



## WOMEN HELPING WOMEN

Jordanian Women's Election Network

October - December 2008

by Roula Attar

### Why Women? Why Now?

In recent years, local, regional and global efforts to engage women in the political process have multiplied and there now exists an unprecedented focus to achieve the full and equitable participation of women in government and politics. In Jordan, women now have reserved quota seats in local and national legislative bodies and hold key ministerial posts. They also have access to awareness and training programs, as well as creative initiatives such as the Women Helping Women (WHW) Network, all of which have been designed with the overall goal of strengthening their political participation.

It is not unusual for many of us these days to be invited to several activities a week that address women's issues, sometimes even on the same day. Support for women's political participation is often explained as an integral part of human rights and attributed, quite simply if I may say, to the fact that "women are half of society." The question of "why women, why now?" is one that merits a more detailed and comprehensive answer, however, as it impacts society as a whole and not just half of its members.

Women leaders have profound positive and democratic impacts on communities, legislatures and in the lives of citizens. For democratic governments to deliver to their constituents, they must be truly representative, and women must be equal partners in the process of democratic development. As activists, elected officials and constituents, their contributions are crucial to building a strong and vibrant society. Specifically:

- Women are highly committed to promoting national and local policies that address the socio-economic and political challenges facing women, children and disadvantaged groups.
- Women are particularly effective in promoting honest government. Places where women are supported as leaders and at the ballot box have a correspondingly low level of corruption.
- Women are strongly committed to peace building, as they often disproportionately suffer the consequences of armed conflict. Reconstruction and reconciliation efforts take root more quickly and are more sustainable when women are involved. By helping women become participating members of a democracy, one can look to mitigate conflicts or stop conflicts before they begin, and
- Women are strongly linked to positive developments in education, infrastructure and health standards at the local level. Where rates of gender development and empowerment are higher, human rates of development and standards of living are also higher.

These facts are the real reason why all of us support women's active participation in politics and why women must continue to be trained, encouraged and empowered to become strong politicians, community leaders and activists. The exclusion of women from political and decision-making processes threatens societies' progress and puts a real strain on countries' development and stability. On the other hand, the benefits of including and engaging women are simply indisputable.

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#### ■ WE DO

**Parliamentary Affairs:** Temporary Political Watch List for the Year 2008

**Political Party Affairs:** Women in Political Parties, awareness train on Political Parties

**Municipal Affairs:** Governmental Services Project, train on Finance  
Municipality, Municipal Reform, and Governance in Municipalities

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**Regional / Global News:** News from Morocco, awareness with Regional  
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## Parliamentary Affairs

The Launch of "It is Your Right to Enjoy Fair and Equal Rights" Signature Collection Campaign for the Ratification of the Temporary Personal Status Law for the Year 2001

Amman- WHW Newsletter

Under the title "It is your right to enjoy fair and equal rights," a campaign to collect electronic and handwritten signatures started weeks ago to gather support for the ratification by parliament of the Temporary Personal Status Law for the year 2001. The campaign is implemented by the Queen Zein Al Sharaf Institute for Development (ZENID) in cooperation with the Jordanian National Forum for Women, the National Center for Culture and Performing Arts, the Association of Social Development Centers, and with financial support from Freedom House.



It is worth mentioning that support committees were formed with experts on human rights and women's issues, as well as lawyers, to draft the legal text of "the petition" that will include amendments to the Personal Status Law.

Nuha Mehrez, Manager of the Women's Empowerment Program at ZENID, had stressed on the Institute's efforts to persuade decision-makers and parliamentarians of the importance of the "project" by meeting with them and collecting signatures from all over the Kingdom, with the goal of changing the law from a temporary one to a permanent one, and to publish it in the official gazette.

The project also works to garner support from mosque preachers and encourages them to raise the local community's awareness of the issue through addressing it in Friday sermons, as well as disseminating awareness messages at the national level. The project focuses on endorsing several temporary articles in the law, specifically the following five articles:

- Considering the dangers of early marriage, especially for girls, the project advocates for keeping the amendment that raises marriage age for both males and females to 18 years and that raises the age for those allowed exceptions from 15 to 16 years.
- The project advocates for sustaining the women's right to divorce, and for increasing the alimony amount in the case of "imposed" divorce to correlate with the length of the marriage, in addition to amendments concerning multiple marriages, where the judge should ensure that the man is financially able to take on another wife and to cover her dowry, as well as obliging the man of informing the second wife that he is married to another and inform the first wife of the multiple marriage contract afterwards.
- The project supports the endorsement of the article pertaining to the alimony of a working wife, to prevent her from being used by the husband and from submitting to his moods if she has a legal job and had obtained her husband's previous consent to work.
- With regard to custody rights, the project calls for endorsing the article as it was stated in the temporary law with the mother having an equal right to see the child and where the judge instead of the procedure officer has the right to decide the time and place of seeing the child based on the child's best interest, in order to sustain the relationship between the child and his mother and his family and to maintain cohesion and avoid putting the child in the midst of any conflict.
- Finally, the importance of endorsing the law and empowering women. Empowerment requires acknowledging women as vital and equal members of society. Empowerment also aims at changing gender relationships in the family and society through raising awareness and improving the status quo.

## Political Party Affairs

"Events and activities held in the governorates are the most important tools for attracting women and youth to political party work"

Yusra Abdulhadi: "For us to achieve our goals, women have to stop fighting other women"

Dalal Ashour: "The Ministry of Interior's decision to provide financial support to political parties changed the wrong perception of party work"

Amman- WFFW Newsletter

Head of the Women's Committee in the Jordanian Unified Front (JUF) party Yusra Abdulhadi asserted the importance of sequencing in strategic planning in her party and emphasized that the Jordanian woman in her party "does not encounter any kind of discrimination, instead, she has the space to work and enjoys everyone's support, at a time when women in other parties complain about discrimination and face difficulty in achieving their partisan and political ambitions."

Speaking of the mechanisms that the JUF uses to attract women and youth, she said: "we meet weekly, and within transforming sessions that are organized for women, we explore ways to empower women and parties, among other issues. The party also holds monthly seminars for women and youth and we offer and up with several new women members after each seminar."

She explained that as Head of the Women's Committee in the party, her responsibilities include following up on women's and members' issues in all governorates, making periodic visits to the governorate branches, meeting with party members and activists in various areas, as well as organizing regular seminars and workshops to encourage women's participation in parties."

Abdulhadi pointed out "the good and continuous turnout of women to join the party. The number of women members in the party is considered good compared to other parties: there are more than 300 women in Amman, 100 members in Aqaba, 50 in Karak, and 50 in Irbid, and the number is continuously increasing in all governorates." In conclusion, she also called upon women to support women and to stop fighting themselves to women would get what they aspire to at all levels.

