



Talking Politics

Women play a vital role in bringing about a positive change in the political culture that prevails in the Kingdom. Nonetheless, the number of women entering politics remains abysmally low. *Living Well* talks to **Roula Attar**, resident country director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Jordan.

Can you tell us about the National Democratic Institute and your role within the organization?

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that has supported democratic institutions and practices in every region of the world for more than two decades. Since its founding in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to establish and strengthen political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government.

As NDI's country director in Jordan, my role is to design and implement technical assistance programs that support local needs and that respond to the priorities of Jordan's political leaders, activists, and institutions. I first began my career with NDI in Washington in 2001, and relocated to Amman in 2004, to establish the institute's field office.

Tell us more about the National Democratic Institute's activities and work in Jordan.

NDI has implemented programs in Jordan since 1993, and maintained an in-country presence since 2004. Throughout this time, NDI has worked with political parties, women's groups, civil society organizations, parliamentary blocs, and the media to address such issues as the political participation of women, the promotion of political pluralism, and the strengthening of civil society. With the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), NDI is currently working to help establish representative and sustainable political systems and institutions that are truly participatory, open, and trusted by the Jordanian people.

What is the Women Helping Women (WHW) initiative and what is NDI's involvement?

Women Helping Women (WHW) Network, it is the first Jordanian initiative of its kind, dedicated to supporting women's candidacy for elected office. Members of the network, currently totalling over 600, are individuals who are committed to recruiting, supporting, and funding viable women candidates; helping them build and run effective campaigns, training the next generation of political activists, and mobilizing voters to help elect women candidates across Jordan. The network also aims at raising awareness of the importance of women's political participation and enhancing the capacity of Jordanian organizations to serve as support and resource groups for women that are active in politics. The network was



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launched in November 2006 by NDI, with support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and is currently in the process of becoming an independent Jordanian organization.

Would you agree that society and the media often represents the political field as a strictly male domain, and that it both directly and indirectly discourages women from political participation?

The political field in Jordan, and anywhere else really, is male dominated. Society and the media in this case simply reflect the reality of the situation and this

in turn, contributes to sustaining society's overall lack of support and conviction regarding women's political participation. That said, I do agree that the media's portrayal of women in politics, when it occurs, is far from positive. Women ministers, members of parliament, and activists rarely receive any media coverage for their efforts, and when they do, it is usually both negative and lacking in substance and depth. Because of the smaller number of women in public office compared to men, the media spotlights and scrutinizes them simply for being women, when such scrutiny is never faced

by their male counterparts.

Is there anything that can be done by the individual to help change this view?

While it is difficult to change established societal views, especially among older demographic groups, each person can help improve perceptions regarding women's political participation in Jordan by modelling positive behaviour and supporting at least one woman that they know. It is also especially important for children and young people to be exposed to success stories and strong models of women in public life. Parents, families, teachers, and mentors all have a responsibility to plant such positive seeds now so that the next generation of voters is more supportive of women in the political field.

Would you agree that leaving women out of politics is a means of disempowerment in today's world; if one does not have a say in political decision-making, one does not really hold any real power or influence?

The issue of women's exclusion from decision-making positions is not a simple issue of disempowerment and is not only related to women. In fact, when women are not well represented in political institutions, it is society as a whole that suffers and, in turn, the country. Women are more inclined to tackle such priority issues as education, health, and the environment when in office and as such, they act on behalf of families and groups and contribute to the country's overall progress and development. Unlike men, women don't seek public office because of power or influence; they get into politics to make things better and to improve themselves, their families, their societies, and in turn, their countries.

Leaving women out of politics doesn't simply disempower women; it actually stalls development and is detrimental to an entire nation's well-being.

Can you tell us a little about the recent trends in women's political participation in Jordan? Have there been any notable improvements or indications of change?

The 2007 parliamentary elections in Jordan revealed a shift in social norms that may precede an important change in Jordanian political culture. Women are at the forefront of a seeming new political phase, serving as agents of change in a society where older tribal male figures have long dominated every facet of daily life. By actively participating in political life and elections, women are competing for power that is traditionally concentrated in the hands of few individuals. They are breaking down traditional practices

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that have long hindered democratic development and progress. Recent favorable legislation and an unprecedented level of participation by women in

the 2007 elections have signaled a new era for the participation of women in Jordan's political life. In the November 2007 elections, 199 women ran for parliamentary

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What does the NDI have to offer young women who are not directly involved in politics but want to increase their political awareness and participation?

As the largest segment of Jordanian society, youth have the potential to play a significant role in the country's political future. Engaging young women in politics is especially important as it allows them to recognize the potential for their future political leadership and helps sow the seeds of gender equality among future leaders during the earliest stages of their political careers. NDI will soon launch programs to strengthen the participation of women and youth in the 2011 elections. Through these projects and also through the Women Helping Women Network, young Jordanian women can receive training on political leadership and campaign skills, attend policy forums to enrich their political education, volunteer to support women candidates, contribute to regular publications on women and politics, as well as get involved with nation-wide civic campaigns on electoral advocacy. There are endless opportunities to become more active in politics and NDI's programs are simply one way to gain the skills and resources needed to do that. ■

office, four times the number of women who stood for election in 2003, and 25 percent of the total number of candidates. Of these women, seven were elected to serve as members of parliament, including the first woman ever to be elected outside the formal quota system. Unlike previous elections, women candidates were visible in their 2007 campaigns as they reached out to large segments of the population in all 45 electoral districts. At the local level, a 2007 municipality's law allocated a 20 percent quota for women in elected municipal councils – a result of persistent advocacy efforts on the

part of women's organizations. The new law resulted in the election of more than 300 women councilors, a dramatic increase from past years. Despite these advances, however, Jordanian women continue to face serious challenges as they seek elected office. Tribalism, the absence of a culture of political fundraising, voter apathy, weak political parties, and a general lack of practical experience in campaign skills and tactics remain critical obstacles for women who aspire to elected office in Jordan.