



The Role of the European Union in Democracy Building: The Impact on Women's Political Participation in the Arab World

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on the challenges facing European Union (EU) institutions in carrying out their programmes in the Arab countries, paying specific attention to women's rights programmes.

The neo-patriarchal orientation of Arab countries has restrained women, marginalizing them and resisting their presence in the public sphere. The lack of women's participation and representation in the political institutions of countries in the Arab region in comparison to those in other areas of the world confirms the existence of deep-rooted conceptual problems surrounding issues of governance, modernization and women's citizenship. The role played by some religious groups, by tribal structures and by a traditionally male dominated economy contributes to a context where external assistance might be needed to support change towards more gender equality and equal opportunities for men and women in the political sphere.

Some main challenges faced by the EU institutions relate to: the dilemma of whether and how to build relations with undemocratic governments; how to sustain useful relations with real, legitimate and credible civil society organizations; and situations of colliding interests between internal EU agendas. EU member states also have individual bilateral relations with Arab world governments, which are not always in coherence with the common EU approach.

However, there are opportunities for EU institutions to make a real difference in the Arab region, by reinforcing democracy and the values of gender equality and human rights in an inclusive and efficient manner that is independent of the political relationships that EU member state governments have with their Arab counterparts.

Summary of Recommendations

Women need more than just tools and strategies to improve their situation in the various sectors. There is a dire need for the creation and adoption of policies that are respectful

of gender and human rights. Partial solutions that do not care to dig deeply enough to fix the root of the problems will never be able to sustain themselves.

The social situation of women varies within the borders of one country and among different countries, depending on social class, religion, ethnicity, age, educational attainment and whether the women are rural or urban dwellers. It is imperative for the international organizations such as the EU operating in the Arab region to stop grouping women together in terms of their needs, regardless of the particularities of their different situations. Extra effort has to be exerted for the different needs to be identified and various groups of women to be targeted in order for any programme to work efficiently.

Work on developing inclusive political participation needs to target both the groups, such as women or youth, and the institutions, such as parties and trade unions. In the case of women's political participation, raising awareness among women and providing them with skills and education cannot be efficient without developing institutions that sponsor the participation of women as vital members with leading roles.

The EU member states recognize their political power and influence in the Arab region – a factor they need to use to press Arab governments for substantial improvements in human rights and democracy, using their organizations to execute programmes in those fields.

The EU member states need to direct their efforts and financial and human resources in the Arab region in a complementary manner. EU institutions working in Arab countries need to learn from each other's mistakes, avoid replicating programmes and join forces in studying the region in order to be able to assist it more efficiently.

1. Setting the Scene

Donor agencies set themselves a number of goals in their work agendas. Such targets include, for example, development of local communities, combating discrimination against women, the reinforcement of democracy, eliminating poverty, limiting environmental problems and building strong civil societies. The donors devise programmes to achieve these goals through direct collaboration with governments and their respective institutions, through partnerships with civil society groups, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and through work with the private sector. Many programmes work to empower women on the economic, political and health fronts.

The EU institutions and other donor agencies operating in the Arab region in general try to conduct their work in the face of a series of challenges that are driven by the two sides of the developmental equation, that is, the agendas of the international donor organizations and the agendas of local partners that act as recipients of the funds. The political reality of the social and cultural situation and the diverse levels of competence of different civil society organizations are examples of challenges facing the international donor agencies. There are also enormous conceptual chasms between pre-packaged programmes and solutions, and the real environment in which these actions are to be implemented. This dilemma poses itself most clearly when the implementation of programmes focusing on women's rights is involved.

This paper sheds light on the challenges facing European Union (EU) institutions in carrying out their programmes in the Arab countries, paying specific attention to issues of women's rights, equal opportunities and political participation.

2. The Context: Democracy and Women's Rights in the Arab World

Despite the gains achieved by feminist movements in the region, gender-related indicators show that the average woman in the Arab world is considered a second-class citizen in both the private and the public spheres, that is, in the family, by the state, in the job market and in civil society.

Women's rights are still often seen in the Arab world as inseparably linked to the domestic sphere. This allows the state power over the management of such rights through what has come to be known as family law. The neo-patriarchal orientation of Arab countries has restrained women even more, marginalizing them and resisting their opportunities to participate in the public sphere (Moghadam, 2003). The drastic decline in women's participation and representation in the political institutions of countries in the Arab region relative to other areas of the world confirms the existence of deep-rooted conceptual problems surrounding issues of governance, modernization and women's citizenship.