As for Assistant Secretary General for Women's Affairs in the Du'a party, Dalal Ashour, she spoke of the many techniques that the party uses to attract women and youth, such as taking advantage of having a women's association at the party's premises and the meetings organized by the party with this group of women to promote the party's work and encourage them to join, in addition to field visits to the governorates to conduct workshops and seminars in order to introduce the role of the party in the country's development process and its prosperity. She also mentioned that the party especially focuses on university students and either meets with them in universities or invites them to participate in various party events.

Ashour spoke of the negative view that many societal groups have regarding political parties, including women. She emphasized the importance of changing this image and expressed that the Ministry of Interior's decision to provide financial support to parties contributed to changing existing misconceptions about party work.

When asked about her reasons for joining a party, Ashour spoke of her belief in the importance of the party, as well as the fact that she aspires to achieve many things through party work. She added that "my voice as a woman will be heard through the party, at a time when it would be difficult for that to happen if I was working alone."

## Study: Citizens Demand that Political Parties Fulfill their Role in Reforming Society

AdOustour – December 15, 2008

**The following is a summary translation of AdOustour newspaper's coverage of the results of the focus group research on public perceptions of political parties, conducted by Al-Mashreq Al-Jadid for Research and supported by the National Democratic Institute (NDI).**

AdOustour – A study conducted by Al-Mashreq Al-Jadid for Research, in cooperation with three Jordanian parties and the National Democratic Institute, reveals citizens' perceptions and expectations of political parties in Jordan. The study shows that citizens' key priorities are education, unemployment and health issues, with political reform falling after those. This is partly attributed the harsh economic conditions in which Jordanians live, rendering unemployment, education and health as major concerns.

The study shows that citizens demand that "political parties assume their major role in conveying the public's needs to the government, achieving reform in society, and providing services to people." Additionally, many think that parties are able to govern the country if given the opportunity, while most think that political parties as well as the government are responsible for the country's affairs.

The study also reveals that the limited presence of political parties in people's lives is a major factor that affects their opinion about the parties' role in public life. Citizens would like to see parties reach out to citizens to learn about their needs and concerns, while some maintain that parties are a means to fulfil "personal" agendas, and not to serve the public interest. The study also shows people's concerns with regards to the weak representation of women in political parties, and the fact that parties are distant from youth, although young people are more apt than other groups in society to be active in political parties.

Dr. Mohammad Abu Baker, the Secretary General of Du'a Party, said that "the study concludes with a number of recommendations including: adopting new strategies to reach out to citizens, building confidence between parties and the media, conducting educational fora and seminars, paying more attention to citizens' needs, and training party members on communication skills, as well as upgrading parties to attain a level that qualifies them and prepares them to take part in government."

For his part, Dr. Hazem Qashouf, Secretary General of Al-Ressalah Party, called for organizing events to discuss the study's findings, and for expanding the scope of research to include people from different backgrounds and age groups.

## Municipal Affairs

### Grassroots Advocacy Project: Enhancing Citizens' Political Participation

*"It is important to familiarize ourselves, as elected officials, with citizens' needs and follow-up with advocacy to solve them. I fully support you (the North Village Center for Training and Project Management-NVCTPM) and promise to continue to move these issues of concern to the parliamentary sessions and the government."*

MP Aser Al Shudman at a meeting with NVCTPM on Saturday, November 29, 2008

The National Democratic Institute's (NDI) grassroots advocacy project aims to assist civil society organizations to foster a political mentality in which citizens and local communities play a central role in the decision-making process.



NVCTPM Volunteer Surveys Local Residents on Issues of Community Concern November 2008, Inhaha Village

The project helps to empower local civil society organizations (CSOs) to assume responsibility for acting in an organized and constructive manner on behalf of their community interests and work towards creating a political discourse that puts citizens' interests at the front line. NDI's training and program activities are designed to increase citizens' understanding of democratic principles, facilitate citizens' involvement in identifying the issues that most affect them, and support direct interaction between citizens and public officials to address these issues.

Through this project, NDI is delivering focused knowledge and skills to four local CSOs in four different governorates outside of Amman: Jordan Valley Center for Comprehensive Development (JVCCD), North Villages Center for Training and Project Management (NVCTPM), Karak Castle Center for Consultations (KCCC) and Hayat Ajlaba Center for Training (HACT). During the first two months of the project, the four CSOs engaged other local CSOs and civic activists in their towns and villages and recruited more than 60 volunteers to conduct their respective surveys on identifying grassroots issues of concern, in the largest effort of its kind in Jordan. CSOs surveyed a sample of 2,368 out of a total of 16,330 households in 22 villages in their four respective municipalities. It is estimated that they reached out to more than 6,000 citizens during their survey distribution as evident by their reports, copies of questionnaires, databases of CSO volunteers and databases of households that were surveyed. In addition, the four grassroots CSOs held six separate roundtables that brought together representatives from tens of civil society representatives and ordinary citizens to brainstorm on and debate their respective communities' needs and priorities. The roundtables are aimed to support the CSOs in the process of identifying the issues of grassroots concern as well as to help build local consensus and partnerships in advance of upcoming advocacy initiatives.



HACT Coordinator Trains Volunteers on Questionnaire Distribution, November 2008, Ajlaba

The four CSOs have already received endorsement from their respective mayors and governors. In a speech at Parliament on November 13, MP Aser Shurman reflected on NVCTPM's efforts to identify issues of community concern: as a good example of CSO work and stressed upon MPs' responsibility to reach out and adopt these issues. In addition, Princess Basma bint Talal attended HACT's training of volunteers on November 13 in Ajlaba and expressed her support and favorable impressions of the Center's enthusiasm and efforts. She also commended HACT and its volunteers for serving their local community through this project and stressed on the importance of working on the grassroots level. The media has also covered CSOs' advocacy activities and positively helped to introduce the project's goals to the Jordanian public. In this regard, *Gerassa News Portal* ([www.gerasanews.com](http://www.gerasanews.com)), *Jordan TV* and *'Yaum Jalil'* newspaper ran positive and supportive stories of the projects.

In 2008, CSOs will continue to engage their local communities to target and advocate for a host of grassroots issues including employment, education, public services, infrastructure, and the construction of new schools.

### A Delegation from the Arab Women Regional Network of Metropolis Visits Al Fuheis Municipality

A delegation from the Arab Women Regional Network of Metropolis / Regional Office-Amman visited the Municipality of Fuheis last November in the framework of the "Local Networking Program", which is being implemented by the Network with the aim of providing an opportunity for women municipal council members to exchange experiences in the field of municipal work. The program includes visits to municipalities in Jordan to learn about best practices and accomplishments.

