

Forum: Human Rights Council  
Issue: Strengthening the rights of women in the Middle-East  
Student Officers: Wienke Behrens and Sofie Zerck  
Position: Vice Presidents

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### Definition of the issue

In closed societies or in countries transitioning to democracy, women are often denied access to power, resources, information, and basic human rights. Women have the right to participate



in decisions that affect their families, their societies, and particularly their own well-being. Yet despite recent progress, women around the world are still largely absent from national and local decision-making bodies. Globally, fewer than 20% of representatives to national

legislative bodies are female, and women continue to face countless challenges to participation in the civic and political life of their countries.

Beyond the numbers, the quality of women's participation is often hindered by discrimination within organizations or limits on women's access to mentoring, training, technology, and other resources.

Strengthening women's rights and addressing barriers to political participation are critical steps toward empowering women, reducing poverty, and achieving our development goals.

The graphic above shows where women have the most political rights and where women do not have any rights.

### **Background information**

In many countries, governments do not adopt or enforce laws that protect women; some countries fail to stop practices that discriminate against and harm women.

There is a continued absence of women's voices in leadership due to the unequal participation and representation of women at the grassroots level, in governments, civil society, and the marketplace. Not only do women have a right to have their voices heard and their rights promoted, but incorporating women's priorities, concerns and ideas into politics may also further the region's chances for peace and prosperity.

There is a Millennium Development Goal for this issue. It is the 3<sup>rd</sup> goal and states: "promote gender equality and empower women".

Article 1 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" says: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Also important for this issue are Article 2, Article 12, Article 19, Article 21, (Article 26) and Article 28.

Women's rights around the world are an important indicator to understand global well-being.

A major global women's rights treaty was ratified by the majority of the world's nations a few decades ago.

Yet, despite many successes in empowering women, numerous issues still exist in all areas of life, ranging from the cultural, political to the economic. For example, women often work more than men, yet are paid less; gender discrimination affects girls and women throughout their lifetime; and women and girls are often the ones that suffer the most poverty.

Many may think that women's rights are only an issue in countries where religion is law, such as many Muslim countries. Or even worse, some may think this is no longer an issue at all. But reading a report about the United Nation's Women's Treaty and how an increasing number of countries are lodging reservations will show otherwise.

Gender equality furthers the cause of child survival and development for all of society, so the importance of women's rights and gender equality should not be underestimated.

### **Criticism**

Critics say that especially article 12 is used by governments or countries to make human rights violation on women to a private affair in order to degrade women's right and to scale up men's rights on privacy, family and personal honor.

Women's right organizations from affected countries request the universality and indivisibility of the Human Rights for women and also in countries, in which the cultural tradition does not provide Human Rights.

### **Key terms:**

**Millennium Development Goals (MDGs):** MDGs are eight goals which were adopted by the UN in 2000. These goals have to be reached until 2015 but it is already clear that some countries cannot reach the goals until next year.

**Universal declaration of Human Rights:** The General Assembly proclaims "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of the Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

**Article 2:** Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis on the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation or sovereignty.

**Article 12:** No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

**Article 19:** Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

**Article 21:**

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.

(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

**Article 26:**

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect to all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

**Article 28:** Everyone is entitled to a social and international order which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

### **Possible solutions**

It might be a solution to offer every woman of the world at least a right to vote in political affairs.

In some countries the police should be trained in a special way so that they can react better in situations where women's rights are violated. Furthermore there has to be education for women so that they can become independent from men and earn for example their own money.

### **Actions taken**

Women played a significant role in the 2011 Arab Spring protests, demanding greater rights, freedoms and political participation.

The CEDAW establishes the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to oversee the implementation of the rights it guarantees (for further analysis of the Convention and Committee see II§1.C). The Committee acts as a monitoring system to oversee the implementation of the Convention. This is done principally by examining reports submitted by states parties, but in 1999, an Optional Protocol expanded the powers of the Committee to include competence to receive individual complaints.

At the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995), a Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration were adopted. This document contains objectives in a range of areas, and proposes institutional and financial arrangements. During a special session of the UNGA in 2000, the Platform for Action was evaluated and appraisal of progress made in its implementation was undertaken by the twenty-third special session of the UNGA entitled 'Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century'. The Assembly adopted a 'Political Declaration and Further Actions and Initiatives to Implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action'.

Furthermore there is the "International Women's Day" on the 8<sup>th</sup> May every year, where protests for Women's rights take place. In some countries there are award presentations for women who did changing things on this issue.

### **Relevant countries and organizations**

**Amnesty International**

## **UN WomenWatch**

**Morocco:** Morocco gave women greater equality and protection of their human rights within marriage and divorce by passing a new family code in 2004.

**Saudi Arabia:** King Abdullah has granted women the right to vote and run in the 2015 municipal elections. The king also appoints 30 women to the top advisory body, the Shura Council.

**Kuwait:** Women earned the right to vote for the first time in 2005, and in 2009, four women won seats in parliament. As in nearby Qatar, they are not able to convey citizenship to their children. Those born to Kuwaiti mothers do get the same benefits as Kuwaiti citizens up until they are 21. That includes free education, health care, and monetary benefits. Unlike in neighboring Saudi Arabia, women can drive and travel on their own. They are not required to cover their heads, though expectations of modest dress remain as in other Gulf countries.

**Iraq:** There are no laws focusing on domestic violence against women. The country's 2005 constitution states that a quarter of parliament seats and government positions must go to women. This later was extended to provincial and local councils. But with the growing power of the religious institutions, women in some areas have been forced to put on veils.

**Syria:** Women are members of parliament, Cabinet ministers and one of the country's vice presidents. The Syrian nine-member government delegation that went to peace talks earlier this year over its civil war included two women. In northeastern Syria, the Al-Qaida-breakaway group called the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant forced women in areas under its control to cover their bodies, including hands and faces.

## **Resolutions and Treaties**

Security Council: 2000: S/RES/1325

General Assembly: 2013: A/RES/68/227

Conventions: Geneva Convention (1949) Article 27

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

UN Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949)

UN Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952)

UN Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957)

Inter-American Convention on the prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women

Several Conventions by the International Labour Organization (ILO)

**In order to prepare for the position of your country you should consider the following:**

Do women have rights in your country?

What can your country do to improve its women's rights?

What can the Council member states do in order to strengthen women's rights in the Middle-East?

Think about possible punishments that can be carried out in case of an infringement of the Women rights.

**Useful links**

[http://www.unicef.org/mdg/index\\_genderequality.htm](http://www.unicef.org/mdg/index_genderequality.htm)

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights>

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/gender.shtml>

**Sources**

<http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about/programs/women-s-rights-program>

<http://www.saferworld.org.uk/home/gender-mena>

<http://d1o2xrel38nv1n.cloudfront.net/files/2013/03/WomensRights.jpg>

<http://www.amnestyusa.org/our-work/issues/women-s-rights>

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

<http://www.humanrights.is/the-human-rights-project/humanrightscasesandmaterials/humanrightsconceptsideasandfora/Undirflokkur/womenandgirls/>

Yours sincerely,

Wienke Behrens (hrc@munoh.de)