For example, gender-related indicators confirm the limited participation of women in parliament. Less than 10 per cent of parliamentarians in the Arab region are women – the lowest percentage globally – and women make up less than 30 per cent of the workforce. The EU Election Observation Mission that supervised the presidential and municipal elections in Yemen in 2006, for example, reported that Yemeni women were completely marginalized, even though the legal framework allowed for their full participation. No real effort was made to implement the law and the result was that women won only a shameful 0.5 per cent of the municipal seats.

Political parties in the Arab region, whether ruling or in opposition, shy away from permitting women the opportunity to fully participate in elections through what is known as 'the individual circle', which guarantees that winning candidates gain votes based on their personal capacities – mostly notably their financial status which allows them to put together an elaborate and expensive campaign. Ruling parties enable their representatives through their unlimited resources, while the opposition, which cannot afford such support, chooses those individuals who have the means and only need the party as a political cover. Male figures are chosen since women are usually economically underprivileged in comparison to men.

Women's empowerment is, furthermore, dependent directly on the level of democracy practiced in any given country. This means that Arab world women are even further from achieving equal rights, since the ruling systems in the Arab world, be they monarchical or republican, are despotic regimes that curb the political involvement of their subjects. These regimes are founded on elitist selection where the individuals rising to power

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and the decision makers belong to the economic, historical, tribal or familial elite, thus guaranteeing the exclusion of the majority from all governing positions in the different institutions (Brumberg, 2002). This puts women at the very bottom of the state hierarchy, since, even though there is general political discrimination, women are marginalized more than men.

Women's rights issues have been manipulated and employed by regimes to create a false image of gender equality in order to impress foreign eyes. The general pattern is for the discourse on women's issues in the Arab region to be diluted, with no targeting of the essence of the problem or attempt to make policy reforms.

Women's rights issues have been manipulated and employed by regimes to create a false image of gender equality in order to impress foreign eyes. The general pattern is for the discourse on women's issues in the Arab region to be diluted, with no targeting of the essence of the problem or attempt to make policy reforms. The topic of women's

political participation has been the source of heated national debates that have led to legislation on gender quotas in Jordan and Morocco and high hopes that these might be implemented in Egypt by the end of 2009. Even though women are registered in the leadership programmes of political parties in countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria, they have not been able to make up more than 30 per cent of the membership of a political party in any Arab country. The Egyptian street can still vividly remember the alliance between the Egyptian political parties in 2005 during the parliamentary elections when they loudly declared that giving women the opportunity to participate fully in elections was their unanimous goal. They joined forces to introduce 14 women as parliamentary candidates, none of whom came even close to being elected. Appointing women to certain posts in the government or political parties is still a token and insubstantial gesture not based on true conviction of merit. It aims to give the impression that discrimination against women is being addressed.

Many Arab countries, such as Egypt and Yemen, also continue to suffer from low female literacy rates, which hinders developmental programmes targeting women. As for gender equality and sexual liberation, the gap between the Islamic countries and the West grows wider and wider. Qualitative questions are still debated in the Arab-Islamic world on issues that stopped resonating long ago in Western countries, including, for instance, whether women make competent political leaders or higher education is more important for men than for women.

Women's right to education

The story of a then 19-year-old girl I encountered at a gender training workshop in Irbid, a Jordanian province, helps to demonstrate developmental predicaments. This girl came from a traditional family and was in her first year of university – a step that she reached after a long battle. She had to work a 12-hour day in order to pay for her higher education because her family had wanted her to quit second-

ary school. She persevered in the face of her father and brothers, who denied her financial help, to put herself through university and is now working and being productive. The basic right to education that women have enjoyed in Egypt for a century and for more than 60 years in other Arab countries is still impeded and young girls still have to fight for it to be realized.

The marginalization of women in the political field has usually led them to participate more actively in civil society, which is more receptive to women's engagement in the decision-making process. In this respect, women find their way to professional agencies, such as trade unions and organizations that work in the areas of human and women's rights. This, however, does not necessarily mean that women occupy most of the decision-making positions in such organizations. Their presence is still limited. For example, although there are more than 87 women's rights organizations in Yemen, women occupy just 6 per cent of the decision-making positions in those entities (Arab Human Development Report, 2005: 132). Women are also almost absent from organizations that advocate personal and civil rights. For instance, among the 25 members of the facilitating committee of the Tunisian alliance for protecting human rights, there are only three women. Such figures repeat themselves in other countries in the region, including Egypt and Morocco (Arab Human Development Report, 2005: 132). The Arab Human Development Report highlights that women's participation and representation are still token in civil society organizations.

The participation of women in civil society organizations is limited to certain fields, such as the supervision of ready planned projects and acting as the link between donor agencies and the designers of programmes, on the one hand, and the targeted female groups in local communities, on the other. Although this has created many job opportunities for women, it is still nowhere near the critical decision-making positions that are taken by men. This leads to a deeper concern over whether representation affects the commitment to gender equality and women's rights issues.

