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International NGO Collaborates with Lebanese Groups to Advance Women's Rights

Fresh data on the status of women in Lebanon will be made public at conference

BEIRUT—The second phase of an innovative project to propel the efforts of local nonprofits working to improve the standing of women in the Middle East and North Africa region will be launched in Beirut, Lebanon today.

The Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa (SWMENA) project acquires scientific survey data to accurately identify and properly address the areas of greatest need for women in the MENA region. The second stage of this endeavor is to deliver the data to local nonprofit advocacy groups or individuals and train them to use the information to better advance their goals. Lebanon is the first country for which this data is available. The survey findings will be made public on February 18, at the end of the two-day conference during which local Lebanese groups will receive training.

“We are very excited to begin this second phase of the program. Accumulating the data was empowering because it allows us to see very clearly the areas where women in the region lacked equality or support. Now we can begin training nonprofits to address and improve those areas of need,” says Rola Abdul-Latif, research officer at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES).

The SWMENA project was initiated in March 2008 as a collaborative effort between the Middle East and North Africa division and the Applied Research Center (ARC) at IFES, the world's premiere election assistance and democracy promotion NGO. IFES is also collaborating with the Institute for Women's Policy Research to create the survey instrument and subsequently analyze the data. The main goal is to work with local stakeholders and encourage them to use solid data in their advocacy efforts in order to bring more credibility to their demands, become more effective at advocating with policymakers and through the media, and build their own local data collection and analysis capacity.

SWMENA is currently collecting data in three countries -- Lebanon, Morocco, and Yemen -- but the project's overarching goal is to improve the status of women in the broader MENA region by strengthening local NGO capacity to effectively advocate on behalf of women in these countries.

Preliminary findings from the Lebanon SWMENA survey have provided much insight, including how much support exists for the introduction of gender quotas in parliament, the rate of female political participation, the introduction of an optional civil marriage law in Lebanon, and reform of laws governing marriage and family, among other things. The survey has also collected new data in other key areas including women's economic participation, social autonomy, and access to healthcare.

The conference in Beirut will be attended by more than two dozen local entities.

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The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) is the world's premiere election assistance organization, providing countries with technical advice and tools to run democratic elections.