

What women want

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Egypt's women remain locked out of key political and economic roles. This can and should change, writes **Doha Abdelhamid***

Despite an arsenal of constitutional articles and laws affording equal rights to females and males, to date progress on empowering Egyptian women, who represent around 49 per cent of the resident population, remains slow, warranting renewed and dedicated efforts towards that just end.

From the early 1900s onwards, women in Egypt formed NGOs that worked mainly in the social/charitable domain, participated in demonstrations against the-then occupation, and issued magazines focused on conveying the woman's voice. It was not until the 1952 Revolution, however, that women were given the right to vote and run for elected office. Women were declared constitutionally equal to men in all domains of life.

Today, gender gaps in education, employment and politics remain but are being steadily bridged. With respect to literacy, the ratio of literate women to men in the 15-24 years age bracket jumped from 84.7 per cent in 1990 to 86.4 per cent in 2004, with strong possibility of equality by 2015. The ratio of boys to girls in primary education rose from 81.3 per cent in 1990 to 90.9 per cent in 2004 (again, well on track for 2015), and in secondary education from 77 per cent in 1990 to 104.3 per cent in 2004 (that is to say, the 2015 target is met).

Figures on tertiary education require a closer look. The ratio of girls to boys in tertiary education in the physical sciences increased from 55 per cent in 1990 to 66 per cent in 2004, equality seeming unlikely to be met by 2015, while the ratio of girls to boys in tertiary education in the social sciences jumped from 65 per cent in 1990 to 99 per cent in 2004.

Turning to the work sector, less in the way of positive news is available. In the private sector, females represent 22 per cent of the country's non-agricultural labour force with female unemployment rates quadrupling those of males (in 2005). Female ownership and/or management of private sector firms - - medium and small sized enterprises in particular -- is meagre. Matters are worse in conditions of informal employment where no protection is offered to females.

High poverty incidence among females compared to males, lower education levels and capacity building opportunities compared to males, and cultural barriers and conservative mindsets and stereotyping -- restricting women's role to that of wife and mother -- remain barriers, preventing Egyptian women from accessing the private sector equally.

Female employees in the public sector suffer similar challenges. With 22 per cent participation rate in the government sector compared to males, female concentration at mid-career positions between the ages of 40 and 45 (accounting for 24 per cent of females in the public sector), females tend to cluster in local government employment (accounting for 36.4 per cent of employment in the local government sector).

Within the public, female participation is concentrated in social service ministries. The Ministry of Health and Population recruits 70 per cent of its labour force from females; the Ministry of International Cooperation 49 per cent; the Ministry for Economic Development 46 per cent. In contrast, the Ministry of Military Production has only eight per cent female labour participation; the Ministry of State for Legal and Parliamentary Affairs also rests at eight per cent; the Ministry of the

People's Assembly wallows at six per cent; finally at the Ministry of Justice only 0.11 per cent of its workforce is female.

Research findings affirm that few females are empowered into leadership positions compared to males; currently the Egyptian cabinet includes only two female ministers as opposed to 32 males (i.e. 5.8 per cent females while females account for 49 per cent of the population). There has never been a female prime minister, vice-president or president of the republic. Nothing in the constitution or law prevents it, however.

With the above exposé in mind, there appears definite need to address gender gaps, dismantle female-hostile work practices, and generate a political habitat conducive to catalysing women's progress into positions of leadership and government -- even into the presidency. The same progress should be sought in private sector, while the informal economy should be brought into the mainstream of legality and national development.

The 1956 constitution and its 2007 amendment enabled women to participate in political life. In 1956, female participation in the legislature stood at as little as 0.57 per cent. During the period 1979-1986, female participation in parliament rose to 35 members, then to 36 between 1984-1987 under Law 21/1979, which allowed the allocation of a number of parliamentary seats to women (33 seats). In 1986, law 188 annulled Law 21/1979 on grounds of manipulating citizens' natural rights. Since then, female political participation in parliament has been declining steadily.

In percentage value, female participation in parliament in 1979 was nine per cent; 8.5 per cent in 1984; then dropping to 3.9 per cent in 1987. By 2002, female representation in the People's Assembly stood at four per cent, declining to 2.2 per cent in 2004, and eight per cent in the Shura Council in the same year. After parliamentary elections in 2005 female People's Assembly participation dived to 1.76 per cent (i.e. eight female members out of a total of 454 seats).

