



MENA Conference

29-30 October 2015

On 29 and 30 October 2015 the MENA Conference, hosted by Gender Concerns International, in partnership with its local Tunisian partners: the Tunisian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LTDH); the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD); and the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD), was held in Tunis as part of Gender Concerns' Post-Election phase of its Gender Election Observation Mission (GEOM) of the Parliamentary and Presidential elections in 2014. The MENA Conference represented the foundation of the creation of a joint regional strategy and action plan to address the gender gaps and disparities highlighted during the electoral processes in some of the MENA region countries, after the so called Arab Spring revolutions. The conference was also a key moment for the Civil Society Organizations to elaborate and present a wider regional action plan for lobbying their respective Governments for greater Gender equality and participation in the democratic process. Representatives from across the MENA Region, including Morocco and Libya, were in attendance.

During this two-day event, the main purpose of this regional conference was emphasized as the goal to encourage and connect civil society organizations across the MENA Region in joint efforts and expertise to effectively advocate and lobby for Gender equality electoral reforms. It has been shown that advocacy and lobbying initiatives are far more effective if Governments and policy makers are involved in the drafting process, and by working closely with Ministries and the National Election Commission Organizations. The conference also acted as a pioneer initiative which will serve as the foundation for the successful implementation of all future strategies.

On the first day, participants presented challenges to gender equality specific to their respective countries observed during election observation missions, with the second day being dedicated to the discussion of critical issues raised before, but with the target audience encompassing a far wider spectrum of public representatives. Gender Concerns International took the opportunity to honour Ms. Halima Jouni of the LTDH, as part of the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize award winners, the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet. As the Chief Guest, the Tunisian Minister of Women and Family Affairs, Ms. Samira Merai Friaa, made important points regarding women's political participation, including the following:

- Horizontal parity in voting lists is crucial to successful gender equality.
- Decision makers from concerned ministries and civil society are expected to take part in the inclusion of women in the political process and to facilitate access to practical and concrete measures to guarantee women's full democratic participation.

As a result of the conference, the following points were highlighted as the most important considerations:

- a) Cultural considerations, including the overarching patriarchal structure of society, need to be central to all initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality, as women continue to face discrimination at all levels because of their presumed position within a specific culture.
- b) All ruling democracies must be based in notions of gender equality and participatory governance.
- c) The shortage of women candidates needs to be addressed.
- d) The lack of infrastructure, adequate transport, and access to polling stations remain some of the biggest obstacles to achieving gender inclusive participation.
- e) Achieving vertical and horizontal parity is an essential part of realising full gender participation and gender equality.



