



Political Empowerment in the MENA Region

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Abstract: Despite the negative impact that gender inequality has on human and sustainable development, women's participation in political life today remains extremely low. Only in a few countries do women occupy positions of great power and responsibility. This is a problem that applies to the Middle East as well, however, there is an underlying dynamism which cannot be ignored and is seldom connected to the positive developments of this region. In order to make progress in gender issues, the United Nations has inserted gender equality into its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN Women agency has been active in several Arab countries with a considerable number of initiatives. Such programmes aim at developing a conversation about women's empowerment, improving governmental policies, involving civil society in shaping new laws and agreements in favour of gender equality. This paper will examine the importance of gender equality during crises and throughout the subsequent recovery process. This paper will focus on the progress being made in gender equality, specifically in the MENA region, and how this is being enhanced by the work of the United Nations.

Regional Dynamism and Political Empowerment in the Middle East

Still today, women are very poorly represented in institutions and country's governments around the world. According to the latest UN Women statistics, the global percentage of women serving in Parliaments is only 24.9%. Nordic countries hold the highest percentage (43.9% in a single house or lower house), while in the Middle East, which occupies the second-lowest position, only 17.5% of available seats are held by women.¹ However, there is a generally strong willingness for women's political engagement in the Middle East as well. Although this region is often regarded as unstable and problematic, there is a commitment to gender equality and social and political engagement, which is greater than one would expect. For instance, during the so-called Arab Spring, women were strongly determined in their activism; in some cases, they mobilized and started to call for change even before the official start of the Spring, inviting men to join them.

Nevertheless, women in the Middle East not only do not hold leadership positions, but are also under-represented in the context of political parties.² One may assume that the merging of the religious sphere with the political one is the core issue, or that the influence of tribalism on such countries is the main motivation for this lack of political participation. Dictatorship and excessive control over society are more often blamed as the most relevant factors. The case of Mu'ammarr Gaddafi in Libya provides a pertinent case study. His vision regarding women and their role in society was widely explained in his *Green Book*, however, interpretations of his beliefs are diverse due to the several contrasting measures adopted during his era. Gaddafi seized power with a *coup d'état* on September 1, 1969. He ruled for

¹ "Women in Politics, 2020," UN Women, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/03/women-in-politics-map-2020#:~:text=Publications-Women%20in%20politics%3A%202020.as%20of%201%20January%202020>.

² "Leadership and political participation," UN Women, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation>.

more than 40 years, but was overthrown and soon after killed by rebels in October 2011, during the so-called Arab Spring. The Gaddafi era is an example of how a dictatorship affects society. On the outside, Gaddafi wanted to be perceived as being a model leader and someone who cared for women's rights and the advancement of society. On the national level, however, the system that he built instead focused primarily on his being able to exert his control over Libyan society. This dual nature was well displayed by the popular committees established at the beginning of the 1970s. They were a tool to convince the civil society that popular participation had been enhanced, but they were, first and foremost, an instrument to control Libyan citizens. This dual nature of Gaddafi's regime has allowed different opinions to emerge, or better, to emphasize particular traits of his dictatorship. Some sources report that, under Gaddafi's legacy, women's role became increasingly active; they had the opportunity to join the military, which was an innovative step, and the government even established a department dedicated to women's affairs. On the other hand, it is reported that Gaddafi's control over society put serious restraints on women's advancement and that his support towards women was merely a façade. A dramatic report by Annick Cojean tells the story of Soraya, who, like many other girls and young women who even served as Gaddafi's personal guards, secretly suffered from violent abuses and sexual harassment perpetrated by the Libyan leader.³

The vision of Gaddafi's feminism being a pure *façade* is shared by Ms. Amal Al-Taher El Haj, a Prime Minister Candidate, who courageously submitted her candidacy to be appointed Libya's Prime Minister after Ali Zeidan following the 2014 government crisis. According to her, Gaddafi did not believe in women's emancipation, but at the same time

³ Annick Cojean, *Gaddafi's Harem: the Story of a Young Woman and the Abuses of Power in Libya* (Toronto: CNIB, 2014).

fostered a precise perception of his being a protector of women's rights. He understood that women's issues and the advancement of women in society could be exploited to better his position in front of other world leaders. He wanted to appear as an open-minded, modern ruler, but it was a pure *façade*.⁴

The post-1969 dictatorship severely impacted the possibility for women to make their voices heard, as the civil society, including universities and the education environment in general, were amply maintained under strict control in order to target dissidents. Women severely suffered from civil rights limitations and, in general, from a civil society constantly targeted by the government. Both after 1969 and after the Arab Spring, during which women played a critical role, their lives continued to be dramatically influenced by biases and a traditional vision of gender roles.⁵ Yet, Libya represents a fervent country where women continue to fight to obtain more rights and to make their voices heard in any possible way.

