

THE POLITICAL ROLE

of women from minorities in the Arab world

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Introduction:

The active participation of women in the popular movement in a number of Arab countries was considered a first step towards changing the societal culture as well as the inferior perception towards it. The conservative traditions that dominate the mindsets in these countries did not prevent women from participating in the popular movement and achieving its goals. This created optimism among supporters of women's issues that it is about to move from the position of a follower to the position of an influential actor, and to strengthen its presence on the numerical and qualitative levels in the political field, but the results of the elections that followed this movement were disappointing.

Arab women have not achieved an acceptable representation rate, except in countries that apply the quota system. This reality warns of the danger of reproducing the system of marginalization and exclusion of women, not only as a result of the traditional societal view that continues to marginalize the role of women in the private sphere, but also under the cloak of religious currents that assumed power after the movement and man-made laws that encourage discriminatory tendencies against women⁽¹⁾.

This was reflected in the deterioration of the status of minority women in those countries, as the political participation of women belonging to minorities is associated with two types of conditions; the first was imposed by the nature of her gender as a different gender according to the classification of the patriarchal society, and the second was imposed by her belonging to groups that suffer from marginalization under the rule of the majority in whose hands the decision is concentrated. What makes it more difficult for women belonging to minorities to reach

(1) Owaisat Fateha, Amouri Muhammad Raseem, "Obstacles to Women's Exercise of Political Rights in the Arab World," Horizons of Science Journal, Volume 4, Issue 3, 2019, p. 22.

decision-making positions and prevents their actual participation in the political process are the religious and ethnic polarizations and the dominance of blocs with religious or ethnic identity and numerical weight over the entire political process in exchange for the absence or weak presence of moderate currents, which makes belonging to these blocs and ascending through them to decision-making centers a difficult issue for women who do not belong in sectarian or ethnic terms to this bloc except through having a common denominator with these blocs and entering the political process not as a representative of the minority to which they belong.

The real problem facing minority women is the existence of a gap between the legal text supporting political participation in most Arab societies and reality and practice. The problem of minority women is not in the enactment of the law, but rather in ignoring the rule of law and setting it aside in the circumstances of the political differences that most of those countries are going through.

⁽²⁾ In light of the controversy over women's rights to political participation, a greater challenge is raised about the rights of minority women in political life, as the double challenge is embodied in the challenge of race or religion and the challenge of gender together, as discrimination based on gender is done to prevent their political participation. Therefore, this article analyzes the argument that women of ethnic minorities suffer from deprivation of political participation, which explains the existence of a complex relationship between sex, race and politics, as gender parity is linked to the intersection of race with gender and the rejection of claims to represent ethnic minorities, their inclusion is conditional on their willingness to work far about their race and religion.

Features of women's political empowerment in the Arab world:

Among the purposes of the United Nations stated in Article 1 of its Charter is to "respect and encourage all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to sex, language or religion, and without discrimination between men and women." According to the charter, "gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential for achieving peace in societies and unlocking society's full potential."

(2) Asmaa Gamil Rashid. "The Psychological and Social Conditions of Minority Women in Iraq: A Field Study," *Journal of Educational and Psychological Research*, Vol. 9, No. 33, p. 276, available at the following link:

<https://jperc.uobaghdad.edu.iq/index.php/jperc/article/view/600/515>

This is evidenced by UN reports which indicate that “as of August 2015, only 22% of all national parliamentarians were female, a slow rise in women’s political participation at the international level, as the percentage of women’s participation in political life varies from one country to another and from one society to another according to the system of laws, values and ideas that govern this society. As we witness gradual strides in eliminating formal discrimination against women worldwide, as gender equality is now part of the basic rights binding on states, yet those rights are applied unevenly across the world, especially in light of the specificity of the Arab countries, which are rich in cultural, sectarian, religious and social pluralism⁽³⁾.

However, recent decades have witnessed a clear increase in calls for women’s empowerment and allowing them to participate in public life as a key actor, The Arab countries, with their different political systems, have taken great strides in this regard, albeit in a formal way at times, to the point that it is considered an advanced step. The higher the level of awareness, the more these sham measures will turn into real measures towards involving Arab women in the political field.

