

# STATUTORY CONFERENCE OF THE WOMEN ELECTED OFFICIALS NETWORK: SUPPORTING THE LOCAL POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN LIBYA

**November 19, 20, 21**

**Gammarth, Tunis**

On November 19, 20, and 21, 2021, the Statutory Conference of the Women Elected Officials Network entitled Supporting the Local Political Participation of Women in Libya took place in Tunis. The conference was attended by more than seventy-five locally elected women from all Libyan regions, the Libyan Minister of Youth Affairs, the European Union delegation to Libya, the Embassy of Germany in Libya, the representative of UN-Women, and the two undersecretaries of the Ministries of Youth and Education.

## Opening

The Statutory Conference was opened by Dr. Neilla Al-Akrimi, Director-General of the International Center for Innovative Local Governance CILG-VNG International (CILG-VNGI). She started with a brief overview of the previous and current work of CILG-VNGI and its efforts to contribute to establishing the decentralization process since 2011 through different programmes, including ISAL (Improved Service Delivery and Accountability at Local Level). Hence, she thanked the different stakeholders involved in the programme and the European Union and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs for co-financing it. Dr. Akrimi also thanked GIZ for supporting the conference.

Dr. Akrimi then focused on the various reasons behind her passion for women's active participation in the decentralization process. First, women represent half of the society, and sustainable development is not possible without their involvement. According to her, for the experience to succeed five essential Principles should be valued; the Five Cs: Confidence, Conviction, Commitment, Courage, and Compassion. At the end of her speech, Dr. Akrimi thanked the partner organizations for supporting the event and the members of the WEON, wishing them a successful election.

The second speech was then delivered by Mrs. Randa Gharib, the undersecretary of the Minister of Planning and Development Affairs. Mrs. Gharib expressed her appreciation of the Libyan women struggles to hold leadership positions in society and in government and her firm belief that Libyan women can occupy important decision-making positions. She also underlined her ministry's efforts to empower young ladies.

In her speech, Dr. Masouda Al-Aswad, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education spoke about the important role of women who rightfully deserve key positions due to their leadership qualities, integrity, and expertise that are equal – if not superior – to those of many men.



She also stressed that competence alone should be the criterion for leadership, and that the important thing today is to preserve what Libyan women have achieved and work to develop it further.

The EU Ambassador to Libya, his excellency Mr. Jose Sabadell, stressed in his speech that the work at the local level to achieve democracy would not happen without women's participation. He also highlighted that Libyan woman could achieve anything they yearn to. He thanked the Network for their work, especially at the local level.

The German Ambassador to Libya, Mr. Michael Onmacht, expressed his pleasure to be present at the conference's opening and said that women's participation serves the interest of society as a whole and that Germany would like to be an active partner in the promotion of women's participation. He also pointed out that the upcoming elections in Libya are crucial for consolidating the role of women. Finally, he thanked the Network and the organizers, and wished them success for their conference.

Ms. Patricia Elias, who attended on behalf of UN Women, said that her organization believes in the importance of women to achieve world peace. She congratulated the Libyan women for their meaningful participation in political events and promised to support them in their efforts as peacemakers in Libya.

Mrs. Nadia Bousriwill, President of the Women Elected Officials Network in Libya, initiated her speech by thanking CILG-VNGI and the Network members and touching on the establishment of the Network, which emerged from the reality of the difficult situation of women working in municipal councils. These difficulties did not deter the Network from working for two years. But today is the time to enhance the presence and participation of women in building local governance and eliminating centralization. Finally, she called for continuing to support the Network so that Libyan women could play their role in achieving national reconciliation.

Ms. Azza Al-Derbali, CILG-VNGI Libya Country Director and ISAL Program Manager, expressed her pride in the Network and what it had achieved and in the conference preparation team at the beginning of her speech. She emphasized that the decentralization process could not be achieved without women's participation. She said that Network members played a significant role as the initiators of projects and ideas, and they owe the success to themselves. She also promised in the last part of the speech to stay fully determined to continue this support.

A video projection screening ISAL's milestones' support to the WEON and testimonies from its members followed the opening session.