Tribalism is often analyzed through a stereotyped lense. It is true that, as in the case of the Libyan society, matters of honour severely impacted women's lives, whose behaviour should never, in any way, damage their families. However, it is also true that in tribal societies, it was not unusual for women to be consulted when it came to political decisions (this usually regarded the tribal leader's first wife, mother or his oldest sister), hence potentially exerting a significant influence over politics. Furthermore, the case of Morocco demonstrates how a strong religious dimension has been able to coexist with impactful reforms over women's rights. Indeed, the King of Morocco is considered to be Prophet Muhammad's direct descendant. Yet, despite the intertwining of religion and power, some

⁴ "ITALIA e LIBIA," Minerva Online, July 2015, 24,
<http://www.minervaonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/LIBRO-LIBIA.pdf>.

⁵ "The Situation of Women in Libya," Gender Concerns International, accessed August 25, 2020,
<http://www.genderconcerns.org/country-in-focus/libya/the-situation-of-women-in-libya/>.

important advancements were introduced by King Muhammad VI in 2004 when a new family code, “Mudawana,” was adopted. It covered several aspects of women’s lives, such as the right to self-guardianship and new regulations regarding polygamy.⁶ It is certain, however, that religion (or better, the interpretation of religion) exerted a significant influence, having an impact on the division of roles among men and women in society.

The Middle East is mostly characterized by patriarchal structures of power. However, there is an increasing number of reports and documents explaining the connection between gender equality (hence, political empowerment) on one side, and sustainable development on the other. The current pandemic has shown us the importance that human development holds, but it cannot happen if we continue to exclude half of the world’s population from the conversation. Nevertheless, even if data show that there is still a lot to do, several signs demonstrate that the path undertaken in the Middle East may be the correct one, and that there is a growing concern with gender equality.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, a Women’s Committee was established by the League of Arab States, which adopted the Strategy for the Advancement of Women.⁷ Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, many Arab States have ratified international agreements regarding women’s rights, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, even if they maintained some provisions regarding practices which are not Shari’a law compliant. In 2004, during the Arab Summit held in Tunisia, women’s empowerment was one of the main issues discussed, as

⁶ “King Mohammed VI opens new era for Moroccan women empowerment,” The North Africa Post, July 29, 2019, accessed August 24, 2020, <https://northafricapost.com/32850-king-mohammed-vi-opens-new-era-for-moroccan-women-empowerment.html>

⁷ Rowaida Al Maaitah, Hadeel Al Maaitah, Hmoud Olaimat, and Muntaha Gharaeibeh, “Arab Women and Political Development,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3 (March 2011): 10.

shown by the resulting Tunis Declaration.⁸ The Declaration formalized the willingness to pursue democratic practices and foster citizens' participation in political life, with particular attention being paid to women. Women's rights and social status must be recognized and preserved. Their role must be strengthened in the educational, political and economic fields.⁹

The growing concern with gender issues led to the establishment of specific ministries and the adoption of National Action Plans. In 2014, a four-year National Action Plan was launched in Iraq. The plan was developed thanks to cooperation between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government.¹⁰ In May 2018, a joint effort between the Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs and the Government of Canada led to a program called "HAYA: Eliminating Violence against Women in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (2018-2022)."¹¹ These are only two of the many efforts which enabled gender issues to emerge more prominently in the region, granting them the space they deserve and generating greater social well-being and prosperity. Proof of this is also the Palestinian Women's Affairs Ministry and the Plan to Combat Violence against Women, endorsed in 2011 by the Palestinian Cabinet.¹² However, such initiatives can be difficult to develop due to the disproportionately low number of women within politics. For this reason, according to Al Maaitah, equal political representation is vital in the establishment of new policies that help

⁸ Al Maaitah, 9.

