

Forum: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Issue: Discussing measures to increase the number of women in politics and their representation, with a focus on the MENA region

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Introduction

The issue of underrepresentation of minorities in politics has maintained its position as one of the most debated topics under the umbrella of equality. The largest demographic that is affected by this are undeniably women who make up just under 50 percent of the world's population. As of January 2023, merely 15 countries have a woman Head of State and 16 have a woman Head of Government.

According to UNWomen, at the current rate of progress, gender parity in national legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063. These statistics are a clear indication that in many places, women are still not seen or accepted as trustworthy and capable leaders due to gender stereotypes and cultural norms.

Over the years, there have been many attempts to increase the number of women in governing bodies, some relatively successful, some less so. A great number of notable measures taken to maintain an equal presence of both genders in legislative organs were proposed in the last 50 years such as gender quotas and policies, training and mentorship programmes and inter-factional associations.

Despite the progress made over the years, women are yet to surpass patriarchal obstacles and challenges that have been systematically established. Exclusion of women from the political sphere in Less Developed Countries can be attributed to the burden of household chores and inequitable access to higher education. It is argued that women bear an unequal brunt of the troubles caused by poverty and conflict.

Women's involvement in decision-making is crucial in making sure public policies are gender-sensitive and represent the needs and wants of the group. Women's struggles can not be accurately tackled without the presence of women's opinions in governing bodies.

Definition of Key Terms

Gender Parity

Gender parity refers to the equal representation of women and men in every dimension of life, in this context; politics.

Electoral Reform

An electoral reform is a change in the election system such as modifications in voting systems, nomination rules, eligibility criteria, etc.

Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling metaphor describes the invisible and subtle barriers often faced by women when trying to enter a particular profession or sector.

Gender Mainstreaming

The term “gender mainstreaming” refers to the integration of gender perspectives into the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies to promote gender equality in all areas, including politics.

Sharia Law

Sharia law, derived from Islamic principles, can influence various aspects of societal norms, including those related to gender roles and political participation while limiting women’s ability to partake in decision-making.

Background Information

Historical context

The history of women in politics is complicated and dates back to the dawn of civilization. Having been restricted to household duties and thought to be inferior to males for generations, women have faced many challenges in their efforts regarding political

participation. Exclusion from political life helped to maintain the patriarchal system that is still present today in our society.

Except in a few rare instances, this exclusion persisted until women took a stand and actively battled for their right to engage in politics in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Suffrage movements and other efforts, became powerful forces in the fight for women's right to vote.

Just like in any part of the globe, women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have been fighting for their right to become respected and active voices in the political sphere. In the last 15 years, pro-democracy protests have intensified, bringing attention to the lack of representation in the region, thus leaving governments with no choice but to re-evaluate the place of women in their societies.

Even in countries like Saudi Arabia and Sudan where Sharia law and Islamism are dominant, improvements are beginning to take place, despite the MENA region's justified reputation for having the lowest rates of female political representation in the world. However it is important to note that these changes do not come from a stand-point of equality but rather complementarity.

Religion-based exclusion from politics

Religion and politics have always been intertwined, most commonly in the earlier stages of civilization. Religion has maintained and arguably augmented its authority and influence in the political realm with society's transformation from ethnic-religions to abrahamic religions such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism. The interpretation of sacred texts played a key role in forming guidelines as to how people live and how communities function. These interpretations are one of the most significant factors in the creation of gender norms. For example, it is argued by many religious scholars that women are the homemakers while men are the providers.

According to shariah law, based on interpretation of the ayah : "And stay in your houses, and do not display yourselves like that of the times of ignorance..." [al-Ahzab 33:33], governmental positions require a person, a woman in this context, to join gatherings and meetings where men are present. Men and women being in the same space, while not completely disallowed, is often not preferred in Islam. However it is important to note once again that sacred texts can be interpreted differently.

Today, religious arguments continue to be actively invoked in politics across a wide range of countries, both developed and developing. While there are exceptions, it is safe to conclude that religion can be a major contributor to the exclusion of women from governmental positions and decision-making.

Islam and women's participation in politics in the MENA region

Sharia, which is translated to "way" or "law," is the term used in Islamic discourse to describe a permanent, abstract divine or religious law that is an essential part of Islamic tradition and stems from Islamic scriptures, primarily the Quran and Hadith.