Perhaps allocating a number of parliamentary seats to women, the system known as the “quota”, which was adopted by Arab countries to force their parties to nominate female candidates on their lists, is considered by some to be a good step to enhance the role and participation of women in political work. For example, Mauritania adopts the “quota” system to ensure that women occupy a sufficient number of seats, as its electoral law stipulates that political parties must include a specific number of women in the candidacy lists, allowing women to obtain a representation of at least 20%⁽⁴⁾.

After the Arab revolutions since 2011, which allowed for greater political participation of women, Tunisia was considered a pioneering example of the participation of Arab women in political decision-making, , which is the first parliamentary elections to be held after the revolution, the number of women participating in the parliamentary elections was 76, with 35% of the parliament members, and this is the highest percentage reached in the history of Tunisia as well as in the entire Arab region. While in Egypt, 75 women succeeded in reaching the House of Representatives after the revolution through free, direct election, whether by competing for individual seats or through the absolute list, in addition to 14 women representatives who were appointed by a decision of the President of the Republic. Thus, the total number of seats occupied by Egyptian women became 89 out of the total 458 seats in parliament.

(3) Yusfat Ali Hashem, “Women’s Political Participation in Elected Councils Between Reality and Texts,” Ahmed Deraya University, Issue 4, December 2016, pg. 49, available at the following link <http://dspace.univ-msila.dz:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/7660/04.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

(4) Hossam al-Din Ali Mageed, “The Women’s Quota System as an Introduction to Building a Just Society: A Study of Empowering Kurdistan Women.” Political Science Journal, p. 55, 2018, p. 308.

In contrast to the persistent calls to enhance the political participation of women in the countries of the Arab world after the revolutions of the Arab Spring, however, efforts to involve women in political life face several obstacles, the most important of which are: society's acceptance of women assuming a leadership role, which raises a pivotal question about the extent of the seriousness and desire of the ruling Arab regimes to make room for women's participation in decision-making, and whether these political calls stem from real convictions of the importance of women's role in public life, or whether the purpose is winning women's votes in elections and obtaining their support without their actual participation in decision-making⁽⁵⁾.

Despite the pivotal role that women play in the Arab world, they are still underrepresented in decision-making positions and processes, as women's interaction with power institutions is diverse, and often reflects their position in this regard. Discrimination is embodied within the male-dominated political spheres. There is disparity within the prevailing political structures. Most countries in the Arab world allow women to be represented at the local level and in regional politics, but their representation declines at the state and external levels due to the socially conservative political climate⁽⁶⁾. What emerges is that Arab women suffer from multiple social systems of oppression and respond to the ways in which gender intersects with other social categories of identity, as discrimination can occur for more than one reason, either cumulative disadvantage or cross-discrimination.

Therefore, the presence of women in the countries of the homeland in political decision-making positions is still below the level compared to their presence in other sectors such as health and education, as the percentage of women's presence in government does not reflect their presence in other sectors. Arab women have not yet reached the presidency of the government, nor have they reached the ministries of sovereignty such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense, nor the ministries of economy and finance, and most of them continue to run ministries of a social nature, as if they are an extension of their traditional functions in society and the family. In addition, the percentage of women decreases as we move up the administrative ladder in decision-making positions, whether in local councils, political parties, or trade unions⁽⁷⁾.

(5) Fatma Bouderaham, "Political Participation and Political Empowerment of Women with Disabilities, Challenges and Treatment Mechanisms in the Arab World," Algeria, Mohamed Boudiaf University of M'sila: Faculty of Law and Political Science, 2018, p. 9, available at the following link

<http://dspace.univ-msila.dz:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/11987>

(6) Howaida Adly, Women's Political Participation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2017, p. 132, available at the following link

<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/aegypten/15390.pdf>

(7) "Arab Women's Participation in Political Action: Challenges and Suggestions," United Nations Report: Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2013, p. 20, available at the following link:

https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/e_escwa_ecw_13_1_a.pdf

Minority women and power:

All countries of the Arab world have one or more groups of minorities living within their lands, which are characterized by an ethnic, linguistic, religious or racial identity different from that of the majority of the population. The harmonious relations between minorities and the majority, and the respect of each group for the identity of the other, are the basic elements in building democracy in those countries, and achieving the aspirations of minorities and guaranteeing their rights represents an acknowledgment of the dignity and equality of all individuals, and promotes development based on participation, as it guarantees the protection of the rights of persons belonging to national minorities or the ethnic, religious or linguistic political and social stability of the countries in which they live.