⁹ "LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES: Tunis Declaration issued at the 16th session of the Arab Summit, held in Tunis on May 22-23, 2004," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, accessed July 10, 2020. https://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/compilation_democracy/league.htm.

¹⁰ "National Action Plan: Iraq," PeaceWomen, accessed July 30, 2020, <https://www.peacewomen.org/nap-iraq>.

¹¹ "Ministry of Women's Affairs and Government of Canada Launch a Flagship Programme to Eliminate Violence Against Women in the West Bank and Gaza," UNFPA, May 7, 2018, <https://palestine.unfpa.org/en/news/ministry-womens-affairs-and-government-canada-launch-flagship-program-me-eliminate-violence>.

¹² "Palestinian Cabinet endorses National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women," UN Women, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2011/1/palestinian-cabinet-endorses-national-strategy-to-combat-violence-against-women>.

protect women.

It is essential that a fair representation of women occurs at all political and leadership levels including the executive branch and parliament (where all laws are formulated) to give women an equal voice in shaping the policies that affect their lives and choices. This will ensure more practical and targeted policies dealing with women's issues to be implemented on the ground. Women must have a role in shaping the policies and strategies that affect their lives.¹³

The establishment of the intergovernmental Arab Women Organization was another decisive step. Founded in 2003, it counts numerous initiatives and publications aimed at empowering women from a political and economic point of view. The organization also stands on the belief that gender equality is an essential condition to achieve sustainable development. For this reason, it has endorsed the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and produced a documentary highlighting the connection between gender issues and sustainability.¹⁴

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

In 2015, the United Nations set up an ambitious initiative known as the 17 Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs.¹⁵ By recognizing the seventeen most critical challenges that the world is facing, the United Nations intended to develop concrete strategies to solve them and involve young activists around the world to ignite change, with the hope of having built a more sustainable world system by 2030. These goals cover a wide framework and address issues such as poverty, water and food waste, education and clean energy.¹⁶ Gender equality was included as the fifth Sustainable Development Goal because, even if it is clear that gender equality is fundamental to achieve sustainable development, the United Nations

¹³ Al Maaitah, "Arab Women and Political Development," 15.

¹⁴ "Arab Women in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda," Arab Women Organization, accessed July 30, 2020, <http://english.arabwomenorg.org/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=8>.

¹⁵ "Sustainable Development Goals," About Sustainable Development Goals, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

¹⁶ "The 17 Goals," The Global Goals for Sustainable Development, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://www.globalgoals.org/>.

recognizes that “many challenges remain: discriminatory laws and social norms remain pervasive, women continue to be under-represented at all levels of political leadership.” The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has often expressed his concern over the risk of losing the progress achieved so far due to the Covid-19 pandemic, as the crisis has made women more vulnerable. Indeed, the webpage dedicated to Gender Equality was updated after the spread of Covid-19, highlighting the severe consequences that the pandemic has had over gender equality and the condition of women. It is highlighted, once again, that development cannot happen without overcoming gender disparities, and the Covid-19 crisis puts in front of governments the opportunity to reverse or eliminate unfair policies, for instance, by protecting women more strictly from violence and abuse.¹⁷

The pandemic has put in danger the achievements made towards gender equality, for instance, by disproportionately increasing women’s burden on multiple levels if compared to men. A United Nations policy brief published after the declaration of the Covid-19 pandemic addresses the most severe consequences that Covid-19 has had on women in the Arab region. It is reported, for instance, that in Egypt, for every one man working in nursing, there are ten women doing the same job.¹⁸ It is not difficult to imagine that such a disproportion makes women more likely to contract the virus in the workplace. Moreover, the policy brief highlights another kind of inequality: in such a situation, women are expected to perform multiple roles, most importantly taking care of their families by safeguarding the physical and mental well-being of those around them. It is reported that the amount of time women dedicate to unpaid work is almost five times higher than men. The closure of schools has, in

¹⁷ "Goal 5: Achieve Gender Equality and Empower all Women and Girls," Sustainable Development Goals, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

¹⁸ “The Impact of Covid-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region,” UN Women, accessed August 22, 2020, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/fr/digital-library/publications/2020/04/the-impact-of-covid19-on-gender-equality-in-the-arab-region>.

many cases, increased women's workloads as they are now responsible for helping children to continue their educations at home in addition to their existing jobs.¹⁸

Despite this, the current crisis has also finally made evident that women can make an enormous difference in the recovery process if they are valued and economically supported by governments. This is more likely to happen with more women involved in policymaking and more female world leaders in international relations, especially Middle Eastern female leaders. Their innovative point of view, compassion and determination are highly needed in such difficult times.

