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Jordanian Women's Political Participation: On the Verge of Arab Spring

By Abdulhalim M. Al-Adwan¹

Abstract:

Recent decades in Jordan have witnessed considerable changes in women's roles in the political sphere and in the community. Jordan has passed, modified, or adopted legislation that fosters the rights of women and the abolition of discrimination against them. Women experienced real visibility in higher leadership positions with 10.8% in the lower house and 11.7% in the senate. Yet, while women earn higher levels of education, their participation in the labor market is relatively low, and those who want to join the labor force meet higher levels of unemployment. Although women have made real progress in the public sphere, their participation is still modest and needs to be fostered and enhanced. More needs to be done to educate Jordanian women on political participation, and on overcoming various obstacles that hinder their efforts towards more visible and effective roles.

Key Words: Jordanian women, political participation, Arab Women.

Introduction

Political participation is not merely during elections of parliament officials and/or government activities, but includes holding key positions and participating in activities that affect the decision processes that shape individual and community life. Women's participation in political activities is among the most important issues that Jordanian society currently faces. Since the early twentieth century, Jordan passed through several stages that reflect the prevailing political atmosphere, be it restrictive or responsive. In recent decades, women's roles in community and public life have witnessed crucial changes thanks to the contribution of women's movements.

These transformations have been supported by the Jordanian government in response to the many calls to grant more attention to women's issues rather than to ignore them. Women's active presence in the public sphere is essential in community and societal development. Government actions such as the adoption and ratification of conventions on the rights of women and on human rights in general, were in response to global pressures and calls to update old laws and eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. The present study discusses various developments in Jordanian women's participation in major government and community structures up to the Arab Spring.

Jordanian and international legislation and women's empowerment

Decades ago women's requests focused on the rights to health, education, and employment. Later, they included demands for positions in higher levels of leadership and participation in community and political parties. Women's voices and efforts brought considerable change in the views of the community and the state to the point of acknowledging that equality between men and women in public life should exist in compliance with what the Jordanian constitution states: that all Jordanians are equal before the law, and that there should be no discrimination of rights and duties regarding their race, religion, or language.

Developments in Jordanian legislation and the recent constitutional amendment (2011) clarify that the term 'Jordanian' in the constitution encompasses "all men and women

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without discrimination.”² Women were granted the right to participate in parliamentary elections as voters and candidates, according to the royal decree in 1974 and other Jordanian legislations. The National Strategy for Women 2006–2011 focused on a major section of legislative changes to grant more equality and justice to women.³ The aim was to comply with international and Arab conventions that Jordan signed and ratified to affirm its commitment to human rights in general and to women's rights in particular. The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) and the concerned government institutions worked together to implement them. Women continue to demand improvements in the legal system to achieve the maximum level of justice and equality, and are ready to take on leadership positions that for so long were denied them because of social restrictions, especially in the case of women from the lower socioeconomic class.

The contribution of women's organizations

Jordanian women were present in public before the establishment of Transjordan in the early part of the Twentieth Century. They joined men in rural and *badia* areas (semi-desert) in agricultural tasks. Soon after the establishment of Transjordan they worked as nurses, teachers, and in volunteer work. Jordanian Society has included both Muslims and Christians for hundreds of years, but Christian women were pioneers in establishing organizations such as the Young Women Christian Association and Women Solidarity Organization that served ethnic and racial groups, and that later served local communities.⁴

More and more women's nongovernmental organizations developed until the Jordanian Women's Association was established in 1974, in collaboration with UNFEM, to support women's participation in political decision making. The Business Women and Career Club (BWCC) was established in 1976; it conducted many workshops and conferences in its main headquarters, and its branches supported women in elections and political participation.

In order to solidify their organizational efforts, the General Union for Women's Organizations (GUWO) was established in 1981. It includes organizations, societies, and local women's committees. The purpose of establishing GUWO was to solidify the activities of women organizations in order to be more efficient and effective in their work. Also GUWO is in line with government policies and views in general. Currently there are around 100 women NGOs throughout the country affiliated with GUWO. They work on women's empowerment through literacy, income-generating projects, legal and human rights literacy, and political participation.

In addition, in 1992 the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) was established by the government of Jordan. In 1996 this commission was authorized to be the official reference point for various women's activities. Coordination and planning committees, as well as local subcommittees, were established as affiliates of JNCW.