Dr. Sanim Benabdallah, Keynote speaker and Expert in the Program for Inclusive Municipal Leadership, gave a presentation entitled: Inclusive Local Governance and Women's Leadership: Lessons Learned from the Canadian-Tunisian Cooperation Initiative. He highlighted the different local contexts and the specificity of each municipal area. The programme aims to encourage women to access the public sphere and succeed. The Expert stressed the importance of working on the process and the methodology. It would not have been possible to achieve tangible and encouraging results in this programme without women leaders and men who are allies of women.

## Legislation and Women's Representation

### The Status of Women and Inclusive Governance in Libyan law

Mrs. Zeitouna Muammer, Former Councillor from Zouara and founding member of the WEON, facilitated the first session. The session was introduced by briefly presenting the theme and the participants. The floor was then given to Mrs. Imen, an Expert in Libyan law who focused on the positive aspects of the legal framework and its shortcomings and the societal customs and traditions' role in impeding women's access to political positions. The constitutional and legal texts that she reviewed do not prevent women from political participation but rather encourage equality between women and men. What matters, according to her, is not the mere presence of women but rather to bring real change.

The second intervention was made by Mrs. Anwar Mnasri, Judge and Representative of the League of Tunisian Voters. Mrs. Anwar spoke about her experience with the Tunisian Constitutional Assembly. She stressed the importance of the constitution as the highest legislation in including the principle of equality, paving the way for a state respecting women's rights and their access to decision-making positions. The judge also expressed her hope that the Libyan state would be a model for the Arab and Islamic society in showing that Islam does not contradict the principle of equality and recalled that international treaties are a source of legislation that Libyan women can resort to in order to establish equality between women and men in the law.

The third intervention was by Mr. Mokhtar Hammami: the former Minister of Local Affairs and Environment in Tunisia. Mr. Hammami stressed the importance of culture and practice more than laws and texts. He took the example of Taher El Haddad's experience in the 1930s in Tunisia, which led to the enshrinement of women's rights in the 1959 constitution. The 2011 constitution also adopted equality between women and men, especially in elected councils, which led to the emergence of women leaders. However, there is still a long way to go for the effective participation of women in decision making. During his intervention, Mr. Hammami reviewed the stages of issuing the electoral law for municipal entitlement and the challenges that accompanied the establishment of vertical and horizontal parity in the candidate electoral lists. He also mentioned that women should launch initiatives and monitor the process to achieve the desired change through real political participation and activism in the political community.

The session ended with an open discussion. The participants asked about the path that led to the establishment of parity in Tunisia and the election of 70 female mayors in a short period and how public opinion was affected. The former minister responded that it was related to gradual societal change and consultations that lasted for a year and a half. Work was done to change mentalities and convince people of women's ability to manage in several areas and specializations while adopting proximity to citizens.

One of the participants and candidates for the upcoming Libyan House of Representatives elections underlined that empowering women in institutions is ensured by laws, while economic and social empowerment is through civil society, culture, and education.

Mokhtar Hammami finally confirmed that gradualism must be adopted to achieve progress for Libyan women, provided that this principle is included in the constitution and the law.

## Axis 2: Women's Voice and Leadership in Decision-Making: Assessing the Evidence at the Local Level

### The Added Value of the Political Participation of Libyan Women: Stability, Social Cohesion, and National Reconciliation

This session was facilitated by Mrs Hania Boukhris, the councillor from Sirte and member of the WEON

First, Dr. Suzan Hama, from the Empowerment Unit at the High National Election Commission in Libya, highlighted that the office deals with women who need support by focusing on three main points :

- Raising women's awareness of the importance of registering in the electoral lists, with the help of 70 female ambassadors from marginalized areas;
- Registration of women married to non-Libyans;
- Registering women displaced by armed conflict and using the hashtag #Receive-Your Card.

Dr. Hama also spoke about the history of the feminist struggle in Libya and the period of founding the Libyan Women's Union in the sixties, before this movement experienced stagnation in the seventies, which affected the gains of women in Libya.

Subsequently, clips from a documentary film on the history of the struggle of Libyan women were shown.