However, despite this, poor living conditions are widespread in minority areas, and most minorities in the Arab world suffer from a lack of basic services. Illiteracy, unemployment, and lack of health care are widespread in minority areas, and minority women are not provided with educational and cultural capabilities. Women who speak only their mother tongue face discrimination even with regard to meeting basic living requirements. Which pushes them to withdraw into their narrow cultural circles, and thus deprives them of acquiring the skills and experiences that qualify them to enter the labor market. Therefore, the lack of vocational education, obtaining a university degree, and limited knowledge of the official language are additional obstacles that prevent the involvement of minority women in Arab societies⁽⁸⁾.

It is clear that minority women's access to social, economic and cultural public positions is very limited, compared to minority men, due to the prevailing cultural barriers and society's view of gender. It becomes more difficult with regard to political positions, as discrimination and inequality hinder their political activity more clearly, especially with regard to running for political office or campaigning with political parties. As the risks and costs of running for elections are higher for women in general than for men, especially with regard to minority women, as double restrictions are imposed on them related to their affiliation to a particular race or religion, and what is related to the so-called "micro loyalties" within a variety of social movements and civil society which are often organized around individual issues or identities⁽⁹⁾.

(8) Hayam Ali Al-Marhej: "The Political Role of Minority Women in Iraq after 2003," Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning, 2022, p. 3, available at the following link

<https://www.bayancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/8798u.pdf>

(9) O'Neill, Brenda, Elisabeth Gidengil, and Lisa Young. "The political integration of immigrant and visible minority women." *Canadian Political Science Review*, vol.6, no. 2-3, 2013, p 187, Available

<https://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/cpsr/article/view/275/429>

The fundamental problem facing minority women remains the gap between the legal text and reality and application. In Arab societies such as those in which custom takes precedence over the law, and society takes precedence over the state, it becomes useless for the constitution to be full of articles guaranteeing cultural and religious freedoms for minority women, without the existence of guarantees and institutions that guarantee the application of these laws. For example, labor and wage laws do not discriminate between women of different religions and nationalities and between men. However, women in general and women belonging to minorities in particular suffer from discrimination in the field of employment and work, as they cannot assume important positions under a system based on the failure of managing ethnic and religious pluralism⁽¹⁰⁾.

The limits of political participation of minority women in the Arab world:

Decision-making centers in Arab countries often rely on national and religious forces that have the greatest weight in society, and certainly not minorities among them, which makes the access of women belonging to minorities impossible. However, in recent years some Arab societies have realized the danger of this on the status of minorities and their influence within the society. Therefore, the Arab regimes created the quota system as an attempt to achieve the desired equality, and with the existence of laws that guarantee the right to political participation for all citizens regardless of religion or gender. However, the law and its institutions were not able to bring minority women to decision-making centers, nor to important administrative positions. Therefore, minority women lack psychological and social security, and find their religious, national, or even national identity a challenge to their social integration and political participation⁽¹¹⁾.

Apart from this, minority women face other obstacles to effective participation in political life, including due to cultural barriers, in particular the local traditional societies that prevent women from playing a role in decision-making, and thus a greater burden and deeper discrimination towards minority women, which deprives them of expressing an opinion on national decisions. Firstly, because they are women, and secondly, because they belong to minority groups, and women may be marginalized within the minority communities to which they belong, as the participation of minorities was often ineffective, and of a symbolic nature in national and local bodies in many countries of the Arab world⁽¹²⁾.

(10) Melanie Hughes, "Politics at the Intersection: A Cross-National Analysis of Minority Women's Legislative Representation", Doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 2008, p108, Available at:

https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=osu1217434642&disposition=inline

(11) Saad Salloum, "Forgotten Voices: Minority Women in Iraq, Human Rights", Violations Report 4, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, 2016, p 28, Available at

<https://ar.iraqicivilsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/FORGOTTEN-VOICES.pdf>

(12) Melanie M. Hughes, "Intersectionality, Quotas, and Minority Women's Political Representation Worldwide", Cambridge University Press: American Political Science Review, Volume 105, Issue 3, August 2011, p 604,

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/intersectionality-quotas-and-minority-womens-political-representation%20worldwide/08B09CDC1D86212EEB3893EB2C783485>



The dangerous thing is that this political marginalization of minority women in most countries of the Arab world is not due only to the ideology of the ruling elite, but also to the societal culture that rejects the participation of minority women, which often comes from minority men. The argument that politics is the work of men is spread everywhere and is rooted in broader social processes, as well as women's obedience to traditions so that women sometimes themselves become a contribution to the marginalization of their position in relation to men, in various educational, religious, social and economic fields⁽¹³⁾.

