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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Civil society dialogue series on social justice issues

Electoral Justice: The Essence of Meaningful Participation in Lebanon and the Arab Region

Beirut, 23 April 2018

Concept note

1. Background

The Arab region is mired in a number of structural challenges exacerbated by ongoing conflicts, socioeconomic disparities and lost development opportunities. It registers the world's highest rate of youth unemployment and one of the lowest rates of representation of youth and women in the political sphere.

Women only account for 18.4 per cent of the total number of parliamentarians in Arab countries, compared with 19.2 per cent in Asia, 23.1 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 41.1 per cent in Nordic countries.¹ As of January 2018, only 3.1 per cent of seats in parliament were occupied by women in Lebanon and Kuwait. The figure drops to 1.2 per cent in Oman, and in Yemen, there are no women in parliament.² A number of structural challenges and obstacles prevent women from taking part in shaping the decisions that affect their lives and future. In the case of Lebanon, underrepresentation is mainly due to the country's social and political landscape marked by sectarianism, oligarchy and gender-based discrimination.

Young people (aged under 30 years) do not fare any better in the region. They constitute another marginalized group that still suffers from limited access to the labour market, health-care services (particularly in rural areas) and political participation. Youth are strikingly absent in national parliaments in Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar,³ and only four countries feature specialized youth-related legislative committees (Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Yemen).⁴ This has been attributed to a number of factors, including the high age eligibility to run for elections, a feeling of alienation from formal politics that prevails among young people, the absence of proportional electoral systems, and the common practice of refraining from voting for young candidates due to their supposed "lack of experience".⁵

Elections are one mean to support the political participation of women and youth. Specific measures are required to ensure success: at the macro level, these include policies and programmes that integrate the

¹ See <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>.

² Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Women in national parliaments: situation as of 1st January 2018". Available from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>. Accessed 6 March 2018.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Youth Participation in National Parliaments 2016* (Geneva, 2016). Available from <http://archive.ipu.org/pdf/publications/youthrep-e.pdf>.

⁴ Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the United Nations Programme on Youth, "Regional overview: youth in the Arab region". Available from <http://social.un.org/youthyear/docs/Regional%20Overview%20Youth%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region-Western%20Asia.pdf>.

⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Youth Participation in National Parliaments 2016*.

principles of social justice, namely equity, equality, rights and participation. These policies and programmes should create an enabling environment for women and youth through emphasis on their right to participate in political activities and their right to access quality education (including civic education), and on the creation of employment opportunities for them.

Removing the barriers to the political participation of women and youth includes bridging the gaps in capacities and resources that prevent them from participating and competing in national or local elections. Women may be reluctant to vote if polling centers are not easily accessible or located in unsafe areas. Electoral regulations should be designed in a way to ensure a fair process where women, youth and other traditionally disadvantaged groups have an equal opportunity to campaign and register to vote, and are protected from election-related violence. Electoral management bodies often lack the knowledge, skills or data required to address the related challenges.

Activities that can empower women and youth to exercise their civil rights include training them on electoral processes and preparing them to be political candidates and leaders. Engaging with parliaments, judicial bodies, political parties, local governments and other relevant constituencies also promotes greater sensitivity and acceptance to women and youth in leadership positions. Other institutional and legal measures can be adopted, such as establishing independent commissions to audit electoral processes or to monitor the application of quotas in parliamentary elections. Such measures do not only serve the goal of fulfilling civic rights; they also advance the implementation of global conventions and internationally agreed goals, including Sustainable Development Goals 10 on reducing inequalities and 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

The role of civil society institutions is paramount in that area. The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is thus holding its *eighth civil society dialogue session* to discuss barriers to the political participation of youth and women in Lebanon and other Arab countries and the drivers of their exclusion from political life, and to explore solutions that would help to improve that participation.

The eighth civil society dialogue session is part of a series launched by ESCWA in 2013 in partnership with civil society organizations (CSOs) and other stakeholders on issues related to justice, participation and citizenship. The dialogues and subsequent regional consultations resulted in concrete recommendations documented in the *Declaration of Civil Society Organizations from the Arab Region on the Post-2015 Framework*, which was presented in the High-level Panel's report to the United Nations Secretary-General on the post-2015 process. These dialogues and consultation meetings also served to take stock of developments in the situation and action of civil society organizations, and to discuss challenges and opportunities for civil society activism and the impact of CSOs on political transition processes in the region in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings.

2. Objectives

The eighth civil society dialogue session, held by the Social Justice Section of ESCWA, is titled Electoral Justice: The Essence of Meaningful Participation in Lebanon and the Arab Region. It is organized in partnership with the Embassy of the Netherlands in Lebanon and the Beyond Reform & Development Group. The session will address the participation of women and youth in political life in general, with a focus on electoral processes. The following issues will be discussed:

1. The importance of the political participation of women and youth in the Arab region, and the current situation in that regard.
2. The main barriers that prevent women and youth from running for elections and holding political positions in the region, particularly in the case of Lebanon and the recent candidacy of 111 women for the parliament.

3. The required tools and mechanisms (social, economic, political) to enforce gender and youth responsive policies and systems, including the legal reforms needed to increase the presence of women and youth in political positions.
4. Good practices on the political participation of women and youth from the region and beyond.

Discussion questions

- (a) What actions can turn the tide of low political participation of women and youth? What are the relevant experiences from other regions?
- (b) How to ensure electoral justice by reforming regulations and improving electoral management to promote the participation of youth and women?
- (c) What kind of capacity-building is required to that purpose?
- (d) How can increased political participation of women and youth help to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

3. Date, venue, partnerships and participants

ESCWA will hold the 2018 civil society dialogue session on 23 April 2018 in the UN House, Beirut, in partnership with the Embassy of the Netherlands in Lebanon and the Beyond Reform & Development Group.

A *panel discussion* will gather Arab activists and experts in the field of political participation/representation of women and youth. The dialogue will also include CSO representatives, academics and media specialists from Lebanon. The meeting will benefit from the contributions of H.E. Mr. Jan Waltmans, Ambassador of the Netherlands in Lebanon, and Mr. Gilbert Doumit, Founder and Managing Partner of the Beyond Reform & Development Group. Young people, parliamentarians and women candidates for the upcoming Lebanese parliamentary elections will also be invited.

4. Outcome

A final report will document the discussions and main recommendations. These recommendations will be used by ESCWA to inform its normative work, namely the policy documents it produces on participatory governance and social justice. The outcome of discussions may also serve to set the ground for activists to campaign and engage with parliamentarians on how to promote the participation of youth and women in future elections in Arab countries.