Ms. Patricia Elias, the Programme Analyst for UN Women in Libya on Rule of Law & Women Political Participation, expressed pride in the past three years of joint work, which made her believe that Libyan women are active contributors to peace process and that the presence of women contributes to the establishment of the rule of law. She used the Rwandan example to confirm this idea, which she said was an example to follow in development indicators after women assumed leadership positions. Ms. Elias also considered that the war conditions in Libya contributed to women taking responsibility, as happened during the Second World War. She stated that the share of women today is 16% in the elected councils, but the goal is to reach 40%, and more.

The third speaker, Mr. Andreas Berding, Head of Project Governance Advisory Fund in Libya (GIZ), indicated that the agency works on public services and governance. According to him, women should play a pivotal role in governance and decentralization, and political reforms can only be achieved with the participation of all groups, especially women. Mr. Berding also stressed that peace agreements are more sustainable when women participate in their formulation.

He furthermore considers that the local participation of women is very significant for stability and through civil society to enhance participatory governance. Libyan women still need more representation, with 50-60% stating that they are under-represented. He also stated that such structures should be created locally leading to similar networks like Libyan women entrepreneurs. Finally, he expressed the continuous commitment of the Agency to achieve the goals above.

At the end of the interventions, Ms. Fatna Al-Khayal, representative of the Network of Locally Elected Women of Africa, REFELA, gave a historical overview of this Network and introduced its structure at

the local and continental levels. She indicated that the interaction between REFELA and North African countries aims to bring about legislative reforms that guarantee women's representation of not less than 30%. Finally, she announced that REFELA aims to accompany women in their electoral campaigns and is also concerned with elected women at the continental level, providing them with training and coaching programs.

During the discussion, questions about whether there are plans to support women and municipal activity in the next stage were also raised. In this regard, Ms. Elias mentioned the eagerness of the United Nations bodies to support the network. Mrs. Hama also announced that the High Commission is providing training for women in the electoral process and that a toll-free number is set up to receive reports and complaints about violence related to the electoral process. Finally, Mr. Berding said that he joined the conference to discuss potential joint programs and plans for the coming period in which the municipalities would be a real partner.

## **Media and Changing the Face of Leadership at the Local Level**

Mrs. Wafaa Al-Senussi, councilor in the municipality of Gorda Al-Shati Municipality, and Mrs. Sabriya Al-Zarqani, councilor in Tajoura, members of the Network of Elected Women in Libya facilitated the workshop.

Mrs. Hela Al-Misrati, Administrative Consultant Specialized in Institutional and Capacity Building, spoke about the media and its outstanding contribution to building the general idea about women, which has always represented a stereotype. She reviewed figures showing the presence of women in the media, where women represent 19% of the total workers in the media. But less than 5% of them have a say on media policies, and 7% work as reporters. She also noticed a gap between the media and women's issues, and there is a lack of media coverage of feminist activism, while women represent the majority of those working in civil society. She also considers that the network can play a role in formulating strategies to improve the role and image of women in the media and that «content makers» should be trained in women's issues.

Dr. Sabiha Homri, Institutional Communication Consultant from Tunisia, talked about the awareness-raising, educational, and supervisory media functions. She stressed that the media today are considered a proximity mechanism for citizens at the local level, contributing to strengthening participatory decision-making. Therefore, the media have a vital role in implementing participatory democracy and development at the local level. In the end, she mentioned that a lot needs to be done to achieve these goals since most municipal councils today do not have a unit in charge of information.

Mrs. Sophie Allard, a municipal council member and representative of the Canadian Federation of Municipalities, spoke about the federation's experience, which succeeded in enhancing women's presence at the local level, as the proportion of women in the electoral bloc increased from 30% to 50%, and women occupied five presidential seats out of 10 municipal councils in larger cities in the country. She also cautioned that there was no support for women who engaged in politics in the beginning, and

therefore more women must be involved in municipal work to support each other. She also noted that when women engage in municipal work, they can make a change. Concerning the media, Sophie said that the media show no interest in covering municipal work and issues of concern to women at the local level, which poses many challenges to the media, given their important role in changing ideas.

