

Gender Equality, Womens' Security and the Millennium Development Goals: How far is Corruption a Hindrance?

Increasing women's' participation in government in Muslim countries:

Building trust, breaking taboos and involving traditional and religious leaders

Arwa Hassan
Independent Consultant

www.14iacc.org

www.iacconference.org

www.twitter.com/14iacc

Background to the context

- This presentation will focus on the context in Muslim countries, with particular reference to Mauretania.
- Women in developing countries have to resort to various methods when negotiating their rights and ensuring that they are fairly represented in public life.
- In many Muslim countries, this is made doubly difficult by frequently misunderstood perceptions of women's "place" in Muslim societies.
- Encouraging women to put themselves forward for positions in public life can be challenging. Women in many Muslim societies do not do so since much religious teaching on these issues would appear to discourage women from assuming such positions.

Key problem: Islamic teachings are misunderstood

- Unfortunately, most religious instruction relies heavily on certain patriarchal interpretations of Islamic traditions.
- In early Islamic times, women played a leading role in advising and counselling. One example is Sayidda Nafisa, who held advisory sessions to which people journeyed from afar to seek her counsel.
- The prophet's wife, Khadija, was a successful businesswoman and entrepreneur of her day.
- Many biographies of strong female leaders have been virtually omitted from many historical accounts (which have primarily been recorded and passed down by men!)

Challenge: clarifying the context

- When working in Muslim countries on issues of women's education and getting more women involved in local governance, involving enlightened religious leaders can be key.
- In programmes implemented by the German BMZ and the GTZ, the support of Islamic scholars has been actively sought in order to advocate for legal change and to ensure better representation of women in government.
- This has proved to be hugely successful in the case of Mauretania.

Key elements of the Mauretanian project

- The project looked not only at governance and women, but also related issues such as literacy, women's rights and FGM.
- Helpful that GTZ work on gender was known and respected.
- Via the various activities, a public debate on the role of women was brought about.
- A handbook was developed on women's rights and Islam.
- High level national events took place in addition to the work on the ground (Training of Trainers, etc).

- Taboo subjects were discussed.
- Imams entered into debate and dialogue with the women. They made reference to Aisha and Khadija, well-known for exerting considerable influence on the Prophet and for being outspoken when it came to political issues amongst the early Islamic community of the time
- Self-confidence of women improved and they felt more comfortable becoming involved in politics.
- Men began to view women in a different light.

Results

- In the south Mauritanian region of Hodh El Gharbi und Guidimakha, where the GTZ is active, 1120 women stood for election in the local and parliamentary elections.
- Today, female MPs constitute almost a third of all seats in city and local councils, even in extremely conservative areas.
- In Parliament they make up 18 % of MPs.

Final thoughts

- Involving key religious actors in development cooperation increases the acceptability and success of a programme from the implementational side.
- Also leads to synergies that would have been unthinkable had these stakeholders not been involved.
- Involving religious actors should be viewed as a door-opener, which can in fact help circumvent many barriers.