Yafai and her party's six male delegates all voted against mandatory gender representation in politics. "The 30 percent limits choice," Yafai said. "You will not be able to find qualified people to fill this quota."

Although Yafai acknowledged that she would not have participated in the NDC had her party's participation not been tied to the inclusion of a female delegate, she touches on an argument pro-quota activists are constantly forced to dispute. Yemen - plagued by **high levels of illiteracy** and **relatively lower levels of enrollment in schools for girls** - does not have enough skilled or educated women to fill elected and appointed positions.

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Nadia al-Sakkaf, an independent NDC representative who was the only woman on the NDC's governing body, dismissed this argument without hesitation. "Where are the qualified men?" she asked. "Women won't solve all problems. The 70 percent of men at [the NDC] did not solve all men's issues. It is not fair to ask so much of women."

Pro-quota advocates have [created online databases](#) that list potential female leaders and their credentials, in an effort to gain support, but these measures haven't stifled criticism.

Samira Ali Bindaair, who has worked in development for 20 years across many of Yemen's rural areas, said she was not convinced that a quota would enact change in places that are far from the country's decision-making centres, nor provide a voice for Yemen's rural female population. "How effective will it be? It seems [like a] very token [measure] and full of self-interest," she said. "I don't think anyone is looking at the core issues affecting women."

Meanwhile, Raja argued the quota could be most effective at the local level if Yemen moves away from a centralised system to a federalist one with devolved powers, as the NDC recommended.

"A lot of women do have solutions at the local level, but right now they are outside of the decision making," she said.