The interventions led to a discussion that concluded that it was important today to draft a media pact and create a partnership between the media and the Women Elected Officials Network since information is a double-edged sword. The discussion also ended in a recommendation to document and archive the activity of elected members so that the outcome of their work could reach the general public.

## Networking Session between Tunisian and Libyan Women Elected

### Councilors

At the end of the first day, an networking session was held that included members of the Board of Directors of the Network of Elected Women in Libya and Tunisia to exchange ideas and discuss joint actions.

Dr. Sami Yassine Al-Turki, from CILG-VNGI, opened the session and presented its objectives as an opportunity to create a direct dialogue between the WEON in Libya and its counterpart in Tunisia. He started by mentioning that political parties' disputes affected the network in Tunisia, while Libyan women succeeded in overcoming regional and clan disputes. Hence, it is clear that overcoming affiliation differences represents a common challenge for the two networks, despite the success of the Libyan network in this, which represents an opportunity for the Tunisian network to identify the mechanisms that the Libyan network has followed to achieve this.

Female members of Tunisian municipal councils attended from the municipalities of Tunis, Hammam Al-Anf, Nabeul, Naasan (Chairperson of the Municipal Council), Siliana, Enfidha, and Saqia Al-Dayer, and from Libya, members of the municipal councils of Janzour, Tripoli Center, and Souk Al-Juma. During the meeting, the following points were mainly raised:

1. Political violence against elected women is very common in the municipal work in both countries. Therefore, a mechanism must be established to accompany women victims of political violence. The Tunisian network has set up an observatory to monitor violence and support the elected officials that need aid. It was agreed to provide the Libyan network with documents describing this experience and exchange knowledge.
2. There is a legal framework in the two countries, but there is a lack of implementation and follow-up, which contributes to the repression of women's rights
3. There are ways to develop mechanisms to address violence cases against women in the political sphere.
4. Political violence was among the reasons for establishing the network in Libya

5. There must be legal training on how to act in the case of violence.
6. Women's societal status and its impact on the work of elected women
7. Tunisian women are at the forefront of women's rights in the Arab world, while there is political and community disapproval of women running for leadership positions in Libya.
8. Structuring the network
9. The network in Tunisia is unclear in its structure and connections (considering its affiliation with the National Federation of Tunisian Cities), unlike the Libyan one, registered as a civil society organization. This difference may explain the incompatibility in the development and implementation of programs.
10. The problems and challenges that the elected women encountered made them establish the WEON
11. The majority presence of men in the Association of Libyan Municipalities is an obstacle to an adequate representation of elected women in the association's structures
12. The representativity battle that the elected Libyan women are waging is more complex than that waged by their counterpart in Tunisia, as it started from scratch. In contrast, the Tunisian women found the ground almost ready through the electoral law that guaranteed broad representation for women.
13. The media and its role in shedding light on women's participation
14. The importance of dealing with the media to further define the role and activities of women and the problems they face.

At the end of the meeting, it has been recognized that work in the coming period would focus on addressing the attempt to remove the quota and work to increase women's representation in the elected councils in Libya, while the network's goal in Tunisia is to preserve women's representation and work to strengthen its internal structure.

## Day 2:

Dr. Sami Yassine Turki opened the meetings of the second day with a wrap-up of the previous day's work and the main points raised.

The Role of Public Opinion and Inclusive Governance in Economic Public policies and Planning in Women Empowerment

Mr. Abdul Salam Saad, Head of the Media Office, in the municipality of Shahat, began his speech by thanking and praising the WEON in Libya and the importance of its role in uniting the Libyans and working to preserve the rights of citizens. He mentioned the recommendations of the United Nations about gender inclusion and equality in rights between women and men.

It was considered that women's organizations like the Network should make an effort to reach out to the media and involve them in their activities. He also advised that periodicals and posts be published and sent to the media, using social media to cover activities. Mr. Saad also recommended caution against media with anti-women agendas.