The delegation included Greater Amman Municipality (GAM) council members Ms. Myassar Al Sa'idi and Ms. Samia Al Seifi, in addition to a number of women heads of directorates and regions in GAM, including:

Engineer Jawaher Obeidat, Director of Baqr Al Jadeidah region; Engineer Fadwa Abu Gheita, Director of the Training Center; Engineer Eman Al Ma'aytah, Director of the Research and Development Department, and Ms. Eman Al Sarayreh, Head of the Legal Unit, in addition to the Network Director Ms. Anwa Baigari and Ms. Farouq Al Ja'afreh, Assistant Director of the Pavements' Department.

The delegation met with Al Fuheis Mayor Mr. Jerjes Sweis, Mayor's Deputy Ms. Alvira Jreissat, and municipal council members Ms. Siham Qa'war and Ms. Alaf Mada'ben, as well as a number of experts in the municipality. Participants also toured the old village and the archeological sites which are planned to be renovated and touristically revived.

The Network's director stated that "Al Fuheis municipality was selected so as to learn about its pioneering experience in increasing its budget's income through enforcing its rights and upgrading its services, as well as to learn about the experience of women council members since the municipality's council includes three women, including a Deputy Mayor who competitively won her seat."

For his part, Mayor Jerjes Sweis emphasized the active role played by women council members, saying that "the presence and engagement of women create a sort of balance in work, especially since women are less influenced by personal interests and corruption." He also discussed with the participants several areas and projects that the municipality is working on, including putting forward a comprehensive plan for the municipality to achieve its vision so that Al Fuheis becomes a "green town" that showcases its heritage. Women council members highlighted the support they have received since they were elected and pointed out that they haven't faced any challenges at the societal level.

The Network is one of the regional offices of the Women International Network of Metropolis. It has been hosted by the GAM since 2004, and it started its work with the support of Her Royal Highness Princess Basma Bint Talal. The Network aims at improving the participation of women in local administration and decision-making at the local and regional levels.

#### The Women Knowledge Network / Nashmiyat

The Women Knowledge Network / Nashmiyat was established by the Local Governance Development Program (LGDP) and was launched under the patronage of HRH Princess Basma Bint Talal in October 2008. Nashmiyat brings all female council members in Jordan together, with the aim of creating a platform for coordination and knowledge exchange between them. The name Nashmiyat was chosen by the members themselves in the preliminary regional meetings that were conducted in all regions to identify members' needs and priorities. A strategic plan is being prepared for the Network, which will be active under the umbrella of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) at the conclusion of LGDP. The Commission will lead the implementation of the plan in cooperation with the Jordanian National Forum for Women (JNFW).



No.	Municipality	No. of Members	Head of Municipality	No. of Female Members	No. of Male Members	Women Quota	Women Quota Gender Quota
1	Shakerah	20	AbdulRazek Raafat Al Al Tal	6	14	6	6
2	Dar-Ab-Saud	11	Muhammad Farhan Muhammad Sami Ismail	4	7	4	4
3	Al-Ramtha Al-Jadida	6	Eng. Hussein Farah Khader Abu Al Ghak Al Zuh	2	4	2	2
4	Sharhabilat Bin Hussein	7	Ahmed Khamesa Saqib Saqib	4	3	4	4
5	Al-Yamouk	6	Ahmed Salah Mustafa Al Zuh	2	4	2	2
6	Talabat Fahl	7	Muhammad Al-Hamad Al-Radi	2	5	2	2
7	Al-Firafira	6	Ahmed Farah Hussein Alshakr	2	4	2	2
8	Al-Taybeh Al-Jadida	7	Muhammad Moad Al Al Qunbi	2	5	2	2
9	Al-Wasatani	6	Enad Muhammad Jaber Saad Al-Bayan	2	4	2	2
10	Al-Miyar Al-Jadida	10	Eng. Hussein Muhammad Hussein Al-Jamal	3	7	3	3
11	Miyath Bin Jabal	6	Al-Hussein Al Al Ghak	2	4	2	2
12	Al-Sani	7	Ahmed Muhammad Israr Moad Waqiah	2	5	2	2
13	Hajar Bin Al-Walid	6	Rafa Al-Rafi Hamdan Ghak	2	4	2	2
14	Bahar Hussein	6	Bassam Muhammad Asad Al-Khad Al-Sarham	2	4	2	2
15	Ghark Al-Had	11	Tayeb Farid Saqib Al-Shamali	3	8	3	3
16	Burjuni	6	Muhammad Sulaiman Al-Shawqan	2	4	2	2
17	Nabat Al-Husa	6	Waleed Araa Khalaf Al-Sulaiman	2	4	2	2
18	Al-Basrah	7	Muhammad Saad Khalaf Al-Khalafat	2	5	2	2

## WHW Network Members

**Hayat Al Massimi: "The new political parties' law and the perception of opposition party members as unpatriotic hinders the improvement of parties' performance"**

Amman – WHW Newsletter

"Based on my own personal experience, the support that the Islamic Action Front (IAF) party offers to women surpasses its support for men in many ways." This is what former MP Hayat Al Massimi confirmed in an interview with the editor of the Women Helping Women Newsletter. Al Massimi is considered the only woman ever to be elected to Parliament with the support of a political party in Jordan.



Hayat Al Massimi

Al Massimi pointed out that the IAF derives its references from Islam and believes that women's role in "enjoining good and forbidding evil" is equal to that of men. The party's literature and bylaws reflect its belief in the importance of women practicing their political role.

Al Massimi talked about the means of support that the party provides for candidates, men and women, which had been provided to her in previous elections. There is of course the continuous media support and various advertisements including posters, signs and flyers, which are handled in full for the candidate. Additionally, the party allocates a team of volunteers to assist and support the candidate on a regular basis throughout the campaign. The team is trained to handle different types of issues, particularly on Election Day, when the team oversees all arrangements for the candidate.

Al Massimi also pointed out the support provided through organizing and hosting meetings, public rallies, press conferences and other events. Financial support also comes on top of all these types of support.

The Chairwoman of the Women's Committee at the Pharmacists' Professional Association and formerly the head of the women's section in the IAF party, Al Massimi described the status of Jordanian political parties as "bad". She attributed this to several reasons including "the negative perception of parties and party activism, and deeming their members unpatriotic, as well as the laws that are restrictive of party activities, such as the new law on political parties, as well as laws regulating political life like the Election Law and the Public Gatherings Law, which restrict public freedoms and hinder the improvement of political parties' performance." Al Massimi also spoke of the high pressure placed on opposition parties and their members in the areas of employment and promotion, among others.