UN Women Initiatives in the MENA Region

UN Women's approach is based on the conviction that political participation in Middle Eastern countries can be fostered only by creating a strong bond between the agency, political representatives, authorities and the civil society. Throughout the Arab States, UN Women has organized training workshops, meetings and has set up committees to support young women in mastering their confidence and advocacy for their rights, enhancing their knowledge about politics and its mechanisms. Significant results have been reached in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where the Spring Forward for Women Programme was implemented to raise awareness, enhance advocacy and build skills among girls. This Programme has brought promising results, raising women's presence within Palestinian institutions increased from 20% to 30%.¹⁹ Furthermore, UN Women strives to increase the political participation of women through cooperation with local bodies, as in the case of the Occupied Palestinian Territories, where in coordination with the General Union of Workers, some meetings were held in order to educate girls about their own empowerment in political

¹⁹ "Leadership and political participation," UN Women, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation>.

life. UN Women has also been active in Gaza, where the situation is overall difficult. Now more than ever, women find themselves forced to be present on multiple fronts and to deal with poor living conditions, lack of adequate services such as clean water provisions or severely limited in the pursuit of their educational career because they lack internet access. The current crisis has also highlighted that it is too easy for women's political participation to be set aside as a "non-priority." However, this is the key to both problems: since they have a more ample vision regarding the impact that crises have on societies, it is essential to be constantly informed about their point of view. Therefore, in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, action plans were drafted, and professional training was developed. The goal was gathering real-life examples proving the positive impact of inclusive policies on societies.

Another example comes from Morocco, where the focus was on the analysis of draft laws paying particular attention to women's rights; on the one hand, UN Women supported the "Parliamentarians for Equality" group, whose goal was fostering the concern of different parliamentary groups with regard to women's rights. On the other hand, UN Women supported the local Democratic Association of Moroccan Women advocating for gender equality with the Committee for Governmental Plan for Equality, gathering sixteen associations in the field of human rights and organizing a workshop in order to evaluate the progress made so far.²⁰

Building Future Female Leaders: the Generation Equality Forum

The Generation Equality Forum is a global meeting made possible thanks to cooperation between UN Women and the governments of Mexico and France. This initiative puts gender equality at the centre of a global conversation, enabling the maximum participation to the Forum through real-time, online sessions, as the goal of the Forum is to

²⁰ See note 19.

maximize and diversify participation. The final aim is to develop a feminist agenda and establish the Action Coalitions, which are “global, innovative, multi-stakeholder partnerships that will mobilize governments, civil society, international organizations, and the private sector.”²¹ These coalitions are made as efficient and impactful as possible by attributing them to specific themes and goals with the support of public and private investments. These bodies are concerned with the development of small, achievable steps regarding the following topics: feminist leadership and action for climate justice; tackling gender-based violence; pursuing economic justice and equality; implementing technology that could help to reach the goal of gender equality; enhancing bodily autonomy and reproductive rights.²²

Why We Need More Women: Governments Successfully Dealing with the Pandemic

The global pandemic certainly represents a dramatic moment in our history. It also constitutes, however, an invaluable opportunity to show what female leaders are actually capable of. Praising their achievements can serve to demonstrate that there would be no loss, only benefits in counting more female leaders, not just in the Middle East, but around the world. UN Women has often highlighted the amazing results female world leaders have achieved, as is the case of Her Excellency Vjosa Osmani, who holds the position of the first woman to be Chairman of the Assembly in Kosovo. Ms. Osmani is only one of several examples of world leaders who have recorded huge results in the fight against Covid-19. Denmark and New Zealand, which are both led by women, have experienced similar results. Indeed, female leaders are more driven to safeguard women’s issues because they are aware of or have directly experienced the vulnerability and daily challenges, such as performing

²¹ "About," Generation Equality Forum, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://forum.generationequality.org/about>.