Muslim nations where Sharia law has been officially proclaimed and Islam is the state religion follow a "classical Sharia" system, establishing an organizational structure of "government under God." This type of Sharia law is practiced in fifteen different nations. Among these nations are Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran, and Iraq as well as certain areas of Indonesia, the Maldives, Malaysia and Nigeria.

Countries that practice Sharia law are required to consult the Quran in order to make legislative decisions that abide by the rules set by the holy text. As the interpretations of the Quran by scholars from different nations vary, so do the rights given to women. In Islam, women have the same right to vote as men. Most countries in the MENA region granted women the right to vote between the years 1950 and 1970.

In Islam, leaders are chosen based on qualifications, irrespective of gender; the misconception arises from a misinterpretation of a hadith about the downfall of the historical Persian empire led by a woman, leading some to mistakenly believe that all female leaders are destined to fail. Nonetheless, with a few exceptions, the majority of Islamic scholars today reject the idea of a female head of state.

The suffrage movement

The 19th century saw the subject of women's voting rights finally come to light. The fight for women's voting rights was most intense in the United States and Great Britain, despite the fact that those nations were not the first to give women the right to vote, at least not nationally.

In Great Britain, the Chartist movement of the 1840s demanded women's suffrage, a demand first made by Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The first woman suffrage committee was established in Manchester in 1865. In 1867, a petition which had roughly 1,550 signatures and called for women to have the right to vote was introduced to Parliament. In the years that followed, every significant suffrage bill that was presented to Parliament was defeated, even though some of these petitions had amassed more than three million signatures.

Over time, there was an increase in the amount of public support for the woman suffrage movement. Public rallies and protests in favor of women's voting rights were held. When World War I broke out, women suffrage organizations turned their focus to supporting the war effort, which led to contributing to the public's support of the woman suffrage movement. February of 1918.

All women thirty years of age or older were granted the right to vote under the Representation of the People Act. Not long after, an act was passed allowing women to hold seats in the House of Commons. In order to give women voters the same rights as males, the voting age for women was lowered to 21 in 1928.

Around a decade earlier than Great Britain, the United States' 19th amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was approved by Congress in 1919, and ratified in 1920. This was no easy feat to reach, resembling the battles of British women, it took decades of protest and resistance to succeed.

Women's place in politics in the 21st century

Significant progress has been made regarding the inclusion of women in politics, particularly in the last 50 years. UN Women reports that women hold leadership positions in 31 countries, constituting 26.5% of Parliament members, with only 22.8% serving as Cabinet Ministers globally. Additionally, new data shows women tend to lead in human rights and gender equality, while men predominantly occupy roles in defence and the economy. Albania, with a 66.7 percent, currently holds the number one ranking for having the highest percentage of women in Cabinet positions.

Nevertheless, UN Women Executive Director Sima Bahous highlighted the fact that in spite of the improvements, women still face many challenges when entering politics. : "This data tells us that women are still the minority of Heads of State and Government. They are still deeply under-represented in government leadership, at less than one in four Cabinet Ministers, with men continuing to dominate critical portfolios such as the economy, defence, and energy. Full democracy needs the equal participation of women in all its processes. Yet, continued violence and threats, online and offline, against women leaders, candidates, and voters blight the potential for their voices and knowledge to bring the

change that is so urgently needed for economic and social recovery. The world cannot afford to continue this injustice. We need a paradigm shift that brings true equality.”

Trend data from the Arab Barometer indicates a sharp increase in support for women in politics in the majority of MENA nations. In eight of the eleven countries for which Arab Barometer has trend data, disagreement over the belief that men are more suitable for political leadership roles than women is at an all-time high.

While it is encouraging to see these rising numbers it is important to remember women still are a minority in almost all legislative bodies.

Countries and Organisations Involved

Tunisia

Tunisia can be considered as one of the most progressive countries in the MENA region when it comes to women’s participation in politics and women’s rights in general. The nation has implemented numerous policies in order to promote the inclusion of women in the realm. One example is the gender quotas for electoral lists that ensure the presence of women in legislative bodies.

Adopted in 2014, the Tunisian constitution includes provisions to promote gender equality. Article 46 addresses the need to take measures in order to ensure gender parity in elected Assemblies. Article 21, apart from emphasizing gender equality, also stresses the state's commitment to ensuring the promotion of women's rights.

