

Women's issues in Djibouti

By **HASNA BARKAT DAUD**

MINISTER FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN AND FAMILY PLANNING



HASNA BARKAT DAUD is a lawyer by profession and one of three female ministers in Djibouti.

The Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Family Planning was set up in 2008, and since then it has played a key role in empowering and promoting the involvement of women in the political and socio-economic spheres, as well as encouraging their participation in Djibouti's overall development process.

Djiboutian women are making slow but sure progress in participating in public life, and although they are still under-represented, their presence is growing in the structures of political decision-making, and they are increasingly visible in local and regional government.

Even before the ministry was set up, the government had begun implementing policies and programmes to improve the position of women in Djibouti, as well as signing up to several international and regional agreements to promote the role of women.

Djibouti has a national policy for the promotion of women, children and vulnerable people. Civil society, NGOs and other international actors are involved in all levels of its drafting and implementation.

A year after the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1999, a delegate had been appointed to review and analyse all of Djibouti's gender-related policies. Since then, the ministry has evolved into an autonomous department charged with promoting and protecting women's rights. The ratification of the Convention sparked a transformation in Djibouti that has changed the landscape of the country.

Further progress has been made since that ratification. Before 1999, women's political participation was almost non-existent, with no history of women having been elected to political posts throughout the country's history. Major legislative reforms, therefore, were necessary. In 2002, a law had been adopted implementing a series of quotas – including a minimum requirement of 20 per cent of high-ranking official posts to be held by women.

By 2003, seven women had become members of Parliament; today, three ministerial posts are held by women and a woman has been elected as head of one of the country's four major political parties.

Education: the key

The key to improving the role of women in Djiboutian society is education. Since 1999 basic primary

education for all young people has been compulsory, and Djibouti had seen a resulting increase both in girls' basic and secondary education over the last 15 years: The government continues to support the increased attendance of girls through scholarships, material support and other targeted measures.

Meanwhile, programmes now exist across the country to augment general literacy in English and French, benefitting many women. Additionally, the government has implemented a literacy strategy through non-formal education that seeks to reach rural populations – which made up the bulk of Djibouti's illiterate people.

Major legal reforms will also improve women's access to the judicial system. Among others, the reforms include a new judicial assistance law and the creation of "roaming courts" in rural areas.

Changes to the law are also helping to eradicate the practice of female genital mutilation. Given the deep anchoring of this tradition in our society, the only way to bring about change is with the full support, commitment and participation of community chiefs and other traditional leaders.

In the area of health, the country is working to improve the quality of life for vulnerable people. Women and children's health is the cornerstone of the national health policy, and many new programmes had been put in place. Djibouti has adopted measures decentralising the health system and provided free health care throughout the country.

Sadly, there has been a trend towards the feminisation of HIV/AIDS in the country, with 56 per cent of infections now occurring in women. In response, programmes for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission have been instituted and a national strategic plan has been created to fight the scourge of HIV and other transmitted diseases.

Djibouti is focused on keeping women at the centre of development in order to end poverty and foster sustainable development. To those ends, successive social development initiatives are underway. Our country is aware of the need to further eliminate discrepancies between men and women, and is working to implement the principle of parity throughout a wide range of Government policies: The effect has been that of a quiet revolution to modernise our society. **F**