In this context, the literature has identified factors that impede minority women's path to political office such as traditional gender norms, family support, party recruitment and support, electoral systems, and campaign financing. While all candidates face challenges during political campaigns, women need to campaign harder than their male counterparts do, because they need to win larger numbers of donors because people tend to make fewer contributions to women, so women are three times more likely to worry about gender discrimination, and twice as likely to be afraid of negative societal views⁽¹⁴⁾.

Conclusion:

Increasing the political participation of women in decision-making in the Arab world is seen as a pillar of democracy, respect for human rights, justice and good governance. Accordingly, the participation of women from ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, immigrant and stateless minorities is also part of building responsive and accountable democracies. However, despite their mobilization at the grassroots level, minority women are still largely marginalized in exercising political power, so the literature is still divided on whether it should focus on the quantitative representation of women and their numerical presence in the legislative and executive branches in Arab countries, or the content and impact of specific political measures on women and their impact on the decision-making process⁽¹⁵⁾.

(13) Fatma Boudersham, reference previously mentioned.

(14) Melanie M. Hughes, "The Intersection of Gender and Minority Status in National Legislatures: The Minority Women Legislative Index", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol.38.2013,p 489, Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/lsq.12025>

(15) Rainbow Murray, "The Political Representation of Ethnic Minority Women in France", *Parliamentary Affairs*, Volume 69, Issue 3, July 2016, Pages 586, Available at <https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/69/3/586/2240867>

In the context of the fact that women's participation in political action is low in the entire world, but it is the lowest in the Arab region, especially with regard to minority women in the region, whether in elected or appointed councils. The literature refers to a group of obstacles that together form a barrier preventing minority women from participating in political action at the global level, and at the Arab level in particular. Among them, gender hierarchies, discrimination, and violence are rooted in different ways across multiple areas of their lives, and persistent inequality hinders their political activity. This is due to a combination of linguistic discrimination, lack of political education, an anti-difference climate, and gender-based discrimination to prevent their political participation at all levels.

In response to these obstacles and in order to activate and strengthen the role of women in political work and thus activating minority women. The Arab countries have adopted many mechanisms such as the signing of international instruments such as conventions and treaties concerned with human rights in general and women in particular, and the inclusion in their constitutions of supportive legislation and procedures to activate the role of women in political action, and the adoption of specific strategies and practices such as the application of the quota system in parliaments and representative councils⁽¹⁶⁾.

However, the legal and procedural basis for respecting the rights of minority women in Arab countries is still restricted, due to the absence of implementation mechanisms. However, features of a possible change in the prevailing mentality began to appear during the popular movement in a number of Arab countries, after the active participation of women during this Arab movement and the period that followed. Therefore, we can say that the countries that have witnessed popular revolutions in recent years in the region may have a comparative advantage, because they are in the process of preparing new constitutions that can include articles that guarantee women's political rights. As for countries that have not witnessed revolutions or popular movement and regime change, and that lack the necessary mechanisms, the participation of women in public affairs and political action is still below the desired level, which indicates a gap between theory and practice.

Hence, instead of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to combating the lack of political representation of minority women, the multiple, diverse, and intersecting needs of minority women must be taken into account in order to support them in a real and effective way. In addition to establishing a zero-tolerance rule for sexism and other forms of discrimination with clear channels for reporting hate speech,

(16) Ashraf Awad Ali, "The Role of Women in Political Life: A Comparative Study of the Political Participation of Arab and Western Women: A Case Study: The United States of America and the Republic of Tunisia (2001–2015)", Arab Democratic Center, 2017, available at the following link

<https://democraticac.de/?p=47417>

as well as promoting work-life balance for both women and men, while adopting measures to ensure gender balance in electoral lists, providing funding for women candidates in elections, supporting minority women's associations and networks, consulting regularly and empowering minority women to advance the policy agenda in the Arab world⁽¹⁷⁾.

(17) Huwaida Adly, reference previously mentioned p. 136.

