

# **Women and Political Participation**

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The last decades of the past century and the early years of the present century have witnessed increasing recognition of the important role of women in the Arab community. This was due to the level of intellectual, cultural and human development attained by mankind, and the struggle of the women of the world against oppression and exploitation, and to achieve freedom, justice and social progress.

The issue of women's liberation and participation in the economic, social and political life has attracted the attention of the world, with its international organizations, governmental and civil institutions. National and international efforts moved towards supporting all the orientations, projects and programs that advance the status of women and increase their participation and effectiveness in authority and decision-making positions.

This attention was manifest in the fourth International Conference of Women in Beijing in 1995. Article 182 of the Beijing Work Programme stated that:

Despite the large-scale movement towards the adoption of democracy, women are still largely under-represented in most government levels, particularly in ministries and other executive departments. Women have attained only small progress in gaining political authority in the legislative bodies, or attaining the aim of bringing the women's rate up to 30% in the decision-making positions by 1995 – an aim adopted by the UN Socio-Economic Council.

Women's ascent to the positions of authority and decision-making, particularly the legislative authority is not only one of the basic demands of justice and democracy, but it is also a main condition necessary for women's presence in the positions of authority and decision-making.

Without the women's active participation in the political life, and without introducing their perspective into all the levels of decision-making, it would not be possible to achieve the goals of equality and participation responding to the requirements of economic and social development which constitute the material base of the progress of the community. Most governments of the world, as well as the civil, popular and mass institutions followed up the implementation of the Beijing Work Programme, within the limits of the available potentials and the requirements of the socio-political orientations and philosophies prevailing in society.

In Syria, it is difficult to separate the question of women from that society as a whole, because the state constitution, the national legislations and political visions proceeds from the concept of citizenship in terms of rights and duties of both sexes. Man and Woman are evaluated according to the merits and amounts of what each has to offer, according to his/her potentials, capacities and qualifications.

Proceeding from serious work, and the support of women by the political leadership and government in Syria, the rate of women's participation in political life and all decision-making positions increased. Women were integrated in all aspects of development. The law and the constitution ensure the right of election and nomination for women as long as they are legally eligible.

**Following are the most important figure indicators of the active presence and participation of Syrian women in political life and decision-making positions.**

### **The Legislative Authority**

In the first legislative session in 1973, there were four women, and in the second session of 1977, there were seven. The number rose to 13 female members in the third session of 1981, and to 16 in the fourth session in 1985. In the fifth legislative session, there were 21 female members of the People's Assembly in 1990, i.e. 8.8% of the total membership, rising to 24 women in the sixth legislative session, while the seventh session of 1998 contained 26 women, i.e. 10.4%. In the eighth legislative session of 2003, the rate was 12%, which is high, compared to the rate of women in the parliaments of the Arab homeland.

### **The Executive Authority**

The first female minister in Syria was appointed in 1976, the minister of culture and national guidance. A woman was appointed minister of higher education in 1992. In 2000, two women were appointed ministers of labour and social affairs and culture. Female assistants were also appointed to the ministers of health, foreign affairs, supplies and communications and technology. Female department directors and section heads in most government ministries, as well as 24 female bank managers. In 2003, a woman was appointed minister of expatriates.

### **The Judiciary Authority**

The rate of women reached 13.1%; and a woman attained the highest post in the state as attorney general of the Republic.

### **Local Administration**

The rate of women has reached 12.5%

### **Government Ministries and Departments**

The rate is 19%

### **Party Leaderships**

Women in Syria participated as members of the Central Committee of the Baath Socialist Arab Party, of the leadership of the National Progressive Front, and all the party branches, sections and groups in the governorates, at the rate of 13%. The secretary-general of the Communist Party is a woman; and there are 18 female members of the Central Committee of that Party, accounting for 14%. A woman has been elected member of the Regional Leadership of the Baath Party, and another woman was elected as chairperson of the Party Inspection Committee, for the first time.

## The Diplomatic Corps

The first ambassadress to Belgium was appointed in 1988. There were four ambassadresses in 2005. The rate of female participation in the diplomatic missions reached 11% rising in 2005 to 13.6%.