In addition to having a law-based approach to women’s rights, Tunisia also has a vibrant humanitarian movement with activists advocating for gender equality.

Morocco

Morocco is another notable nation when discussing the topic at hand. Over the years, the issue of women's rights and their involvement in politics has been a recurring topic. As a result, the 2011 constitutional revisions in Morocco included the recognition of gender equality and the commitment to promoting women's rights. For example, Article 19 of the revised constitution explicitly states that "Men and women enjoy equal civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights and freedoms."

The nation has also launched a National Strategy for Gender Equality, outlining specific objectives and action plans to address gender disparities in various sectors. In 2023, out of 19 Moroccan ministers 4 were women. While this number may seem far from parity, it is still remarkable considering the approach governments in the region have in regards to women's participation in politics.

Finland

Finland is recognized for its high level of political gender equality. Just like its Nordic counterparts, the nation places a strong emphasis on women's presence in decision-making processes. Gender quotas have been implemented to ensure parity among the two genders. According to the last data published by UN Women, the share of Finnish women Cabinet members who had ministries is 64.3 percent as of 2023.

Sanna Mirella Marin serves as a good example of how the Finnish people view women in higher positions of government. Prior to taking office as prime minister from 2019 to 2023, Marin led the Social Democratic Party of Finland from 2020 to 2023.

UN Women

UN Women is the United Nations organ concerned with women empowerment in all aspects. Since its establishment, the organization has been working to ensure women are treated fairly and equally in society. As a part of the organization's efforts to empower women, programmes have been launched in order to increase political participation on women's end.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women upholds women's right to participate in public life, the Beijing Platform for Action calls for removing barriers to equal participation and The Millennium Development Goals measure progress towards gender equality in part by the proportion of women in parliamentary seats.

Moreover, UN Women provides training to potential women political candidates to help build and increase their capacities. The organization regularly supports women's rights advocates calling on political parties and proposes initiatives to encourage young women's engagement in politics.

Timeline of events

- September 19, 1893** New Zealand becomes the first self-governing country to grant women the right to vote in parliamentary elections.
- March 3, 1913** Suffragettes organize a major women's suffrage parade in Washington, D.C., advocating for the right to vote in the United States.
- December 14, 1918** The United Kingdom grants voting rights to some women over the age of 30.
- August 18, 1920** The United States passes the 19th Amendment, giving women the right to vote.
- December 5, 1934** Women in Turkiye gain the right to vote.

April 21, 1944	Women in France gain the right to vote.
October 17, 1953	Women in Mexico gain the right to vote.
February 10, 1956	Women in Egypt gain the right to vote.
July 21, 1960	Sirimavo Bandaranaike becomes the world's first female Prime Minister, leading Sri Lanka.
February 7, 1971	Swiss women gain the right to vote at the federal level.
April 27, 1994	South Africa holds its first democratic elections with universal suffrage, allowing women of all races to vote.
May 16, 2005	Kuwait grants women the right to vote and run for office.
Late 2010 to 2011	The Arab Spring protests sweep across the MENA region, with women actively participating in calls for political reform and social change.
October 10, 2012	Qatar holds its first elections in which women are allowed to vote and run for office.
December 12, 2015	Saudi Arabia holds its first municipal elections in which women are able to vote and run as candidates.
October 15, 2017	The #MeToo movement gains momentum globally, shedding light on sexual harassment and assault, and prompting discussions on women's rights in various sectors, including politics.
July 24, 2019	Sheikh Hasina continues her term as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), 1979

The United Nations General Assembly's 1979 adoption of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is the foundation of

the global movement to protect and strengthen women's rights. CEDAW is a comprehensive convention that covers a wide range of rights, including social, political, economic, civil, and cultural rights.

The convention, which upholds the non-discrimination principle, forbids discrimination against women in any form and requires State Parties to take proactive steps to end discriminatory practices. Beyond solely its legal structure, the convention has a global impact on national laws and programs that promote gender equality.

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995

Adopted in 1995 during the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action marked a turning point in the global movement to promote gender equality. This extensive publication covers important challenges impacting women worldwide and provides a visionary road map for realizing women's rights. Although it covers a wide range of topics related to women's lives, it notably emphasizes the critical role that women play in political decision-making.