As for how to expand women's participation in parties and political life, the former Member of Parliament (MP) said that the best way lies in the existence of a true and mature political party life that crystallizes through a modern democratic law and transparent election procedures. This means the presence of women with political party platforms in Parliament.

As for her assessment of the performance of the current parliament, she described it as "weak or nonexistent" due to the domination of "one trend" and to the way most MPs have reached Parliament. She added that nevertheless, there are some distinguished leaders. With regard to women in the current Lower House, Al Massimi said that "except for one MP, unfortunately, women MPs do not have platforms or political party and grassroots support, which leads to a weak performance."

Regarding her participation in the next election, she said that this decision is one that involves an internal consultative process within the party, and it is not an individual decision. Therefore, it is not to be talked about now, especially after what she described as "a bad experience in the 2007 election and the fraud that took place then."

It is worth mentioning that pharmacist Hayat Massimi, who is a mother of five children, has not ceased her political and party activities after leaving Parliament. She continues to be active and participates in all of the party's central and branch activities, as well as numerous lectures and activities on women, family and political issues.



"Our goal is to change the prevailing culture and form pressure groups that work for the citizen's interest"

Engineer Sana' Bari Amer, Manager of the Northern Mazar Area

Amman-WHY newsletter

Manager of the Northern Mazar municipal area, engineer Sana' Bari Amer, was first involved with public work at university through participating in the "Youth Parliament" program, which provided her with the opportunity to interact with many women activists and civil society organizations. She continued working in this area after college, focusing on women and youth issues.



Sana' Bari Amer

Bari Amer explains that "through my interaction with citizens, I have come to realize that the majority of them do not know their rights and have a wrong understanding of democracy and the methods of practicing it. They do not have a clear idea about the importance, goals, or technicality of political party work in Jordan, which results in bad choices for their representatives in parliament and municipal councils, which in turn reflects negatively on them as individuals and also on their area."

She adds, "this is what motivated me to get involved in public work in the first place and to join civil society organizations. I wanted to serve my country and the people in my area, to work on making them better aware of what is happening around them and of their rights and duties in choosing their representatives."

She pointed that "having such a role is hard to achieve through individual work. It has to be done in an institutional manner, through a civil society organization, to have more impact." She also asserts that "our goal is to change the prevailing culture and to mobilize civil society organizations to form pressure groups that work for the citizen's interest."

Bari Amer served as a Program Coordinator in the Northern villages and participated in the AHAMEH project, which worked to better engage women and youth in elections. She also observed the last parliamentary elections and is currently working on "A Better Dialogue for a Better Future," a project supported by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), which aims to establish dialogue between community members and promote networking with civil society institutions and decision-makers at the district level.

She explained that they started working on this project a while ago, and that it is being implemented in two phases: the first phase consisted of surveys, roundtable discussions and dialogue between citizens, civil society organizations, and decision-makers in the district, in an effort to identify the issues that most influence the lives of citizens in the area, which was done by NDI's local partner, the Northern Villages Center for Community Development. The second phase focuses on "advocating for the issue that is chosen by our partners and working with decision-makers in the district to resolve it."

Bari Amer added that "education is one of the top priorities for the area, since the Northern Mazar District lacks an educational department, despite the presence of 43 schools, which weakens oversight. The majority of existing schools are also rented and lack basic facilities for students. Therefore, we are working to lobby decision-makers and have met with the Minister of Education to request that land from the state budget be allocated to build at least two schools in the area by next year, and to ask for the establishment of an education department in the district soon."

She concluded by praising NDI's role in promoting a culture of grassroots advocacy and building skills in such areas as "communication and advocacy," as well as "municipal law," among others, through training workshops and seminars that the Institute regularly conducts for individuals working on such projects in her area to raise their standards of performance and professionalism.

Winner of "King Abdullah Bin Al Hussein II Award for Work and Leadership" and the "The International Leader Award" from Schwab International

### Zainab Al Momani: A Success Story Full of Challenges and a Real Love for Public Work

Amman- WFFW Newsletter



Zainab Al Momani

"The social pioneer is not driven by financial profit, but is pushed forward by a strong genuine desire to achieve structural and continuous social change." These are the words that social activist Zainab Al Momani started her interview with.

Al Momani had founded the first women's cooperative association in her area Sakhra in the governorate of Ajlun, a rural area 80 km away from the capital Amman, which suffers from poverty and unemployment, specifically among women.

Al Momani had first established a nursery, kindergarten, and a school in 2002 to develop herself, continue her education, and help her family. While she only needed nine employees to staff these facilities, she was surprised to receive hundreds of applications from women in her area asking to work in the nursery, all of whom came from poor families and were in desperate need of work.

Al Momani says that "it was from here that the idea was born for founding the first cooperative association aimed empowering women of Sakhra economically, socially, and culturally." She added: "I wanted the association to be a cooperative one in order to distribute the profits on all contributors and subsequently have the right to implement productive projects."

She elaborated that the association started its programs with preliminary projects involving drying vegetables and removing impurities from grains and packaging them. Later on, a dairy factory and a sewing workshop were established, and a system of "rotating loans" was set for women, which enabled more than 700 women in the area to start their own small projects and to earn a good income for themselves and their families.

She added that "the real success story started here, when the idea spread across the Kingdom through the media which in turn encouraged women from neighboring rural areas to contact us and inquire about ways by which we can help them too. That is how we developed our work and founded a union for all farming women in rural areas, which was needed given the fact that low standards of living, high unemployment, abuse against women and their use in agricultural jobs, lack of awareness and culture, increase in the number of family members, polygamy, as well as non-optimal exploitation of agricultural land are common problems for all rural areas. That is how we succeeded in establishing the 'Quality Union for Women Agricultural Producers', which is the first association of its kind in Jordan and in neighboring countries."

The Union's vision is summarized in developing rural women comprehensively at the "economical, cultural, and social levels" and empowering them starting from Jordan and reaching out to rural women in third world countries and neighboring countries like Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq.

As for reasons behind the success of these projects, Al Momani explained that a new idea's progression from a small project to an advanced one requires will and determination to face challenges and obstacles, as well as studying it to find solutions away from considerations of financial profit.

Al Momani spoke of the main structural problems they have faced, including those related to their internal bylaws and the Jordanian law, which prohibits women from joining agricultural unions except in the case of owning land that is no less than 10 dunoms in area. This is a big problem because women in rural areas lack the financial capacities to own any land to begin with.

She added that "hundreds of women have come forward to join the Union but unfortunately they were refused membership, except those who were able to produce a legal proof of lease of agricultural land. We played a big role in trying to find solutions for the women who couldn't join."