3. Challenges for the EU

As described above, many regimes in the Arab world show fierce resistance to change and refer to national sovereignty and traditionality and historicity that forbids any internal or external agents of change to interfere. Can the EU engage in relations and partnerships with such undemocratic regimes in this region without abandoning the principles of human rights? Is it possible to convince and motivate such regimes to move in a more democratic direction, including allowing women's equal political participation? How is it possible for democracy to be reinforced without deepening the control of undemocratic systems?

There is a perception that EU institutions forge relationships with undemocratic regimes based on mutual interests, as EU institutions are aware that the key to securing their trade or security agendas in the region lies in the hands of state institutions. They are not, under any circumstances, going to jeopardize their relationship with the state in order to advocate the principles of democracy and human rights. The general belief among Arab nations is that the EU member states prioritize the interests of their nationals over those of the countries of the global South. Donor agendas and donor priorities are set without seriously considering the realities on the ground and the needs of the local communities.

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The EU institutions also face the challenge of forging alliances with internal parties that embrace their mission and aim to strengthen the values of democracy and human rights. The assumed connection between civil society organizations and democracy,

however, is not necessarily accurate. In countries where the state functions through heavy centralization and direct control over all institutions, civil society organizations can easily become one such large institution that preserves the status quo and secures the undemocratic practices of the regime. There are certain stratagems that can turn civil society organizations into assimilators of discriminatory practices against women and the less-privileged sectors of the community. In their attempt to establish a non-conflictual relationship with the state in order to secure their existence, civil society organizations can reproduce the same patterns characterized by inequality that the state has with its subjects, thereby compromising the integrity and autonomy of civil society.

Cultural barriers also obstruct the work of international organizations, sometimes creating difficulties of communication. During a gathering organized by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in an Arab capital in July 2008, Muslim and Christian male religious figures from different Arab countries met to discuss the topic of violence against women. The difficult course of that dialogue was indicative of an inescapable reality: the presence of a foreign entity, albeit a United Nations-associated one, made local participants doubtful and self-conscious. Difficult opinions were avoided or not clearly stated and disagreements were swept under the carpet in what seemed like a nationalistic and patriotic connivance to refuse to air dirty laundry in front of a stranger. Such meetings prove futile, as the religious leaders were reserved about showing their positions, but also in terms of improving the negative image of the foreign organization and its credibility. The meeting suffered from a lack of any preparation with the religious leaders, to consult with them on the nature of the

topics they found compelling and would want to discuss. Nor did the UNFPA seek the advice of local partners and representatives of civil society organizations on agreeing a common goal for the event. The above incident is just one example.

The level of scepticism towards the agendas of international organizations such as the EU is increasing in the mind of the average Arab individual, especially as he or she is misinformed or not informed about such entities, the kind of

work they engage in and their target partners. Most Arabs cannot differentiate between the various development organizations and disregard all of them equally – particularly when women's issues are concerned. Arab religious and cultural sensitivities make it difficult for them to accept advice on how to conduct any aspect of their private lives, and talking about women immediately signals the private sphere and triggers alarm bells among average citizens and intellectuals alike. The level of scepticism fluctuates from one Arab country to another. Whereas it is almost non-existent in Tunisia and Lebanon, for example, it is loud and clear in Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf.

The EU member states appear to work competitively in the Arab region, using their developmental presence as a tool for proving power and superiority over one another. This has manifested itself in the repetitive nature of the activities of EU institutions and EU member states, using programmes to target the same groups which leads to an enormous depletion of resources.

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Finally, credit should also be given where credit is due. It should be acknowledged that the EU institutions are professional and highly reputable compared to other entities that are associated with other regions. Given the negative feelings harboured towards the United States because of its invasion of Iraq, and its failure to prevent the war in the Lebanese South in 2006 and that on Gaza at the beginning of 2009, the Arab world might be more inclined to build regional relationships through a sustained EU presence that is seen as more serious and credible.

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4. Recommendations for the Future

In conclusion, this section sets out suggestions and recommendations for the strengthening of the role of EU institutions in the fortification of the values of democracy and human rights in the Arab countries, with a special focus on the encouragement of the political participation of women in the region. The recommendations below concern the relationship between the EU institutions and the various governments, the inter-relations between the different EU institutions, and the connection between the EU institutions and their partners in civil society.

For many decades, research papers and conferences have demanded innovative tools and strategies to support women's political participation. It is evident today that women need more than just tools and strategies to improve their situation in the various sectors. There is a dire need for the creation and adoption of policies that are respectful of gender and human rights. Partial solutions that do not care to dig deeply enough to fix the root of the problems will never be able to sustain themselves. For example, although Egypt has passed a law criminalizing female genital mutilation, the practice is still prevalent. Similarly, Jordan has approved a gender quota in parliament, but this has not yet had significant impact on women's participation.