Against this gloomy outlook there are some positive signs. First, government female activism is mushrooming over time. The National Council for Women (NCW), established at the turn of the millennium, declared 16 March each year as Egyptian Woman Day. Mrs Suzanne Mubarak inaugurated the institution's annual conference. Over the years, the conference has addressed the preparation of the first Gender-Based Poverty Reduction Strategy for the nation (in 2006); the first decentralised Gender-Based Five-Year Economic and Social Development Plan (2007-2012); worked in collaboration with government ministries to establish Equal Opportunities Units (since 2003); established a Complaints Office/Ombudsman at its nationwide premises offering legal support to aggrieved women; established a Business Skills Empowerment Centre; a Centre for Political Skills training; and is continuously working as an advocacy hub for women's issues nationally, regionally and internationally.

The National Council for Motherhood and Childhood and the National Council for Human Rights -- two independent bodies -- are also signatories to a long list of international and regional agreements advocating and protecting the health and education of mothers and children, and shielding them from abusive behaviour and aggression.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Education translated the Dakar Declaration adopted by the secretary general of the UN as the basis of an "Education for All" drive and Egyptian Girls' Education Initiative (2002/03-2006/07). The Ministry of Social Protection together with the Women Committee of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) are revisiting the Poverty Alleviation and Subsidisation Package which is geared towards providing incentives to support impoverished households (especially female-headed families) within what is commonly known as the "New Social Contract". The NDP's Women Committee is also working with the Ministry of Justice to amend selected personal status law articles in line with equal female status (standardisation of adultery penalties,

amending procedures for the registration of unlawful children, making more effective the role of family courts, etc).

Women's healthcare is also a cornerstone of well-being and development. This issue is being tackled by the National Population Council, the NCW, and the Ministry of Health and is included in drafting the National Strategy for Women Empowerment (2007-2012).

The first female judge seconded to the Egyptian Constitutional Court -- the highest national court -- was appointed in 2003, followed by 29 female judge appointments across the Egyptian judiciary in 2006. Two further important developments in law relate to women's election to local popular councils and enabling wider freedoms in the operation of NGOs and the acquisition of funds to support such organisations.

Further priorities for breaking the "glass wall" of gender discrimination include reviewing, preparing and implementing a comprehensive national gender policy tailored "according to international best practice". This process should address gaps in access and rights while using gender-sensitive budgeting techniques and remembering elderly women's rights. Verified gender-based statistics are key planning and implementation tools, therefore meriting the establishment of gender-focused statistical units in economic and political institutions.

Second, designing and implementing a comprehensive media campaign to change social stereotypes - especially the traditional mindset that females ought only to be wives and mothers. Any such campaign should target both males and females on an equal footing.

Third, improving the business climate for female entrepreneurs through reasonably priced capacity building opportunities, education linked to business sector needs, and access to finance. Women-focused innovation and skill enhancement centres are required nationwide.

Fourth, lobbying for the effective political participation of women in resulting councils emerging from upcoming local elections (slated for April 2008), by rights in proportion with their percentage number in the nation (49 per cent and not less).

Fifth, allowing NGOs to play a more active role in female empowerment in the economic, political and legal realms.

Sixth, conducting periodic studies and surveys to highlight the challenges facing working women, with delineation made between those in the public versus the private sector, while recommending feasible and pragmatic solutions.

Seventh, reinstating affirmative action law regarding women's participation in legislative bodies at the national and local levels.

Eighth, empowering females into leadership positions in government and the private sector by combating all overt and covert discriminatory practices.

Ninth, building national capacities in gender monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment through the establishment of special units/functional departments within institutions, be they government or private sector, by law.

Tenth, developing national -- and maintaining links with regional and international -- gender networks for knowledge sharing and exchange on best practices.

The political empowerment of Egyptian women at a rate representative of their proportion in society is the only way forward. With an impending NCW annual conference in March 2008 dedicated to the empowerment of Egyptian women economically and politically, and the recent 50-year jubilee celebration of the entrance of women into Egypt's legislature, aspirations are strong for tangible results in 2008.

** The writer is representative of the International Development Evaluation Association. The article is based on a speech delivered to the European Commission conference on Female Equal Opportunity and Gender Equality in Brussels last month.*