



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT
ASFARI INSTITUTE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY
& CITIZENSHIP
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة

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Nationality Law Reforms Needed Across the Middle East-North Africa Region to Uphold Women's Equal Citizenship

Beirut, Lebanon – Civil society leaders from across the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region called for nationality law reforms to amend provisions that deny women equal rights with men. Speaking at a March 6 event at the American University of Beirut's Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship, issue experts from Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya, as well as representatives from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights (GCENR), drew attention to the wide-ranging harms caused by gender discrimination in nationality laws. Experts emphasized that these discriminatory laws not only hurt affected persons and their families, but inhibit sustainable development and negatively impact society as a whole in affected countries.

Asfari Institute Director Lina Abou-Habib opened the event by honoring the late Jordanian women's rights activist and human rights lawyer, Asma Khader, a regional and global leader in the fight to end gender discrimination in nationality laws, in addition to other critical gender equality issues. Ms. Abou-Habib added:

"These conversations around legal reforms, conversations around 'taboo issues,' conversations about everything that is not going right in our communities, in our societies, have started with Asma's voice. She has moved so many important taboo conversations from the private domain to becoming political issues and part of social dialogues. She was a driving force not just with her intellect and her commitment but also with her passion and her kindness."





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Catherine Harrington, GCENR Campaign Manager, highlighted that fourteen of the twenty-four countries globally that deny women's right to confer nationality on their children on an equal basis with men are in the MENA region. Algeria is the only MENA country to uphold women's equal right with men to confer nationality on a non-citizen spouse and on their child. Ms. Harrington added:

"Ninety percent of countries in the world uphold women and men's equal right to pass nationality to their child. Seventy-five percent of countries globally uphold citizens' equal right to confer nationality on a non-citizen spouse. Nationality law reforms to uphold gender equality should not be feared, but embraced, because it is not only the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do. You cannot effectively support women's empowerment, combat gender-based violence, or achieve sustainable development, without upholding gender equality in nationality laws."

"My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family" Campaign Manager, Karima Chebbo, initially paid tribute to Lina Abu-Habib, the first to launch the campaign for women's equal citizenship rights in Lebanon and the Arab world, and then to Catherine Harrington, who, in partnership with the regional campaign, followed up to turn the demand into a Global Campaign. Ms. Chebbo discussed how reforms implemented in the past twenty years by Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia – all of which uphold women and men's equal right to confer nationality on their children – benefited from the "My Nationality is a Right for Me and My Family" regional campaign's work in partnership with civil society actors across MENA.

Underscoring the harm caused by discriminatory nationality laws, Ms. Chebbo noted *"Women carry their children for nine months, give them life, but can't give them citizenship. What is this discrimination that is not only against women, but against entire families?"*

Bahraini writer and researcher in humanities Dr. Mona Abbass Fadhel talked about the findings in her latest book *The Right of the Bahraini Mother to Confer Her Nationality to Her Children*. Dr. Fadhel highlighted Bahrain's obligations under international human rights law, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and the need for the nationality law to uphold full equality between men and women. Dr. Fadhel added, *"Only giving certain rights without the right to nationality is not enough. Citizens, men and women, need to have their full rights in order to be equal citizens of their country."*

Najlaa AlFarisi, Executive Director of Al-Runaq Organization for Women and Children and coordinator of the "Libyan Women Married to Non-Nationals, We Want our Rights" Campaign, spoke about efforts in Libya to advocate for equal nationality rights, including the latest two campaigns "My Right to Vote" and "Your Daughter." Ms. AlFarisi added, *"The 'Your Daughter' Campaign was successful in bringing different factions of Libyan society together and demanding equal nationality rights [for women],"* resulting in some recent positive developments, though the need for additional reforms to uphold gender-equal nationality rights remains.

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Ansam Abayechi, a Regional Gender Advisor at OHCHR's MENA Regional Office, discussed how at the birth of modern states in the region, legislation including nationality laws did not include women. While today:

“All the myths given by some decision makers regarding discrimination against women in nationality laws are unjustifiable. Today, women in the region exercise their full obligations as citizens and take their responsibilities, but when it comes to obtaining their full rights, then there is an obstacle.”

Ms. Abayechi added that OHCHR MENA's latest campaign on equal nationality rights in the region identified influential actors in society and worked with them to shed light on the issue in order to lay the foundation for reforms.



Suhaila Al-Aasam, Vice President of Iraqi Women's League, discussed recent efforts by civil society organizations and activists in Iraq to form the “My Name is My Mother's Name” Campaign, which advocates for the right of children of Iraqi women to be registered in their mothers' names and acquire their mother's nationality. Suhaila noted that such reforms would not only uphold women's equal rights, but *“will solve the issue of the children of Iraqi mothers and foreign fighters.”*

Ms. Chebbo underscored that ending gender discrimination in nationality laws is a question of political will, which can be resolved if political leaders are willing to act. She further noted that,



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today, women play a major role in electing parliaments and governments, but their representation is hindered by legal discrimination against them. *“There is no more urgent priority today than full, equal rights for women and their right to confer nationality on their families on equal basis with men.”*

The event also served to launch the first edition of [“Munasara”](#) Magazine published by Muwatin Media Network and GCENR. The magazine was developed with the contributions and support of more than thirty journalists, civil society organizations, and activists from across the region. This first issue of the magazine focuses on the issue of discrimination against women in nationality rights in the MENA region through the lens of affected persons and gender equality activists. It tells the stories of past and ongoing advocacy efforts by communities to build momentum for reform in several countries, including those where women secured the right to confer nationality on their children on an equal basis with men and those where some steps toward reform were taken.

Abbas Taleb, GCENR coalition coordinator and Muwatin Associate Director, noted that: *“The most brilliant takeaway from this magazine is that in each of the countries that discriminate against women in nationality laws, people are pushing against this discrimination. This shows a great deal of belief in their rights”*



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