The Noor al Hussein Foundation, established in 1985, concentrates on projects that empower families in general and women in particular, while the Jordan River Foundation (JRF) focuses on improving the social and economic conditions of women by establishing and executing income-generating projects. JRF also has pioneering work in combating child abuse and neglect. These organizations play a vital role in supporting women's endeavors in all political, social, and economic levels; they achieved goals like the participation of women in political life, and continue to empower them to run for higher leadership positions.

² Government of Jordan. The Jordanian Constitution Article (6), for the Year 1952.

³ Abduljaber, H. (20-21 January, 2004). Jordanian Women's Rights in Legislation: Reality and Ambitions. In the Workshop on Democracy in Islamic Countries: the Jordanian Experience. Organized by International Affairs Society and the Center for Islam and Democracy in Washington, DC.

Jordanian Women in Legislative Bodies

Women were given the right to vote and to be elected in the 1974 constitutional amendment, but actually participated for the first time in the voting process in the supplementary election in 1984 to fill in the seats of those who were deceased or those who resigned.⁵ When it came to an elected candidate, only one woman won a seat in parliament in 1993.

The failure of women to win parliamentary seats in 1997 came as a shock, and they pushed to put more pressure on the Jordanian government to implement the Beijing Protocol in order to ensure equality and nondiscrimination. The response of the government was positive in that it passed Election Law number 17 for the year 2003 in which 6 seats were assigned to women in the lower house of representatives. In 2007 the quota was increased to 12 seats for women out of 110 seats.⁶

With regard to the upper house (senate), women's participation came first in 1978 when three women were appointed in what was called at that time the National Consultative Council. After democratic life resumed in 1989, one woman was appointed in the senate, and women's representation increased in subsequent councils to reach 9 members in 2010.⁷ In spite of social and legislative obstacles to women's membership in parliament, women challenged traditional thinking and made considerable progress.

The Executive Authority

Women's participation in government is considered to be the main entrance to attaining equality and ensuring that gender issues will be addressed. Percentages in the participation of women in politics increased, for instance, from one minister to four. Jordanian women reached the position of active deputy of the prime minister;⁸ they also hold the position of general secretary of several ministries. Many women are principals, counselors, division heads in several departments and government institutions. Based on the study conducted by the Jordanian National Commission for Women in 2010 on gender consideration in the public sector covering 81 ministries and government institutions (72, 32% of total public institutions), women constitute 44.9% of all government employees, while only 17% are in managerial positions, and only 10% occupy higher level leadership positions.⁹

Even though the participation of women in higher leadership positions remains limited, their involvement has made a difference in challenging the norms and changing the stereotypes society has of women. Some women view themselves as equal to men, with strong abilities and competencies. As a result, society has become more tolerant of women in leadership positions and top managerial jobs, and will want to enhance their emancipation toward equality.

Women's Participation in the Judiciary

Jordanian women had no role in the judicial system before 1996, the date when the first female judge was appointed. Since then there has been a considerable increase in the

⁵ Al-Adwan A. M. (2001). *Political Pluralism in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 1989-2006*, Vol. 2, Pp: 466-467.

⁶ The National Report on Women's Progress toward Justice, Participation, and Equality, 2010-2011, pp. 92-97.

⁷ Al-Rashdan, N. (2000). "My Experience in Political and Women's Public Work," In Horani, H. *Arab Women and Political Participation*. Amman: New Jordan Center for Studies, p. 385.

⁸ She was Dr Rima Khalaf Al-henaidi.

⁹ The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) (2011) *The National Report on Women Progress toward Justice, Participation and Equality, 2010-2011*, Pp 22-24 and 116.

number of female judges holding positions at various levels. Women are now presiding Judge, civil district attorney, and Attorney General of Amman, and internationally, one Jordanian woman judge was appointed by the UN to international Criminal Court, she was Justice Taghrid Hikmat.¹⁰

For a woman to be a judge is a debatable issue in Jordanian society. As well it was traditionally debated. Therefore accepting women in the judiciary system was not an easy thing. The reasons for this difficulty is mainly due to the issue of intermingling with men, and due the stereotypical views that women are emotional and may not stand situations were serious crimes are discussed. Nevertheless, women participation in the judiciary system was increased due to several factors including women achieving higher levels of education, gradual and increasing participation in economic and public life, and with the influence of women and human rights movements.