At the beginning of his intervention, Mr. Moez Attiya, an expert in support of women's capacities and local development from Tunisia, recalled that women's empowerment and equality are one of the Sustainable Development Goals. He considered that the lower presence of women in the media was due to the lack of diligence of producers and editors. He also noted an imbalance in economic equality reflected in the proportion of women holding higher degrees assigned to economic institutions in Tunisia, which is almost non-existent in Libya. In conclusion, he said that consultative meetings and decision-making mechanisms must be brought closer to women and that the task of intellectuals and civil society is to remove obstacles to enhancing women's participation.

The last intervention was made by Mrs. Shaima Bouhlel, an expert in local governance from Tunisia, who expressed her happiness with the conference, the culmination of many discussions. After that, she spoke about the economic and social effects of including gender in legal texts. She stated that the change in laws usually comes in response to a change in public opinion. She then indicated that public opinion is the set of ideas and principles in society. Some sciences help understand public opinion and how it is formed. Probing opinions and focus groups are also crucial for monitoring change in principles and opinions. She also considered that work must be done in the medium and long term to change public opinion.

Subsequently, a discussion took place, concluding that the media should spotlight women's problems, and laws should be enforced, but in order for this to happen, awareness must be spread among people to reinforce their ownership of the idea. The difference between justice and equality was also discussed, pointing to the need to build partnerships with organizations and associations that work on the same goals.

After that, a session was held in honor of Mr. Fathallah Al-Zani, Minister of Youth in the Libyan Government of National Unity, whom Dr. Neila Akrimi welcomed. Mr. Al Zani congratulated the women members of the network for holding their conference and introduced the work of the Ministry of Youth, especially at the local level. He also thanked the Undersecretary of the Ministry, Mrs. Randa Gharib, for empowering young women at the ministry level. He also called for establishing a network of elected young women, expressing the ministry's readiness to sponsor and organize its founding conference.

## **Success Stories around Female Leadership and Enhanced**

### **Inclusive Municipal Services**

The workshop was run by Ms. Fariha Darhab, a municipal councilwoman in Tobroq and a member of the Women Elected Officials Network.

Ms. Nadia Koukli, in charge of Women's Affairs at the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, congratulated the women members of the network on their success. However, according to her, the real success is in the running for elections, acquiring access to municipal councils, and contributing to decision-making.

Ms. Ines Ghazouani, Team Leader PLMI "For an Inclusive Municipal Leadership" program in Tunisia, during the second intervention, gave a presentation entitled "Inclusive Local Governance and Women's Leadership." The presentation reveals how gender was taken into account in municipal planning and the steps taken to that end, including the establishment of the Women's Elected Network in Tunisian municipalities under the National Federation of Tunisian Cities. Subsequently, a video was shown of the experience of Mrs. Najiba Al-Garnouki, a member of the municipal council in Sidi Bourouis (Siliana governorate), one of the beneficiaries of the program.

At the end of the session, the floor was given to the attendees to present their own success stories highlighting the importance of women's will and their belief in their role.

Ms. Azza Derbali made a concluding presentation. She presented the overall orientation and the projects to be pursued in the coming period, which, while dealing with the support of municipalities and decentralization in general, would promote participation and attention to gender mainstreaming in public policies and projects. She also spoke of women's solidarity and its importance in sharing experiences and learning from mistakes so that the network could become a power of proposal and a framework for discussion and implementation of ideas.

The attendees agreed on the importance of financial and logistical support at the municipal level. However, thought must be given to ways and mechanisms to make all municipalities devise solutions for citizens and implement their projects based on their resources.

At the conclusion of the day's proceedings, a session was held summarizing the decisions of the various interventions and discussions.

## The Elections

Twenty-two female members ran for elections, and a committee formed by the network's members supervised all stages of the elections, headed by Mrs. Khayriyah al-Mahdi.

On the morning of Sunday, November 21st, the final results of the elections were announced after no appeals were made, and the 71 participants unanimously agreed that the elections were fair and transparent. The results were announced in a plenary session during which the relinquishing board members handed on the torch to the elected members of the new board headed by Mrs. Nadia Abu Sriwil. The new body confirmed its intention to strengthen the role of the network and further devote the presence of women in the elected councils.