The Beijing Platform for Action places a strong emphasis on the value of women's involvement in decision-making at all levels. Both nationally and locally, it promotes greater female representation in political institutions. The manifesto emphasizes how important it is to remove obstacles that prevent women from entering the political sphere.

UN Security Council Resolution 1325, 2000

The goal of Resolution 1325 is to incorporate gender viewpoints into all aspects of peacekeeping and conflict resolution. The importance of women's equal and full participation in all initiatives pertaining to the preservation and advancement of security and peace is emphasized in the resolution. It demands that national, regional, and

international organizations that deal with conflict resolution have more women in positions of decision-making.

UN Security Council Resolution 1889, 2009

Adopted on October 5, 2009, UN Security Council Resolution 1889 adds significantly to the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda that Resolution 1325 initiated. By reinforcing the commitment to furthering gender equality and women's involvement in peace processes, Resolution 1889 builds on the groundwork set by previous resolutions, especially Resolutions 1325 and 1820.

UN General Assembly Resolution 66/130, 2011

On December 19, 2011, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/130, which highlights women's political involvement and calls for their equal participation in public and political issues. The principles that have been outlined in previous resolutions are reiterated and strengthened in this one. Acknowledging the importance of education and capacity building, the resolution pushes member nations to fund initiatives that improve women's abilities as leaders. Promoting educational opportunities that enable women to actively engage in politics is one way to do this.

Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Quotas

Quotas, in the context of gender parity in politics, refers to a predetermined numerical target that is set to ensure the minimum number of women in a legislative body. Countries like Rwanda and Sweden have successfully used quotas to increase women's participation

in legislatures. Quotas provide a necessary push to lessen the impact of both invisible barriers and preexisting challenges.

Quotas are often established as temporary measures to regulate and accelerate the process of gender equality in decision-making. Once the country achieves a more balanced representation quotas can be reevaluated.

Gender-responsive legal reforms

Legal reforms are a requirement for countries that wish to include women in politics. Modifying or repealing laws in order to eliminate any legal barriers faced by women is a primary step towards women's inclusion. Legal reforms often revoke laws that perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce traditional norms that restrict women from entering the field of politics.

Japan is a recent example of the impact legal reforms can have. In 2018, the country passed a law that requires political parties to field an equal number of men and women. Parties that fail to meet the recommended target receive less funding compared to those that do.

Capacity-building programs

Initiated often by supranational organizations, capacity-building programs offer assistance to women interested in entering the political realm. From fundamental skills such as leadership and media training to campaign management and networking opportunities, these programs aim to equip women with the necessary resources to succeed as political figures.

Possible Solutions

In order to increase the number of women in politics, innovative and feasible approaches that remove structural obstacles and enable women to assume leadership positions are essential. However, delegates should consider, while writing and debating, the extent to which the proposed clauses are realistic and feasible. Before writing and voting for or against each clause delegates should ask themselves the following questions:

1. Has the solution proposed in the clause been previously implemented?
2. Has it worked successfully? If so, how successful was it in solving the issue at hand?
3. Is there a pragmatic example of it?
4. Is it feasible? If so, how effectively can it be implemented by the Member States?
5. Does it comply with the UN charter?
6. Does it violate a member state's national sovereignty?
7. Does it force a member state to take specific actions?

After considering the aforementioned factors, delegates can prepare clauses inspired by the following potential solutions aimed at reducing barriers that women are faced with:

1. Implementing mandatory and state-enforced gender quotas for political party candidate lists or elected positions. This may include reducing the funding of parties that fail to comply or increasing funding for those that take initiative to achieve a more balanced representation.
2. Developing candidate training programs in order to cultivate a more diverse pool of political candidates. These programs would aim to provide women with the necessary skills to overcome challenges they are confronted with when entering politics as well as helping them excel as politicians.
3. Establishing regulations to increase transparency in the selection process of political candidates. These regulations may include open candidate nominations which would eliminate any biases and discriminatory practices.

4. Implementing economic empowerment programs in order to address any financial barriers women may face in pursuing political careers. This could include grants, scholarships and low interest loans.
5. Launching public awareness campaigns to promote women's participation in politics through the media, social media platforms and community events.
6. Raising awareness on the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as race, religion, socioeconomic status, etc. in order to consider unique challenges faced by women in minority groups.

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