Women's Participation in Diplomatic Corps

Women succeeded in overcoming various obstacles in the field of diplomatic relations, like higher competition for these positions, the reluctance of husbands and family members for their women to work abroad. A woman participated in the Diplomatic Corp in 1970 as honorary ambassador. Since then, the Executive Branch has been appointing women ambassadors to France in 2001, and in 2006 to Britain, Italy, and USA, as well as appointing the first woman Head of Mission and a Commissioner of Ministers. Currently several women hold various types of positions at the diplomatic corps, including advisors, secretaries, and attaché and one woman in the position of Assistant Secretary General at the League of Arab States

Women's Participation in local Municipalities

Women's participation in local municipalities is considered to be one of the most important experiences in political, social, economic, and service fields. Even though women didn't have the right to vote or be candidates for the municipal council based on the 1955 law, amendment number 22 in 1982 granted them this right for the first time in Jordan.¹¹ Nine women won municipality council membership and only one woman won the post of mayor. In addition, twenty-three women were appointed by the government in Jordanian municipalities.¹²

In the elections of various municipalities there was an impetus for broader participation of women. Eight women won the elections and twenty-five were appointed as members, and only one woman was appointed mayor.¹³ In 2003 the representation of women in local councils widened to ninety-nine members, meaning that one woman was appointed in every local council. In addition to the appointed members, five women won their seats through the elections. In 2007, law number 14 on municipalities' elections granted women 20% of councils' members. This change brought 211 women by quota while 20 women won in the free elections. In 2011, amendments to the law brought an increase of the quota to 25%. These legal changes came about because of women's movements' pressures; without such quota women may not have achieved meaningful representation.

¹⁰ The National Report on Women Progress, Pp: 121-123.

¹¹ Al-Horani, H. (2004). "The Current Conditions of Jordanian Municipalities and their Developmental Role." In *Issues of Civil Society*, Vols. 21-22. Amman: New Jordan Studies Center. Pp: 17. And Hmaisat, A. Municipalities' Law number 29 for the year 1955 and the amending laws for the year 2005. In *Parliament Message* no 56, June 2003, P. 51.

¹² Barakat, L. 9 (2003). "Jordanian Women and the Experience of the 14th Parliamentary Elections." *The Parliament Message*, Vol 12, No. 50, September 2003, p. 51.

¹³ The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). (2010). *Jordanian Women in Municipalities' Councils*, pp: 107-109.

Women's Economic Participation

Women's economic empowerment and independence are key to their participation in political and community life: they make them visible to society. In Jordan, women's participation in economic activities is relatively low compared to men, and is considered the lowest in countries of similar socioeconomic conditions.¹⁴ Currently, their participation in the labor market is 14.7% with a high unemployment rate of 21.7% compared with 10.4% for men.¹⁵ These numbers lead women's movements and activists to call for the creation of a legal and institutional environment that will help to overcome the poor participation. Several measures were enacted including amendments to relevant laws and regulations, the introduction of lending schemas and initiating income-generating projects in local communities.¹⁶

Nevertheless, and in spite of continued efforts to improve women's economic conditions, there are no economic structuring programs; there is a mismatch between education and labor market, issues of minimum wage, lack of job security in the private sector, expatriate workers, and traditional social values that may limit women's economic participation.¹⁷ In addition, women carry the burden of several family and social roles including care of household and children. Traditionally, women are confined to specific professions such as health and education, and do not receive proper education and training to prepare them for employment in other professions and positions such as higher managerial and leadership positions.

Women's Participation in Political Parties

In the '90's women were a small percentage in the total membership of political parties and leadership bodies. This is due to the lack of development in the political party life and the lack of governing legislations for this purpose. Jordan went through a long period in which political parties were banned and memberships violated the law. This restriction impacted Jordanians of both genders when it came to joining a political party. After the return of democratic life in 1989, women became moderately involved and began to take on their political roles. They constituted around 5% of the founding constituencies and leadership bodies of political parties in 1992-1993. This number grew to 7.5% in 35 parties.

In 2007, law number 17 raised the minimum number required to form and license political parties to 500 members. This condition led political parties to seek wider participation of women, resulting in an increase of 27.8% in 2008. In 2009 and 2010 this figure moved up to 29.9%. In absolute numbers this means that there were 3285 women in the general assemblies of political parties, and only two women reached leadership positions in two political parties.¹⁸ Even with the presence of a few female activists in political parties and movements like Arab Spring, the percentage of women's participation is still

¹⁴ The Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) (2011) The National Report on Women Progress toward Justice, Participation and Equality, 2010-2011, Pp 56-57.

¹⁵ JNCW. (2012). National Strategy for Women, 21012-2015. Amman: JNCW.

