



**Pathways for Women in Democratic Transitions –
International Experiences and Lessons Learned**

Roundtable, Cairo, 2 June 2011

Keynote Address by Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General, International IDEA

Madam Moderator,
Madam Minister,
Madam Under-Secretary General,
Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

International IDEA is proud to be one of the partners of UN Women in leading this international conference on the role of women in democratic transitions. I want to congratulate and thank UN Women for hosting this conference. I also warmly welcome the attendance here today of the Under-Secretary General and Executive Director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet.

It is a great pleasure for me to return again to Cairo, the place where I celebrated International Women's Day in March this year. On that day, I met with a group of Egyptian women activists and was impressed by their strength and commitment. These were the women who had stood with their male counterparts and demonstrated for democratic freedoms in Egypt. At the same time, as they gathered on Tahrir Square to celebrate International Women's Day, they were told to go home by some of these very same men that they had stood side-by-side with in the previous demonstrations. I was struck once again by the uphill battle for equal recognition faced by women's groups, not just in Egypt, but in the wider region and all over the world.

I was also struck by parallels between what happened in Cairo on 8 March and the experience of women in the US and Europe after 1945. During the Second World War, women had moved into the workforce in huge numbers to replace the men who were away

fighting. Once the war was over, the women were sent back into the domestic sphere and were not consulted about the choices they themselves would like to make. There is still underrepresentation of women in leadership positions in the US and Europe, both in politics and in the private sector. Egypt and the Arab region now has a unique opportunity to learn from these kinds of mistakes and to ensure that the women who were so vital a force in creating change remain a vital force in creating, shaping and participating in democracy.

International IDEA is a global inter-governmental organization, based in Stockholm, which supports sustainable democracy. I am pleased to be able to say that we have now established an interim regional programme for the West Asia North Africa (WANA) region, based in Cairo. One of the key areas of our work in this region will be gender and democracy, and we look forward to partnering with many of you in these efforts.

International IDEA has the firm conviction that the question of equal participation of women and men in democracy goes right to the heart of democracy itself. International IDEA's working definition of democracy has two elements:

- Popular control over public decision-making, and;
- Equality between citizens in the exercise of that control.

On that basis, democracy cannot fully be realized unless there is equality between citizens, and this includes equality between women and men. The unfolding events in this region present a live challenge in making both these principles come alive.

Women have been pushing for their space in politics and public life across the Arab region, not just in Egypt, but in Bahrain, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. It is critical now to capitalise on the momentum this force has created to ensure that women remain key actors in the next phase – the building of democratic systems and processes.

All countries around the world fall down when it comes to equal representation of women in politics and political leadership. We rightly celebrate the election of women Prime Ministers and Presidents. Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia was the first elected female President in Africa. Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan was the first woman leader of a Muslim country. However, these and other achievements by high-profile women mask entrenched cultures where all women's aspirations are not equally fulfilled.

In terms of women in politics, the Arab region clearly faces its own particular challenges. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Arab States have the lowest average levels of women in Parliament at 11%, compared to a global average of 19%. Let us hope that that figure will be much higher in one year's time after elections have been held in Egypt and Tunisia. Let us also hope that it will be even higher in ten years time.

All actors supporting democracy and gender equality need to face the realities of entrenched views and a political culture which needs to change. That political culture needs to change, not only for the sake of gender equality, but for the sake of inclusive and participatory democracy itself. Changing political culture is a long-term endeavour, but, as we have seen in Egypt and around the region in recent months, the impulse of democracy is strong and can produce surprisingly quick action.

I want to move on to more practical ground now and I am pleased that the focus of this Roundtable is on learning from comparative experiences. The circumstances of each country are unique and the direction and shape of the democracy which a country develops should also be unique. At the same time, sharing of information about what has happened in other countries can be an important resource for local actors in deciding what might work best in their own unique context.

International IDEA is an organization which has built up global comparative knowledge on democracy since its establishment in 1995. In the area of gender and democracy, and building on this comparative knowledge, there are a couple of observations that can be made:

- The electoral system matters profoundly. There are electoral systems which are more likely to produce better gender equality. For example, our experience tells us that 'first past the post' electoral systems are less likely to get women elected than proportional systems.
- Quota systems matter. Whether they are voluntary or binding, they do have an impact. However, some quota systems are not effective and how they are integrated into the electoral system is very important. Countries such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Rwanda all have gender quotas and they all operate in different ways, both at local and national levels. Electoral quotas may also be included in the constitutional design, such as in Nepal. In Tunisia, it has been decided that political parties will submit lists of candidates comprising of 50% women for the next parliamentary

elections. In addition to the variety of quota systems being implemented all over the world, international experience has also shown that where quotas are discussed as part of design of the electoral system, they have better effect.

- Political parties matter. Political parties are the gatekeepers against women in politics and they hold the key to the equal participation of women in political life. Internal barriers to women within political parties are therefore a key issue to be addressed.

- Through International IDEA's work supporting the design of constitutions for countries undergoing democratic transition, we have realised something else important. Processes matter. The constitutional process which goes into the design of a new constitution is critical. It is equally critical that women and men are involved in this design. This is not easy to achieve, particularly in countries where women may suffer from societal attitudes in relation to women's leadership. One example of a country which has successfully included gender in its constitutional design process is South Africa, where gender equality was recognised on a par with racial equality as essential for the building of South African democracy.

- Media is often also a channel for cementing entrenched views about the responsibilities of women and men. The role of the media, in particular new media, needs to be assessed, given the enormous role it has played in democratic transitions in this region. In particular, media coverage of elections matters. A recent study by International IDEA on gender bias in media coverage of elections shows how the media can, wittingly or unwittingly, contribute to barriers against women in politics. I am pleased that the author of this report, which is based on experience in Latin America, is here in Cairo sharing these experiences this week.

Let me conclude by saying how pleased I am to see so many important actors here today to address the issue of gender and democracy. The equal participation of all citizens is vital for the realisation of democracy, not just here in Egypt and in the Arab world, but in each and every country around the world which seeks to become a full democracy.