

# NEWSLETTER

United Nations Development Programme



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## Women and politics in the Arab region: her participation, our future

Through its Regional Electoral Support Project for Middle East and North Africa, UNDP has partnered with the Arab Network for Women in Elections and the Organization of Arab Electoral Management Bodies (ArabEMBs) to launch the **#HerParticipationOurFuture** campaign on December 15, to help change the narrative on women's electoral participation in the Arab region.

The year-long campaign aims to raise awareness, advocate for policy reform, and contribute to improving public attitudes and perceptions towards women in political life with activities planned at both the regional and national levels across the region.

The chairman of the Independent Election Commission of Jordan opened the event together with the chairperson of the Arab Network for Women in Elections, the Swedish Ambassador to Jordan and UNDP Resident Representative to Jordan Ms. Randa Al Housn who stated: "The campaign is in recognition of the fact that while women make up more than half the region's population, they continue to be widely underrepresented in political life at all levels and they are often left out of key decision-making bodies. The data is clear: globally, women make up less than 23% of parliaments, with an average of 18% in the Arab region which shows a substantial gender gap in parliaments".

The stigma against women in politics is still well and alive. For instance, attitudes towards women candidates are still largely characterized by deeply ingrained stereotypes about women in politics, and political opponents will often use those stereotypes to question women's capacities to run for office. Thus, women continue to face structural, socioeconomic, institutional and cultural barriers to political participation.

Tackling those barriers takes effort from every element of society including governments, civil society, the media, academia, the private sector, youth and even men. While leaders have committed to international conventions that support women's rights and there has been progress made, further efforts need to be spared to raise awareness on this equality gap, improve public perception of women in politics, combat violence that women leaders and candidates face and promote increased participation and representation of women in politics and decision-making positions to fulfill these commitments as well as achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Promoting gender equality and women's political participation is an integral part of the United Nations' mandate in supporting electoral processes around the world. UNDP is working on promoting women's political participation at different levels and through different mediums. The **#HerParticipationOurFuture** campaign aims to bring the region closer to fulfilling these



commitments and ultimately achieving the SDGs, by advocating for an increased role of women in political life.

Many civil society organizations are spearheading independent advocacy efforts to tackle the challenges women in elections face at both the national and regional level. Their awareness raising and advocacy efforts are vital to achieving the 2030 Agenda and the objectives of the campaign.

As such, through this partnership between electoral management bodies, civil society organizations and regional organizations, **#HerParticipationOurFuture** marks a key milestone to bring together government and non-government segments of society towards increasing women's political participation in the region.

## Water scarcity: an imminent threat for the Arab region

The Arab region is one of the most water scarce regions in the world hosting no more than 1.2 % of all renewable water resources with serious impacts on people's livelihood and human development.

As the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) concluded in Glasgow and looking ahead to COP27 to be held in Egypt, UNDP's Regional Bureau for Arab States, along with the League of Arab States and the Government of Japan, hosted a roundtable on 22 November to discuss climate risks in the Arab region with a special focus on water scarcity.

Over 100 participants were convened from the Arab region, Japan, and international agencies, including Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), UNDP, UN-ESCWA, and UNICEF to discuss the projected impact of climate change, particularly the state of water security in the region. The concern was echoed among all the speakers and panelists: the Arab region is a climate hot spot, and climate change is expected to lead to the degradation of the amount and quality of water resources in the already water stressed region.

Dr. Ihab Jnad, Head of Water Sector at the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) explained: "Population growth as well as mismanagement of water resources have been further contributing to the region's water scarcity. Especially in the coastal aquifers, the over-pumping of groundwater has led to the salinization of groundwater which became unfit for use".

The discussion highlighted that water insecurity exacerbated by climate change will directly impact people's health and lives, as well as agriculture, food production, and economic development. While acknowledging that the Arab region has come far to prioritize water related issues in the last decade, the consensus was that efforts and support to circumvent the challenges and reduce the risks need to be strengthened immediately, as the water related consequences of climate change would pose a great threat to the region, spanning from natural disasters, to socio-economic impact leading to migration, displacement, and conflicts.