¹⁶ Shtaiwi, M. (2008). The Economic Marginality of Jordanian Women Amman: UNFEM and the Jordanian Center for Social Research.

¹⁷ Al-Marashdah, K. (Ed.) (2010). Women in Jordan Labor Market, 2004-2009. Amman: Women Work Directorate/Ministry of Labor.

¹⁸ JNCW. (2011). The National Report on Women's Progress toward Justice, Participation and Equality, 2010-2011, pp: 103-105, and JNCW (2012). The National Strategy for Women, 2102-2015. Amman: JNCW, and Government of Jordan, Ministry of Interior/Political Parties Directorate. (2007). Report on Political Parties.

exceptionally low compared to men's, and instead of increasing it began to decrease since 2011.¹⁹

A study by the National Center for Human Rights in 2004 on political parties showed the decrease in the women's participation in political parties; it also showed the reasons that have been hindering women's entrance in these parties which include:

- The general political climate during the last few decades
- Women being physically exhausted, especially working women.
- Lack of social support for women from the community
- Lack of knowledge on legal and human rights, political rights, and labor and family law.
- Lack of trust in the political parties' role.

Women's Participation in Professional Unions

Women's participation in professional unions varies according to the type of union. In general, women constitute 20% of members, with very few in lead positions, like in two unions: Jordanian Bar Association and Pharmaceutical Association.²⁰ It was estimated in 2011 that out of 48937 union members women were 11275, representing 27.6%. However, their participation in union councils was very low. The majority of women members are in the Engineering Union, and a notable presence in certain professional unions.²¹

These unions were catalyst in leading women's movements and introducing women to public life, including in the legislative and social spheres, in ministries and public institutions, and in civil society institutions. Professional unions also played a major role in defending human rights, democracy, and social development. Professional unions have the added value of qualified and well educated members with significant financial power and influence over their constituencies. Political parties severely lack such advantage.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, Jordanian women achieved noticeable progress in terms of participating in public life though it may not be satisfying to them. Jordanian government policies, in accordance with constitution and laws, and also in compliance with Jordan's commitments to conventions and declarations on human rights, and on women right in particular, paved the way to secure a positive and supportive environment for women's active participation in political and public life.

In addition, the efforts of women's movements and those of civil society organizations brought real change to prevailing traditions and culture. Several laws and regulations that used to hinder women's progress were changed and replaced with appropriate alternatives. However, there are still more obstacle that stand in women's way. These obstacles can be summarized as follows:

- Traditions and customs that view women as dependent and followers, and cannot be on their own.
- The lack of trust in women's abilities in leadership, in taking responsibility.

¹⁹ Jordan Reform Center and Haweya Center (2012). Reform in Jordan. Report supported by the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation.

²⁰ Al-Rai Newspaper, June 2005.

²¹ Such as nursing (56%), pharmaceutical (54%), agricultural engineering (38.8%), dentistry (34.7%), Jordanian Bar Association (20%) and Medical Association (16%). See New Jordan Studies Center (NJSC). New Jordan Studies Center (NJSC). (2011). Civil Society in Jordan: its Structure and its Regional and Sectoral Distribution. Amman: NJSC (2011). Amman: NJSC. See also The Jordanian National Commission for Women (2011), The National Report on Women's Progress toward Justice, Participation and Equality, 2010-2011, p. 25.

- Competition with men on scarce resources, specifically on leadership positions.
- The adverse impact of the women's quota in parliament which inhibit any emergence of women's leadership at the national level.
- There are also some personal factors that contribute to women's reluctance to enter political life:
 - Women's inadequate political education and awareness
 - Poor participation of women in economic life
 - Lack of coordination of various women's organizations
 - Pressures of home and work demands

Recommendations

Experience shows us that fast and quick steps without adequately preparing the surrounding environment may result in reverse outcomes. It is of utmost importance to Jordan and to Jordanian women to activate laws that enable them to reach their full potential, and that may remove obstacles that hinder their active contribution to development. Efforts at the community level should accompany legal reform. Laws by themselves may not achieve the planned results. More work is needed to change attitudes that still hold negative views on women as active members of society.

Social and cultural change is not an easy task. It needs time, efforts, and perseverance. Therefore, the government needs to show continued effort and care, and more specifically, women's and civil society organizations need to preserve and increase their gains. Women should seek more opportunities for a wider and effective presence in all aspects of their community. They should solidify their active presence in political parties, in community organizations, and in all walks of life, and gain relevant knowledge, skills and experiences that enable them to be active members in their society.