## Popular Organizations, Trade Unions, Civil Societies, and the Private Sector

50% in the Union of Revolutionary Youth  
 50% in the National Union of Syrian Students  
 50% in the Vanguard Organization  
 52% in the Teachers' Union  
 70% in the Pharmaceutical Union  
 19% in the Bar Association  
 30% in the Peasant Union  
 40% in the Labour Trade Union  
 60% in the Civil Societies, of which there are more than 750 in Syria.

Women also constitute 10% of the business community in trade and industry. There are committees of businesswomen in the chambers of commerce all over the country.

A table of male and female nominees in Parliamentary elections

legislative session	number of nominees		total	Rate of women%
	Males	females		
1973-1977	2677	85	2762	3.1
1981-1985	3755	157	3912	4
1990-1994	4912	315	5227	6
1998-2002	5148	498	5645	8.8
2003-2007	8719	852	9571	9.7

Members of the People's Assembly by session and gender

legislative session	members of the P.A.		total	rate of women%
	males	females		
Establishment of the P.A.	169	4	173	2.3
1973-1977	182	5	187	2.7
1977-1981	180	6	186	3.2
1981-1985	182	13	195	6.7
1986-1990	178	17	195	8.7
1990-1994	226	21	247	8.5
1994-1998	222	24	246	9.7
1998-2002	223	26	249	10.4
2003-2007	220	30	250	12

Members of local councils and the rate of women therein

Year	number of members		total	rate of women%
	males	females		
1975	3276	27	3303	0.8
1985	3937	76	4013	1.8
1994	4526	173	4699	3.6
1999	4739	189	4928	3.8
2003	5236	151	5387	2.8

Nominees in Local council elections

Year	number of nominees		total	rate of women%
	males	females		
1975	9812	198	10010	2
1985	11437	473	11910	4
1994	18127	639	18766	3.4
1999	20289	894	21183	4.2
2003	25505	797	26302	3.1

The rate of women in the judiciary and diplomatic corps

type of position	males	females	total	rate of women%
Judiciary	1094	152	1246	12
lawyers	13296	2467	15763	16
ministers	28	2	30	7
ambassadors	57	4	61	7
trade unions	150564	38453	189017	20

Female members in the offices of popular organizations  
and vocational trade unions

organization/union	number of members		total	rate of women%
	males	females		
General union of handicraft societies	100707	2577	103284	2.6
union of revolutionary Youth	721212	591159	1312371	45
union of agrarian engineers	15661	4005	19666	25.6
union of engineers	62646	11686	74332	18.7
teachers' union	113732	133103	246835	53.9

Female members of some popular organizations  
and vocational trade unions

organization/union	number of members		total	rate of women%
	males	females		
General Union of Syrian Students	2622	862	3484	24.7
General Union of Peasants	498	6	504	1.2
General union of Handicraft Societies	—	26	—	—
Baath Vanguard Organization	1087	248	1235	20
General Federation of Workers Trade Unions	—	1780	—	—
Union of Revolutionary Youth	40257	16102	56359	28.6
General Union of Athletes	426	53	479	11.1
Union of Agrarian Engineers	312	31	343	9
Teachers' Union	604	121	725	16.7

**Proposed Orientations to increase women's political participation in authority and leading positions in the Arab homeland**

- 1- Amendment of legislations that hinder recognition of women as human beings and their multilateral role in life.
- 2- Work to deeper women's awareness of their political and legal rights, and to acquaint them of their potentials and ability to take part in leading administrative positions at all levels and in every field.
- 3- Provision of a suitable climate to support the values of equality and to ensure the spirit of citizenship, in order to achieve women's actual participation in political life, away from any discrimination.
- 4- Urging specialized Arab scientific centers to pay due attention to women's political participation, with commitment to the principles and systematology of social gender.

- 5- Adoption of policies, programmes and institutional mechanisms that would consolidate the representation of women in the parliament and local councils, including the interim adoption of the quota system, in order to establish the concept of fair democracy, and in line with international commitment in this respect.