²² "Action Coalitions," Generation Equality Forum, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://forum.generationequality.org/action-coalitions>.

multiple roles on the private and public level simultaneously. When asked about the role men should play in supporting gender equality, especially in the political context, Ms. Osmani replied:

A limited number of women hold leadership positions globally and the same applies to Kosovo. Social productivity cannot be reached while people are marginalized, discriminated and face gender-based barriers. We, men and women, need to contribute to including more women in decision-making processes and to raise their representation in leadership positions. It is imperative to tackle the male-dominant culture that we cultivate at home from early ages. It is also our responsibility to raise our children free of stigmas and of traditional gender roles.²³

This is such a powerful statement because it addresses two major points. First and foremost, the fact that men must not, by any means, be excluded from the discourse of gender equality. Men and women must learn to cooperate with each other. Men must learn to seek and accept a plurality of diversified opinions, most importantly women's opinion, so that different ideas and solutions can emerge. This has already proved to be a successful method, and is attributed with being a contributing factor as to why countries who are currently led by women have been achieving greater success in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. This issue was also addressed by an article published in the *New York Times* in May 2020.²⁴

Secondly, Ms. Osmani mentioned the existence of a "male-dominant" culture, which is passed from generation to generation, taught in the majority of social environments, be it at home or at school. If that kind of subtle culture is not addressed and reversed, working to achieve gender equality at the highest levels of power will be useless and even more difficult than now, as the problem will not have been solved at its roots. The struggle for gender equality starts at home, when two parents equally support each other, discuss gender norms

²³ "Take Five: "Women leaders around the world have demonstrated successful management of the pandemic," UN Women, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/6/take-five-vjosa-osmani>.

²⁴ Amanda Taub, "Why Are Women-Led Nations Doing Better With Covid-19?," The New York Times (The New York Times, May 15, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/15/world/coronavirus-women-leaders.html>.

and roles, and redefine them for their children. It is interesting to note that the Prime Minister candidate of Libya Amal Al-Taher El-Haj, addressed the same issue during a meeting held in Rome in March 2014. During this meeting, she addressed the importance of shifting the views on women's roles in all aspects of life. She stressed that one of the most important ways in which to fight discrimination is through changing patterns of thought. Ms. El-Haj suggested that many books currently available in Libya depict the daily life of families as follows: a mother typically dedicates her time to housework while her husband goes to work. Her daughter also carries out housework as well, but her brother just sits down.²⁵ This is a subtle but powerful tool to educate children. It leads them to believe that women must dedicate their time to clean the house and cook meals, while men are not entitled to such tasks, instead they must provide for their families. These words serve to remark the importance that children and education hold in shaping a more sustainable future in which the United Nations SDGs will be, at least partially, achieved.

Female Leaders in the Arab World: Role Models

Despite poor political participation, recently, there have been interesting developments in the Middle East with regard to gender equality. This is shown by some initiatives and the careers which some women have been able to pursue.

One example of this being the diplomat and former Palestinian Minister of Foreign Affairs Rana Zakarneh's affirmation regarding how the perception of women has been changing in Palestine. In the past, a stereotyped perception of women's role in society represented an obstacle towards building a career for themselves. Evidence shows that this has been gradually changing. Thanks to women's incredible resilience, doubts regarding their accountability, professionalism and abilities are slowly dissolving. In an article that Ms.

²⁵ "ITALIA e LIBIA," 25.

Zakarneh wrote on the World Economic Forum platform, she highlighted some of the positive outcomes generated by women's inclusion in the political sphere. First and foremost, laws will become more inclusive and creative solutions will emerge as a result of taking different opinions into account. Secondly, income inequalities will decrease. Thirdly, including more female decision-makers will lead to a decrease in mortality rates. Women's dedication to the health sector may prompt the draft of specific policies and also a more significant allocation of funds. Finally, there could be surprising benefits in investing in gender equality from the financial point of view as well. It is reported that "\$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 if gender equality is advanced, of which \$0.6 trillion will be added to the MENA countries' GDP."²⁶