Al Momani also stressed the lack of financial and moral support at the beginning and the lack of man's trust and confidence in woman's ability to manage projects in rural areas. However, the success of the projects she implemented later provided her with financial and moral support and earned her the trust and support of the community.

Following the success she has achieved thus far, Al Momani would now like establish a garden and a park in her area, as well as permanent headquarters for the Association and the Union, in addition to implementing additional collective social projects that provide increased job opportunities for women and encourage them to depend on themselves in presenting and managing projects.

Al Momani predicted that the idea will spread all over the kingdom and neighboring countries within the next 10 years, which will reflect positively on the standards of living of Jordanian women and women of neighboring countries. She also added that the success of her projects is the biggest reason for why the idea got media attention. The success of a woman in a project is the main incentive for spreading the idea.

It is worth mentioning in the end that Zainab Al Momani is the winner of the "King Abdullah Bin Al Hussein II Award for Work and Leadership", as well as "The International Leader Award" from Schwab International.

## Various Local News

### Jordanian Women Ministers under the Microscope

Al Khatsoob: "Having four women ministers in government is still a new phenomenon"

#### Amman- WHW Newsletter

Heavy criticism and in some ways political violence is what Jordanian women ministers in Nader Al Dahabi's government have faced from certain traditional movements represented by MPs and writers, due to a generally unclear societal view towards women and their participation in public life, especially in the decision-making field.



Minister of State Development  
Nader Al Dahabi

Minister of Culture  
Nancy Bakir

Minister of Tourism  
Maha Al Khateeb

Despite the fact that many Jordanian women leaders in both the executive and legislative branches of government have suffered in the past and were faced with heavy criticism and the undermining of their achievements, the four women ministers in Al Dahabi's cabinet have been faced with a higher level of criticism and challenge. Unfortunately, attacks on them have been based on personal matters rather than professional ones. For example, there was a major attack against Minister of Culture Nancy Bakir, stirred on the basis that at an official reception at the Turkish Embassy, she was photographed with a Turkish actor while conversing with the Ambassador, something that was deemed inappropriate. As Minister of Culture, should Bakir have pushed the audience away and refused to be photographed???

Critics of women ministers also go so far as to deprive them from having humanitarian feelings, criticizing them, for example, for publicly shedding tears over the death of a public figure with such a special cultural status as the deceased poet Mahmoud Darwish. And what a "terrible crime" did Minister of Social Development Hale Lattouf commit when she attended one of parliament's sessions in her training suit, not having had time to change after receiving a phone call during her participation in a "charitable marathon" asking her to rush to parliament.

Despite some people's views that the media overreacted in labeling such criticism as "attacks" on women ministers because they are "women" and that many male ministers have been subject to similar criticism, anyone who follows the political scene would see otherwise. After all, many male ministers' violations and shortcomings were kept under cover, while women ministers were put in the spotlight and both they and their families were criticized without merit.

The women ministers have used various means to defend themselves against these attacks. For her part, Bakir chose to respond to her critics directly through the media after she and her family were targeted.

As for Minister of Tourism Maha Al Khateeb, she believes that "women in the public sphere should be prepared for criticism from society, MPs, and the media," even though she admitted that a person is not always ready to handle such criticism. She added that women leaders in Jordan are under the spotlight because society is still coming to terms with the idea of having women in decision-making positions, saying that while "everyone is used to having male ministers in office, a cabinet with four women ministers at the same time is still a relatively new phenomenon."

She emphasized that "having many women ministers in government is a clear message from the higher authority represented by the King that women are Jordanian citizens who enjoy all rights and who assume all the duties of serving their country," and pointed out that "women ministers' responsibilities are greater and more advanced than those of male ministers, since in addition to the responsibilities of the position, women also have to prove worthy of the trust that has been given to them."

Al Khateeb concluded by stating that "no one, regardless of his or her gender, is immune to mistakes, and real courage lies in acknowledging the mistake and apologizing for it when it happens. However, if someone gets criticized for no justifiable reason, then he or she has the right to respond to critics as they see fit."

Basic Talk: "Women in Reform Documents and Initiatives" - Dr. Orabi Al Rantawi  
November 13th, 2008

AdDustour Newspaper - translation of the original Arabic piece

A joint invitation from the International Institute for Women's Solidarity and the Jordanian Association for Freedom and Democratic Thought provided us with the opportunity to have an honest dialogue about the reality of "women in reform documents and initiatives." The talk of course was focused on the Jordanian woman, and the initiatives and documents reviewed included the Constitution (the father of all laws), the National Charter, as well as "Jordan First", the "National Agenda", and "We are all Jordan". Even though some participants leaned towards a "positive view" of the humble results achieved thus far on the women's empowerment front, most of the participants believe these results to be "unsatisfactory" and short of desired hopes and expectations.

In discussing the phenomenon of "standing still and beating around the bush," the difference in points of view led to differences on what techniques and mechanisms should be used to overcome the current situation and to push the realization process forward. As far as I'm concerned, the lack of sufficient support for women's issues, rights and roles, is part of a wider, more dangerous trend of stalling the overall political reform process, and there does not seem to be enough will or effort to overcome that.

The truth resulting from a valid contradiction in the Jordanian context is that women have really achieved astonishing advancement in higher education and access to medical treatment and preventive services. Unfortunately, however, this was not reflected in woman's political, economic, and social participation in the country. The contrast is also clear when we realize that the number of female students at universities exceeds the number of male students and that this is not reflected in a balanced presence of men and women in the labor market, businesses, unions, associations, and chambers, in addition to the limited role women play in politics in general.

For example, the percentage of women in political parties does not 7.5%, and this gets lower as one climbs the structural and organizational ladder of the party, bearing in mind that the percentage of party women whose education level is "beyond high school" is more than 82%. It is noted that the percentage of women in leftist parties does not exceed 5%, while the percentage does not exceed 6% in Islamic and pan-Arab nationalist parties, to leap to 11.5% in centrist and nationalist parties, whose membership does not stir "the culture of fear." Moreover, the membership of many of these parties is nothing more than mere appearances and names on paper.

Jordanian women's representation level in parliament is low when compared with the rest of the world. The international average of women's participation in 189 parliaments in 2008 reached 18.2%, with the Arab percentage at 8.1% and the Jordanian percentage not exceeding 6% after the implementation of the quota system. Other percentages are as high as 41% in Rwanda and Northern Europe, 21% in the Americas, and 15% in the bigger African Southern Sahara countries.

The picture becomes clearer when we realize that the total number of votes women candidates obtained in the 2007 elections did not exceed 47,000 votes, divided between 199 winners and losers, with only 12,000 votes cast for successful candidates, the same number quota winners obtained in the 2003 elections.