The social situation of women varies within the borders of one country and among different countries, depending on social class, religion, ethnicity, age, educational attainment and whether the women are rural or urban dwellers. The structural frame of a particular country, the developmental stage through which it is moving and the nature of the state with its economic, social and cultural policies are all important factors that shape the legal ranking and social situation of women. It is imperative for the international organizations such as the EU operating in the Arab region to stop grouping women together in terms of their needs, regardless of the particularities of their different situations. Thus, while planning programmes that target women, these organizations need to understand that there is no single category that includes all women. Extra effort has to be exerted for the different needs to be identified and various groups of women to be targeted in order for any programme to work efficiently. The concept that mutual interests unite all women, as romantically idealistic as it may sound, remains an ideological possibility that cannot necessarily be translated into reality. There can be occasional mutual interests between the different sectors, but the fact remains that different groups of women have different needs and different ideas about how to improve the quality of their own life.

The political and economic interests that define the relationships which the EU has with the Arab region should not compromise the integrity of its programmes concentrating on human rights and the development of a democratic environment.

The political and economic interests that define the relationships which the EU has with the Arab region should not compromise the integrity of its programmes concentrating on human rights and the development of a democratic environment. Whereas political and the economic interests benefit elite groups in society, the egalitarian values of human rights aim to improve society as a whole, especially for marginalized and voiceless individuals. Therefore, standards need to be developed to separate the general connections that EU member states forge with their Arab counterparts from the assistance the EU provides in the field of development.

Although the reform of governmental institutions has been a constant objective on the developmental agenda of the EU, important steps have yet to be taken in that regard. Such agencies usually target the presidential institution as the sole political actor in need of developmental attention, as in the case, for instance, of Egypt. A wider and more comprehensive reforming lens would focus on the different political parties, in an attempt to enhance their potential to play a pivotal role on the political scene. Years of marginalization have left the political parties outside the presidential institution in the Arab region completely paralysed and in dire need of long-term and sustained developmental help in terms of equipping their members and employees with the necessary skills, and information on gender equality and human rights and how to enhance tools for mass political participation. The different union groupings and independent social entities need similar attention to enhance their positive presence

on the political and social scenes. In order to achieve the above, different national institutions and research units at universities need to be put to work to help EU institutions to reach out.

Work on developing inclusive political participation needs to target both the groups, such as women or youth, and the institutions, such as parties and trade unions. In the case of women's political participation, raising awareness among women and providing them with skills and education cannot be efficient without developing institutions that sponsor the participation of women as vital members with leading roles. These institutions need capacity-building to develop a pluralistic and non-discriminatory environment that would be welcoming to women, otherwise women will continue to face institutional rigidity and repression – even though they are capable of political participation – as in the case of Egypt and Yemen.

The EU member states recognize their political power and influence in the Arab region – a factor they need to use to press Arab governments for substantial improvements in human rights and democracy, using their organizations to execute programmes in those fields. The EU discourse tries officially to refute the notion that the interests of EU citizens

are always prioritized. For such a refutation to succeed, the leadership of the EU needs to rebuild bridges of understanding and cooperation with the Arab region, regaining the trust of its people by being more transparent about its goals. The EU member states also need to study the performance of the development programmes that have been designed and implemented in the Arab region by EU institutions in order to assess their levels of efficiency and success and find new ways to remedy their shortcomings.

Raising awareness among women and providing them with skills and education is not efficient without also developing institutions that sponsor the participation of women as vital members with leading roles.

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The EU member states need to direct their efforts and financial and human resources in the Arab region in a complementary manner. EU institutions working in Arab countries need to learn from each other's mistakes, avoid replicating programmes and join forces in studying the region in order to be able to assist it more efficiently.

The EU needs to rebuild bridges of understanding and cooperation with the Arab region, regaining the trust of its people by being more transparent about its goals.

To conclude, there are endless possibilities for EU institutions to make a real difference in the Arab region, by reinforcing democracy and the values of human rights including a clear focus on gender equality, in an inclusive and efficient manner that is independent of the political relationships that EU member state governments have with their Arab counterparts.

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Dr Gihan Abou Zeid is an Egyptian activist in the human rights movement and an authority on women's rights and development in the Arab world. She is currently leading a nationwide study of initiatives on violence against women as part of a larger attempt to present concrete recommendations to the Egyptian Government and civil society. Dr Gihan Abou Zeid has 20 years of professional experience in international research projects on various aspects of gender and development with women's organizations, universities, United Nations agencies and civil society organizations. She has written two books and contributed articles to many journals.