Another example of an empowered and compassionate woman is Queen Rania Al Abdullah of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Born in 1970, she graduated in business administration from the American University of Cairo in 1991 and worked in banking and later in the information technology sector before marrying Prince Abdullah bin Al Hussein in 1993.²⁷ Since then, Queen Rania has been active on different fronts both at the local and international level. She is greatly concerned with the protection of families, particularly children, while at the same time, she is also focused on women's empowerment. Moreover, she believes that Muslim and Arab cultures must be valued, on the one hand, by fighting prejudices, while on the other by enhancing mutual compassion and understanding. She has striven to improve the Jordanian educational system by modifying curricula and ensuring that girls and boys would be granted the same opportunities without any discrimination on the

²⁶ Rana Zakarneh, "A new generation of women leaders is making waves in the Arab world," World Economic Forum, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/a-new-generation-of-arab-women-leaders/>.

²⁷ "Her Majesty Queen Rania Al Abdullah," Queen Rania Al Abdullah Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.queenrania.jo/en/rania>.

basis of gender. In this respect, Queen Rania has been collaborating with the United Nations for many years, and she holds the position of Honorary Chair of the UN Girls Education Initiatives, she also supports the United Nations Foundation and the World Economic Forum.²⁶

Queen Rania is particularly active on several different fronts reflecting her empathy and compassion. At the Girl Up Pep Rally in Los Angeles in 2010, Her Majesty stressed the importance of global cooperation among young adults living in developed countries and teenagers living in developing countries, highlighting the disparity in opportunities that young girls living in developing countries encounter. Queen Rania underlined that, despite these girls' talents and ambition, there is an immense discrepancy in the number of opportunities they are granted – which are often none - and the number of obstacles they encounter in everyday life, which prevent them from self-realization. In many cases, girls are prevented from going to school, are the last to eat and get the least to eat, and they have very limited access to healthcare.²⁸ Therefore, one must take into consideration not only the discrepancy in opportunities granted to boys and girls, but also inequalities among girls based on the dichotomy between “Developed” and “Developing” countries, which is to say where a girl was raised.

If the world starts to rely more on women's technical and practical knowledge, civil societies will experience large improvements and a greater amount of prosperity. At the HeforShe Impact Summit, held in New York in 2018, Queen Rania stressed that during difficult times women's needs tend to be forgotten; they “slip off national agendas, increasing

²⁸ “Queen Rania Joins Hundreds of School Girls in Girl Up Pep Rally in Los Angeles,” Queen Rania Al Abdullah, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.queenrania.jo/en/media/press/queen-rania-joins-hundreds-school-girls-girl-pep-rally-los-ang eles>.

the gap between hardship and hope.”²⁹ Governments must be aware of this tendency so that, when it appears, it can be reversed (if there is the willingness to do so). Finally, Queen Rania stressed how travelling can help one notice that, despite cultural, social and religious differences, the needs and difficulties experienced by women and girls around the world are often similar, and empowerment comes as the most important and effective response to enhance young girls’ lives. “Empowerment is contagious – I see it lighting up the faces of our youngest girls,” Queen Rania said. If coupled with solidarity, empowerment can truly be the lighthouse leading human beings to re-build a better world instead of simply reproducing the pre-Coronavirus global system. “It’s what I call ‘the reverse domino effect’: lift up one woman, and she’ll lift up others, who lift up more.”²⁸

Final Considerations

The Middle East is more active than most people assume when it comes to gender issues. Several are the projects under development, and young girls are extremely willing to make their voices heard. Indeed, the importance of female world leaders has been extensively displayed during the ongoing pandemic, as many countries led by women have been able to respond effectively to this threat. In an interview with UN Women, Her Excellency Vjosa Osmani has displayed the motivations, which lead us to believe in the importance of gender equality in the context of human development. The role played by personalities such as diplomats, and First Ladies must not be underestimated, as their voices influence governmental decisions and policies to be more driven towards women’s necessities. In conclusion, as the example of Queen Rania shows, the cooperation between women leaders

²⁹ “Queen Rania Highlights Arab Women’s Unique Challenges at HeforShe IMPACT Summit,” Queen Rania Al Abdullah, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.queenrania.jo/en/media/press-releases/queen-rania-highlights-arab-women%E2%80%99s-unique-challenges-heforshe-impact-summit>.

and international organizations is often crucial for raising awareness about women's political empowerment.

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