



The Middle East Partnership Initiative Supporting Women

"Investing in the potential of the world's women and girls is one of the surest ways to achieve global economic progress, political stability, and greater prosperity for women — and men — the world over."

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton - March 8, 2010

Women are often the strongest advocates for positive political, economic, educational, legal, and social reform throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) provides assistance that is customized and relevant to the needs of women within four key areas:

SOCIAL AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Civic education projects and training in leadership and advocacy strategies give women the skills and confidence to act on behalf of their own communities and to play an active role in society and politics. MEPI focuses on increasing the role and profile of women in shaping communities through targeted projects that help broaden women's civic engagement.

One of MEPI's newer projects, *Min Ajlina*, or "*For Us*," increases the effectiveness of Bedouin women's organizations in Israel's Negev region. The project is implemented by Shatil, an Israeli NGO that strives to empower women's advocacy organizations in an environment that is traditional and patriarchal. *Min Ajlina* is also establishing greater awareness within the Negev's Bedouin community about the rights and potential of women. Activities, which target young Bedouin women and men enrolled in local high schools and colleges, provide a forum to discuss gender roles and the changing status of Bedouin women.

Women in Saudi Arabia are seeking expanded opportunities for civic engagement, and MEPI is meeting this demand. *The Saudi Women's Civic Participation* project focuses on developing the leadership abilities and organizational and management skills of current and up-and-coming women civic leaders, including those who intend to participate as voters, educators, and possibly as candidates, in elections for chambers of commerce and other bodies. MEPI works to help Saudi women take advantage of new opportunities for civic participation.

The Online Activism Institute (OAI) uses an e-learning platform to deliver the "Create Your Activism Plan" curriculum to help participants transform their visions for change into concrete, achievable actions. Nearly 40 Egyptian women civil society reformers, ages 19 to 48, have completed training, including writing their own activism plans. The participants come from a diverse array of professional fields, including students, lawyers, council members, journalists, and businesswomen. Their activism plans span issues from women's rights, to local community development, to elections monitoring, and youth civic education. Participants say that as a result of their training, they now have clearer goals and a more comprehensive approach to their activism. As participant Saneya El Fikki shared, "It helped me organize my goals and thoughts and gave me tools to help me change these visions into reality."



WOMEN IN POLITICS

While the past decade has seen the expansion of women's suffrage and a doubling of the number of women elected to office region-wide, the level of women's political and civic engagement in the MENA region continues to be the lowest in the world. MEPI supports projects to increase the level of women's participation in building democratic, pluralistic societies through projects that train women to run for office, advance their leadership skills, and help them advocate for legislation that promotes women's rights in their home countries.





The *National Democratic Institute (NDI)* and the *International Republican Institute (IRI)* trained nearly 4,000 women candidates in preparation for Morocco's June 2009 municipal elections, where the government had established a 12% quota for women's seats. Women exceeded the quota by winning 12.3% of the seats outright, marking a dramatic increase from only 0.5% of seats they held previously. Of note, half the women elected were under the age of 35, and 20% of the women trained by IRI and NDI won seats.

The National Democratic Institute's (NDI's) *Expanding Support for Political Reform* project is designed to strengthen democratic processes in the Gulf. In Kuwait, NDI is empowering political groups to organize and run effective campaigns at the local and national levels. The four women members of parliament elected in 2009 all received MEPI assistance through training programs implemented by NDI and American University and have been active in promoting civic reforms since becoming parliamentarians.

SUPPORTING WOMEN IN THE LAW

Women lawyers can be powerful advocates for women's equality and advancement. MEPI supports the professional development of young female legal practitioners in the region to engage in critical family, criminal, commercial, and international law issues. MEPI also works with activists and government officials to push for laws and amendments that respect women as equal members of society.

For example, with the graduation of the first class of women with law degrees from Jeddah's King Abdulaziz University, MEPI partnered with a Jeddah-based law firm to offer the recent graduates two *Women's Legal Training Programs* in December 2009 and February 2010. Participants learned how to network professionally, draft contracts, conduct legal research, and participated in a moot court competition.

The *Countering Early Marriage NGO Network*, comprised of several Yemeni NGOs working with the guidance of NDI, will work together, starting in late 2010, to counter the problem of early marriage in Yemen. The network aims to significantly reduce the number of incidents of early marriage in Yemen, which does not have legislation defining a legal minimum age for marrying. Through advocacy and awareness efforts, the network will work to change attitudes of local communities and national legislators to push for their support of ending the practice of early marriage. This approach is designed to create an impact outside of Sana'a and will enhance grassroots efforts by local actors. The network will also embrace a wide variety of local stakeholders, from the Government of Yemen to women's groups and other potential donors.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women's access to economic opportunities is crucial to the region's economic growth. MEPI supports projects that enhance women's marketable skills and expand women's participation in the region's economy.

MENA Businesswomen's Network - The Middle East and North Africa Businesswomen's Network (MENA BWN), established with MEPI funding in 2006, partners with businesswomen's associations in eleven countries in the region to increase the value of women-owned businesses, advance the role of women in society, and promote a regional culture of women's entrepreneurship. MENA BWN direct membership has grown to over 2,100 businesswomen – a 380% growth since 2006 - and local BWN hubs have hosted over 200 events reaching 14,000 people. In 2010, the BWN launched as a fully independent regional organization with private sector support.