Nearly a year after introducing women's quota in municipal elections, the situation of women in municipalities is sad, to say the least. Women in municipal councils are marginalized in terms of the tasks they are given and the responsibilities thrown their way. Even those who win outside the quota system and were not appointed are treated as second class members, with several shameful stories being told in the regard.

The situation in unions is not very different either, with poll results indicating that only 10% of working women are members of unions, which is a percentage close to that of women in the workforce in general, which does not exceed 12%.

Women in the business field still face many challenges as well, with the percentage of companies and institutes owned by women standing at 11% of the total number. Unfortunately, many businesswomen do not even know the address of the establishments registered in their names because in reality, these are sham ownerships resulting from the desire to avoid taxes or from being married to a non-Jordanian man.

In sum, we have launched many initiatives and reform documents that have not seen the light yet and have not made it to the implementation phase. The status of women has been hit in the same way that various aspects of public life in the country have been hit, and it is in dire need of reform and modernization. So, is there anyone out there that will respond? And when, how and with what do we start?

#### Project to Monitor and Document Procedures of Women's Court Trials in Cases of Violence Against Women

The Arab Women's Legal Network (AWLN) will be monitoring and documenting women's trials in Jordanian courts that are related to cases of violence against women through attending and observing court sessions on these cases. A legal team will conduct the monitoring and documentation process and deduce findings that will be presented to a consultative committee consisting of a member of the Public Prosecution Office, a member of the Judicial Inspection Department, a member of the Criminal Court, a member of the Family Protection Unit, a member of the National Center for Human Rights, a member of the Department of Family Affairs at the Ministry of Justice and a representative of the media.

It is worth mentioning that this program is being implemented by AWLN with financial support from Freedom House.

#### New Media Initiative

As of March 2009, the Arab Women's Media Center (AWMC) will start training media representatives and youth on audio-visual media skills, in addition to techniques used by anchors. This comes after the Center recently launched its new Media Training Site, which specializes in broadcasting training and production.

The Center is also preparing to conduct a 10-day course entitled "Youth for Change," with male and female journalists from both Syria and Jordan in the beginning of February. Several qualified media professors will lecture during the course.

#### The Gender and Social Fund (GSF) launches its official website

The Gender and Social Fund (GSF) recently launched its official website at [www.gsf-jo.org](http://www.gsf-jo.org). The GSF website includes information about the Fund, its objectives, current initiatives and collaborative efforts. In addition, it contains information regarding the Fund's current contributions and local partners, including interesting stories from the field. In addition to the Fund's newsletter and publications, GSF's request for proposal guidelines and announcements are also available through the website. Interested organizations and individuals can register through the website to receive the different announcements made by GSF.

#### The Arab Women International Network of Metropolis Conducts Workshops to Introduce the Gender Concept

The Arab Women International Network of Metropolis / Regional Office-Jordan conducted a number of training workshops in cooperation with the Jordanian National Commission for Women, aimed at enhancing the concept of "gender" for female and male employees at the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM). Several women assistant managers participated in the first workshop which was delivered by Engineer Ahmed Al Zu'bi, a gender expert at the International Labor Organization. The second workshop targeted a number of male employees only. More workshops will be organized in the future.

These workshops are conducted in context of the "Knowledge Empowerment Program" which the Network is implementing for women municipal council members and employees at GAM in order to increase their knowledge through responding to their interests, which were identified through the various surveys that the Network conducts for this purpose. The Network has recently involved male employees in the program in order to improve their knowledge of different issues relevant to women's rights and human rights and urge them to initiate positive change that would be beneficial for all segments of society.

The workshops tackled the definition of "gender" as a set of roles and social and cultural relationships acquired during the early developmental state and later solidified within the family, society and various institutions. These roles and relationships differ from one society to another and one period to another. Qualitative and quantitative gender indicators were also considered, and the concept was also discussed from an Islamic perspective. The workshops were based on different exercises seeking to highlight the forms of discrimination against women in society, represented in imposing certain roles on them. Several mechanisms and procedures to combat discrimination were concluded, starting from change within one's self and the family.

It is worth noting that the Network is one of the regional offices of the Women International Network of Metropolis. It has been hosted by the GAM since 2004, and it aims at improving the participation of women in local administration and decision-making at the local and regional levels.

#### Appointment of New NDI Women's Programs Coordinator

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is pleased to welcome Ms. Noor Razzaz to the position of Women's Programs Coordinator. Ms. Razzaz started her position on January 3, 2009. Previously, she worked on women and youth programs for the Local Governance Development Program (LGDP), a project funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), administered by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and implemented by Associates in Rural Development (ARD), in close collaboration with the Ministry of Planning & International Cooperation, as well as the Ministry of Municipal Affairs. Ms. Razzaz was part of the team that planned and established the Nashriyat Network for Women as well as a youth volunteerism and training program in cooperation with Queen Zain Al Shara Institute (ZENI) for development in nine municipalities. Ms. Razzaz will now be managing the Women Helping Women (WHW) project, which is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

#### Panel Presentation and Discussion on the Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Jordan

A roundtable discussion on the "Impact of the Global Economic Crisis on Jordan" took place in Amman in December with the participation of economic researcher Dr. Khawla Isbetan, economic expert Lina Sawaged from the Jordan Investment Board, and Dr. Naheel Sagf Al Hel from the Business Administration Faculty at the University of Jordan (UJ), as well as the attendance of women civil society and political party activists and representatives. The event was organized by the Women Helping Women (WHW) Network.



The discussion was moderated by journalist and Al Quds Center for Political Studies Director Mr. Grab-Al Rantawi, who started by saying that "we have to be concerned if the crisis hits the core of Gulf countries." He added, "there are some who rejoice about the so-called collapse of the capitalist system due to the recent economic crisis and hope for some new other system to emerge." One wonders, however, about "what is the anticipated new system? It is a totally vague one and if it does materialize, will it be better than the current economic system?" He went on to point out that "most opinions given on this issue have been robbing but settlements of intellectual and political accounts between different factions. They are thus not based on a logical analysis or realization of what is to come."

As for Dr. Khawla Isbetan from the Business Administration Faculty at UJ, she asserted that "financial crises usually develop into both economic and social crises and lead to negative repercussions that multiply."

She pointed out that "Jordan is one of the developing countries that have liberated their economies by adopting open economic policies for the past 18 years and achieved good economic growth rates. Therefore, this reciprocal relation will definitely have an impact that will reflect the global economic situation and financial crisis."

Economic expert Lina Sawaged talked about the source of the global economic crisis and its relation to high-risk real estate loans, which have affected the American and global economy. She added that "the potential negative and positive effects will cancel each other and that the impact on Jordan has not been catastrophic as was the case in other countries."