With this shared sense of urgency, the participants exchanged views and ideas on how countries in the Arab region can tackle water security related issues, for instance through new and alternative methods and technologies, and water governance whereby local, national, and international stakeholders work together to achieve sustainability. They agreed that at the national



level, coordination among different ministries, departments, and sectors is needed to effectively manage water resources. At the local level, communities can benefit but also play a central role in water management, and women and youth should be empowered as leaders and agents for change in that direction.

The speakers from the League of Arab states and Japan, as well as those from UN agencies, discussed the important role of international partnership to support the efforts in the region through technical assistance, information sharing, policy developments, and sustainable financing. Noting Japan's work in supporting water related projects in other countries and its leadership in disaster reduction, participants from Arab countries welcomed and invited Japan's further engagement in the region on climate action.

The virtual cross-regional dialogue was the sixth of a policy roundtable series launched in 2019 by UNDP, the League of Arab States, and the Government of Japan, aiming to enhance cooperation between Japan and the Arab States and to establish a policy dialogue platform encompassing common development priorities and concerns towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Digital Transformation: A New Era For Youth

Technology and social media play a great role in our lives and have changed many aspects of our world, including helping youth elevate their voices and contribute to the development of their communities.

On October 28, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) and the Youth Development Delegates conducted a virtual webinar on **"Youth in the Digital Era"**, engaging more than 100 participants, including youth across the Arab region. The webinar emphasized how digital technologies, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, have changed the way we work, run our businesses, and communicate with each other, as well as affected what news we see and believe.

Here are the **key insights** from the experts and young innovators:

**First**, it is important to understand the danger of misinformation in online spaces.

The role of digital platforms increased during the pandemic, said Paul Semaan, digital transformation consultant from Lebanon. While the platforms gave us a way of connecting with each other when physical closeness was not possible, evaluating the truthfulness of information posted online is not easy.

*"Youth should analyze any news they receive by checking if it is published from a credible resource, and if it is based on contested information"*, noted Ghassan Ben Chiheb, founder of Tahaqqaq platform, the first digital platform in Morocco to combat fake news. *"There are many digital tools available to check the truthfulness of news"*, added Riham Abu Aita, who heads the Kashif program that focuses on fact-checking and verifying online news.

The sentiment was shared by Munya Thaher, who works as a media coordinator at 7amleh, Arab Center for Social Media Advancement, in Palestine, promoting digital rights. She highlighted the role that media education can play in helping people identify misinformation and hate speech in online spaces.

**Second**, digital transformation has brought many benefits for doing impactful business online. Discussing the role of digital in marketing and business practices, entrepreneurs Jad Fakhani,



CEO of Beycom, and Rami Alama, co-founder of Lexyom.inc, noted that digital has made doing business easier. Whether it comes to signing contracts digitally or reaching out to new audiences through digital marketing, new opportunities can also open chances for youth if they are comfortable utilizing the digital to the fullest. Jad and Rami addressed the youth with a piece of advice:

*"Technology and social media can be very beneficial for entrepreneurs as they can give you access to a lot of data that can help you."*

**Third**, technology affects us at all levels of life, from global development to personal interactions. Highlighting the centrality of technology in global development, Israa Ahmed from the Arab Youth Center, which aims to empower a new generation of youth from the Arab region to build a better future, noted that *"Technology is a key driver for the development of societies and countries, as it accelerates the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals"*. Technology can help young innovators to come up with solutions that can contribute to solving the most pressing challenges, including climate change.

On the other hand, our actions and encounters in digital spaces can have significant impacts on individuals. Leila Mnekbi, national coordinator at Salamat Tunisia, works on raising awareness on digital safety and digital violence and emphasized that we need to create abuse-free online environments to support the mental health of youth and adults alike.

You can watch the live recording of the webinar (in Arabic) [here](#).

*Youth Development Delegates in the Arab Region is a joint initiative between UNDP and the Arab Youth Center, through which 11 youth from the region are deployed in UNDP country offices to contribute to sustainable development and youth empowerment. The "Youth in the Digital Era" webinar is the second in the series in which the Delegates lead discussions on timely topics related to youth and development in the Arab region.*