

Political and Civil Participation of the Arab Woman An Essential Constituent in Sustainable Development

By : Professor Nadia Halim Sulliman

The definition of sustainable development is closely related to justice, equality, participation and fulfillment of needs. One of its important meanings is its readiness for continual development based on a clear vision of what needs to be sustained. Development, in general, aims at putting the qualifications and skills of all the people into practice so that everyone may be able to have an active participatory role.

The participation of women, similar to that of man, is considered of significant value to the legal democratic systems and every progress in social equity is followed by progress in the democratic life. However, the political participation of the Arab woman is to a great extent defective and this is clearly seen in the low rates of the participation of women in the public work fields and in the elected committees. These low rates are relative from one Arab country to the other and besides that it is characterized by selectivity to a great extent and appears to be in some cases complimenting the democratic façade.

The woman may not be willing to participate in politics and there is skepticism from her part that this participation may not satisfy one of the needs that she wishes to fulfill or that it does not form a conviction based on an awareness of the importance of that role in her life.

The development of non-governmental organizations in the Arab world indicates their increase and the presence of women in these organizations and marks high rates of participation although the activities in these organizations have not included political involvement of women except recently. Some of the reports describe many activities that have played an effective role in various fields like modernizing the laws in some countries and exercising some pressure on decision makers in some others. The results of all these efforts and their success in achieving their goals need efficient research and

scientific effort to assess these activities. These reports; moreover, depict many negative issues that hinder these organizations from giving in spite of their power in the Arab World.

The performance of the woman in the parliament is a very important indicator regarding her political participation and involvement. However, the performance assessment of this involvement faces huge deficiency in the records that would otherwise show real active participation. What we have shows a number of indicators that reveal the nature of this performance the most important of which is the selectivity of membership and its obvious recurrence which has its detrimental impact on not applying real democracy by rotating membership. The reports also show lack of involvement of some members to issues related to women in particular - a note that was raised by male members. The reports; moreover, show weak or complete lack of participation in external political issues. So the question on the extent of efficiency of the membership selection of women who are skillful and capable of taking responsibilities as a delegate for the whole nation still persists.

Regardless of the discrepancy between the rates of participation in the delegation committees or in public decision making arenas, they are all minimal and lack continuity. Lack of support and social and public belief in her capabilities will threaten the continuity and persistence of women.

There are many cultural problems that hinder the practical progress of the participation of the Arab woman in the public and political life because women issues and their topics still remain in the focus in our tradition and contemporary times. Many accuse those topics to be western callings which should be rejected and in order to give it a legal right, this rejection is often disguised in the gown of religion in a patriarchal frame which in effect aborts any democratic progress in the scientific and pragmatic sense. In another erroneous attempt many exert effort to convince others that the lack of the participation of women in the political arena is not a kind of inequality but more of a difference of roles and activities. The result of this fake awareness causes the woman herself to suffer from lack of confidence in her capabilities that qualify her to enter and fight in the political arena.

The laws of the personal cases form a main source in the understanding of the self. In many Arab countries what is generally applied are laws that suppress her and make her a follower and an oppressed follower cannot defend the oppressed or the nation's causes.

If we look at the activities and the effort exerted to empower the woman and make her play an effective role show that there are many programs and projects that help her become economically, socially and politically capable. However, the effect of

these programs and projects is very limited and lacks continuity, comprehensiveness and geographical coverage.

Some of the efforts to empower women were applied by many countries and political systems which have adopted electoral programs that allow the woman to be active and present in the different committees. These countries found satisfaction in using the specialized systems and the quota. By following this system, many Arab countries succeeded in reaching acceptable rates (quota) in their elected committees while other Arab countries are considering following the same course. On the other hand, there is strong rejection from some who try to hinder progress in that sphere and tend to accuse this system of lacking in the constitution or that it contradicts equality while others accuse the woman of lack of qualifications and capabilities that prepare her to work in that field.

Hope is only found in new Arab strategies that would combine a bunch of interventions in the frame of a civil society while rejecting the concept of political participation of women as a feminist issue and emphasizing that she is an integral and an indispensable part of any reform program or any plan to reach sustainable development. Without these new strategies, our efforts to modernize our Arab communities will be futile and doubtful.