

Women enter Egyptian politics with help from church-sponsored program

CAIRO, Egypt - Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., claimed she put 18 million cracks in the glass ceiling to women's electoral participation during the U.S. presidential primaries. In Egypt, the glass ceiling is much lower, yet a church-sponsored program is helping a handful of courageous women chip away at the restrictions of a political culture that would otherwise exclude them.

Fatheyah Abdel-Rahman is one of the pioneers. Before she ran and won a seat on her local council in the Asyut region of Egypt, she didn't even know the local council existed. When she announced her candidacy for a council seat early this year, many in her village, including some of her relatives, criticized the 57-year-old for treading in territory where women are not supposed to trespass. But during her campaign she talked about everyday issues such as how local corruption was creating bread lines and letting the very poorest go hungry - issues she said male candidates tended to ignore.

Her strategy worked. Abdel-Rahman was elected in April, and by September she made good on one campaign promise by inaugurating the village's only health clinic.

"Although I'm the first woman on the council, they have welcomed me. I have a voice," she told Catholic News Service. "I've got the respect today of people who used to mock me. There's a new vision in our community. Men and women come together in my house to talk about the future of the village."

Abdel-Rahman's political career was launched after she participated in political

awareness training sponsored by Catholic Relief Services, the U.S. bishops' international relief and development agency.

For years CRS has worked with women in microfinance programs, and the agency decided to upgrade the empowerment of women from the economic to the political arena. Working with two local Egyptian groups for the last two years, CRS sponsored seminars on political awareness for women who participated in small-loan programs. The seminars focused on the nuts and bolts of democracy: how to register to vote, how to get a voter ID card, how to file for office, how to support each other during the campaign.

Eleven thousand women participated, and they selected women from their midst to pursue electoral office. Forty-eight actually initiated the process of registering their candidacy. Five of them made it on the ballot. Of those five, three won.

Laila Ahmed, project manager for CRS, said the meager number of women elected does not reflect the campaign's objectives.

"Our goal wasn't to get women elected. Our goal was to increase the participation of women, so that women leaders would emerge in the community and run, whether they won or not. We were lucky to have three winners in such a difficult environment," she said.

A U.S. government official whose agency has provided funding for the program said it is now widely accepted that if change is going to happen in poor communities, it will start with women.

"Many philosophers and political scientists say you judge the quality of a society by the quality of the life of its women. And when you raise the quality of life of its women you raise the quality of life for all," said Hilda Arellano, mission director of the U.S. Agency for International Development in Egypt, during a September

ceremony honoring the newly elected women.

Earlier efforts to increase women's participation in Egyptian politics peaked in the '70s. In 1979, Egypt adopted a law guaranteeing women a quota of seats in the national legislature. Yet that was rescinded in 1986, and Egyptian lawmakers have rebuffed recent efforts to once again provide a minimum number of seats for women.

A more conservative cultural ethos is behind the resistance. The spread of Wahhabism, a conservative form of Islam that Egyptian migrant workers have brought home from Saudi Arabia, clearly has reduced the cultural space for women.

"In the past, women were more engaged in politics. But today, despite all the economic development in the country, some people are becoming more conservative and don't want women to participate," Hoda Sayed, another of the newly elected women councilors, told CNS.

Some women who tried to run for office received enthusiastic support from their families, Ahmed said, but others faced violent opposition.

"One husband threatened to beat his wife or burn down the house if she ran. Another came home with the papers to register her candidacy, but her husband ripped them up and said he would divorce her if she insisted. Some other women came up against competition from male members of their own clan, and tradition wouldn't allow them to compete against a relative in the election," Ahmed said.

She said the problem does not lie with Egypt's government.

"The government tries to encourage women to participate. The problem isn't the government; it's the people. The government isn't going to keep us from practicing democracy. The problem is that some men are difficult to persuade. Some of the

women were prevented from running by the male clerks who receive the papers (they need) to file to run as a candidate. These men would keep asking for more papers, even though that's not legal," she said.

The women are setting all sorts of new trends. Sayed, a 34-year-old widow, also decided she wanted to go back to school to learn to read, so she started attending some of her children's classes.

"My kids were embarrassed at first to have their mother sitting with them but now they are all right with the idea. Now they help me prepare for exams," said Sayed, who is pushing the council to sponsor a literacy program in her village.

"Women make better politicians because we're closer to the people than men. We feel their suffering," said Abdel-Rahman.

Effectiveness could also be a campaign plank for Egyptian women.

"The men are watching us. When we opened the clinic, many people were surprised by the speed with which we got it approved and established. And so now they're asking why the men couldn't make it happen before," Abdel-Rahman said.