Dr. Naheel Sagf Al Hel from the Business Administration Faculty at UJ addressed the impact of the economic crisis on education and its outcomes. She demanded increased monitoring of financial institutions.

A long discussion took place between the women civil society and political party activists and the panelists and there was consensus that the full impact of the economic crisis on Jordan is still unclear. There was a strong demand for increased transparency between government, citizens and the various institutions so that the effects of the crisis are clearly conveyed to all.

### Former Moroccan Minister and Current MP Najma Tay Ghazali Responds to Accusations on "Inciting Moroccan Women on Civil Disobedience and Refraining from Voting"

Amman- WRW Newsletter

An article on political aggression against women by Moroccan MP and member of the Executive Committee of the National Assembly of Independents party Najma Tay Ghazali stirred some Moroccan political circles who claimed that "she suggested taking up a form of civil disobedience and refraining from voting".

The MP stressed "I do not incite civil disobedience but the political discrimination that is still practiced against women drove me to pose methodological questions and hypotheses to get all of society, including women, to think about the negative consequences of marginalizing women politically."



Former Moroccan Minister and Current MP Najma Tay Ghazali

The former minister talked in her article about women suffering from "political violence" through a comprehensive conspiracy by a group of male politicians in a systematic manner. She also pointed out that Moroccan women have been let down politically and that equality hasn't been achieved in this area, even though the higher authority in Morocco and the majority of political parties are advocates for equality between the two genders in all fields.

Ghazali wondered in her article that "in light of such disappointment, what would happen if women declared a kind of civil disobedience and boycotted all political activities such as running for office, voting and participating in political parties over the next decade?" She also asked "what would happen if women united and completely pulled out from the political arena until balance is achieved and until men acknowledge their roles and abilities?"

She also criticized in her article "the negative role of some political parties that fail to fulfill their responsibilities towards women by operating based on self-interest that puts men first. This stems from a cultural psychology rooted in the Moroccan mentality which sees women as weak, lacking in skill, and in constant need of men's protection."

The former minister sees that there should be an "examination of the traditional public culture that disregards woman's capacity to thrive and dismisses her ability to handle local public affairs." She emphasizes "the importance of starting from this view and working hard to change it, because women who are capable of raising generations, by the admission of their grandfathers, husbands, and brothers, are also capable of bearing responsibilities."

She also disapproved of "the struggle between women themselves when seeking decision-making positions, as well as women's use of attention and compassion to get men's support". She asserts that this notion is "not a result of any oppression, denial or injustice, but is derived from her sense of responsibility and her desire to participate in dialogue and include citizens in it."

Ghazali admits that "women's political situation in Morocco is relatively good especially after the Moroccan parliament ratified in 2008 electoral legislation that guarantees women 12% representation in the next municipal polls. This is an important gain in the current situation, but is still short of the demands of Moroccan women activists striving for equality. There are protest efforts by activists such as the women's organization known as 'the third in the horizon of equality', whose name indicates its demand."

Even though she does not dismiss the importance of the above decision, she does not believe in the idea of women attaining positions through quota systems because she believes that such mechanisms disregard women's strong abilities, which have been proven in various fields.

The MP praised the Moroccan King's speech at the opening of one of parliament's sessions where, when discussing the Family Code, he asserted the importance of giving woman her proper inheritance rights as given to her in Islam and not to violate her rights and appoint someone to act on her behalf without her permission, citing Prophet Mohammad, Peace Be Upon Him, "he who is good to them is a good man and he who hurts them is a bad man."

She also praised the Moroccan monarch's request to lift all reservations that Morocco had on CEDAW on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. At the same time, she criticized women activists who follow imported models and concepts and ignore the cultural and modern heritage of their society, saying "we do not need to apply systems that are not in line with our spiritual values, especially since past experiences by Leftist, Marxist and other parties, have shown that they cannot work in the Moroccan context, and were nothing more than a waste of half a century in useless matters and side problems."

Ghazal summarized her future ambition in "achieving absolute equity between men and women in Morocco in all social aspects, without conflicting with Islamic Sharia". It is logical to acknowledge a woman's role in raising generations and her professional status when we fail to admit her capacity in the political field. This is what I wish for Arab women in general, to obtain equality and especially at the political level."

#### News from Morocco

##### King Announces Electoral Reforms to Open New Parliament Session

During the opening of the fall legislative session on October 10, King Mohamed VI declared that local elections will be held on June 12, 2009, and unveiled a new set of reforms to the electoral code. The reforms, which will be discussed by the parliament in the coming weeks, include lowering the voting age from 23 to 21, requiring only the national identification card for voter registration, increasing the number of women candidates by requiring a "zabira system" wherein no electoral list can feature three consecutive candidates of the same gender and, in a concession to larger political parties, raising the threshold for party representation from three to five percent of the vote. After completing a study of the high proportion of invalid ballots during the 2007 legislative elections, the Ministry of Interior will introduce suggested improvements to the ballot in the coming months.

##### Moroccan Women MPs and NGOs Call For Stronger Representation

On October 10, a group of women members of parliament (MPs) and ministers known as the Forum of Moroccan Women Parliamentarians adopted a plan of action to strengthen women's political participation in the 2009 communal elections. The women demanded that political actors implement a quota system outlined in the Call for Equality, a document proclaiming women's role in promoting democracy, equality and development, which received more than 700 signatures in Rabat. Nourha Skali, the Minister for Social Development, Family and Solidarity, deplored the fact that Moroccan women only hold 0.56% of communal seats and asserted women's potential to positively contribute to politics. An alliance of hundreds of women's associations met with Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi and called for an amendment to the electoral code with provisions that would guarantee women 33 percent of seats in all representative institutions.

#### Manal Al Sharif and the Ongoing Struggle of Saudi Women Journalists

Amman- WHW Newsletter

"A successful journalist is one who overcomes obstacles with words and letters and comes out with a different vision that is clearly visible in her writings". That is how Manal Al Sharif began to describe the job she adores, as editor of the "Women's Sections" in the Saudi Al Madina newspaper, as well as presenter and program producer for "Out of the Frame" program on the satellite television station "Iqra'."

Al Sharif explained that "establishing a name for women on the Saudi journalism map is a difficult endeavor and that the road is full of obstacles. However, the Saudi woman journalist's insistence on challenging the status quo and her strong dedication to her work will pave the way for her". She spoke of the main challenges she faced and that Saudi women journalists still face, which include the undermining of their journalistic abilities by institutions and officials in the workplace, as well as the lack of a framework through which they can combat that.

Al Sharif referred to her own experience once she began her journalism career ten years ago, working as a "piece contributor" in Hayat magazine, which shut down five months after Al Sharif joined. She then moved on to Al Eqtadyyah Saudi newspaper as the first woman unpaid intern for a period of six months, and then as a contributor and then "fixed" staff until she was nominated by Dr. Hafez Al Yafi to work as full-time editor in the Jeddah regional office of Al Watan newspaper, eight months before its launch.

She witnessed the birth of this newspaper and continued working there for more than 6 years after that, during which she was appointed head of the women's section. She later submitted her resignation due to disagreements with the editor-in-chief and moved to work in Al Madina newspaper in 2006 where she established the women's sections and where she continues to work, partly due to the management's support of women's leadership role.



### Bold proposals despite discrimination and a rugged road!

During the interview with her, Al Sharif spoke of various aspects of "injustice" that the Saudi woman journalist faces in the absence of a system that protects her and secures her rights. "I worked for two years in Al Iqtisadiyah and in the end, they refused to give me a reference! Even though the workload required of me was equal to that of my male colleagues, there was discrimination in title and pay."

Al Sharif also confirmed that her work in many "publications" enriched her experience both at the professional and personal levels and further motivated her to pursue her media career and to develop it. She went on to work in television and distinguished herself by taking on the bold issues of women in courts and prisons, which are usually censored, as well as such issues as drug addiction, rape, AIDS, suicide, and murder. She explored both the reasons for these problems, as well as solutions to them.

Al Sharif believes that there is a real need to establish training centers for women journalists. She pointed out that the concept of journalism is misunderstood by many in society and that this is due to shortcomings on the part of Saudi media institutions.

She also criticized the weak showing by Saudi women journalists at conferences and forums conducted outside the country, since a woman is not allowed to travel by herself, adding that "while the man seizes the opportunity to travel, he deprives his wife, sister, or daughter from it."

### Negative role of media institutions

Al Sharif also criticized the negative role that media institutions play in this field by depriving women journalists from traveling and benefiting from courses, among others, choosing instead to reserve travel and professional development opportunities to males only. The Saudi woman journalist's rights are further violated when a man working in a media institution on a "piece-by-piece" basis has the ability to influence the article more than a woman who is the editor-in-chief of her newspaper, with some men often putting their names on articles that had been written by female colleagues.

Al Sharif called for "establishing a journalists' commission that works to protect women journalists from oppression." She also demanded that "support from the Media Ministry be provided in line with what had previously been offered to women artists." Additionally, she asked Saudi women journalists to develop themselves and called on media institutions and professionals to open up training opportunities to women and to utilize their skills in the field. She hopes that Saudi women journalists will obtain better positions and that their abilities will be recognized by men after what now has been more than a 30-year struggle.

### Unforgettable memory

Speaking of the most important incidents that she has been through in her professional life, Al Sharif said "I will never forget being in New York City on September 11th. I was participating in a training course at the United Nations, and the city changed, with people running and shouting in the streets, and with pictures of lost ones placed on walls and various public places. I was one of the few Arab journalists who had witnessed that painful event that changed the course of history, especially for our Arab region." She added that "despite everyone's advice to immediately discontinue the training course and return home, I decided to stay and finish it training and was in America for six more weeks after that."

### Saudi women and politics

Al Sharif sees that "the political situation of Saudi women is still beneath the required level," explaining that "despite the fact that women are present in the Foreign Ministry and in embassies and diplomatic missions, they have not yet reached any leadership positions, even though some of them are not new to political activism. The opportunity has not come yet to fully empower women politically, but there is hope that this will be achieved in the future."

Al Sharif concluded that "political stability in the region is a key factor for the progress of Arab women because when woman enjoys security and stability, she achieves." She also called on Arab women leaders to join forces and transcend geographical borders and tribal and religious prejudice, asserting that peace is a cause that unites all Arabs.

## The Power of "Democracy"... and the Magic of "Change"!

Kholoud Al Khatatbeh

The recent American elections on November 4, 2008 saw Democratic candidate Barack Obama achieve a historic victory over his Republican competitor John McCain. Obama became the first African-American president of the United States from Springfield, Illinois, which is incidentally the hometown of the late US President Abraham Lincoln, under whose administration slavery was abolished. The true significance of this event lies in the fact that only half a century ago in America, African-Americans did not even have the right to vote.

One cannot but acknowledge here Obama's intelligence and ability to influence and attract women to participate in the election through having his powerful, well-educated wife by his side throughout the campaign. He also had a strong, respectful message for the elderly, and appealed to parents and family values when he left his campaign in critical times to visit his sick grandmother who later on passed away. This fared well with women voters in America who are known, for the most part, for deciding who to vote for at the last minute.

Obama also avoided Al Gore's mistake of not concentrating on women's issues. His previous vote in support of equal pay for women garnered him additional support, especially since his opponent McCain had voted against the legislation. Obama was also exceptional in conveying "smart" messages and he used the internet to raise contributions from small donors that ranged from \$5 to \$500 each for his campaign. He was also fortunate in choosing a distinguished team of skilled listeners and compassionate people to manage his campaign. He emphasized and repeated his strong message of "change". Each and every candidate, man or woman, anywhere in the world, can benefit from such advanced techniques.

Upon winning the election, Obama stated in front of his supporters that "change has come through these elections and that what happened proves without a doubt that anything and everything is possible in America," adding that his dream and the dreams of his ancestors have been realized through the power of democracy. For our part, we too hope that positive change will sweep our region and that our dreams of just peace and democracy will become a reality.

Obama's messages of "change" and "hope" had a magical effect on the "enraged" population. This is what I noticed throughout my stay in the US to witness the election there. I was lucky enough to be in the heart of the event and to have been chosen to represent Jordan in a program by the Middle East Partnership Initiative as one of the most prominent women leaders in the Middle East and North Africa. I was accompanied by 44 distinguished women leaders to observe the political and democratic process in the US and monitor it to gain leadership and political skills related to elections and campaigns.

In a discussion session that we Arab women leaders had with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Rice stated that "democracy will marginalize terrorists and that the presence of political space and a political structure based on freedom and hope for a better future will deter people from thinking of terrorism. Elections and freedoms will not take us back to medieval times or to the marginalization of women, but they will limit terrorist acts." Even though we theoretically agree with Rice's rhetoric, we must admit that her actions in the region contradict her words and her constant talk of democracy.

Talking about women's issues in general, Rice stated that the American woman and the Arab woman have accomplished exceptional achievements. She elaborated that for American women, being in high decision-making positions such as Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin is actually a new phenomenon since women in the US are still struggling to politically obtain their rights. She added that "the real accomplishment for a woman lies in the power of her choice and her drive to go out and achieve something special for herself. The success of the Jordanian and Arab woman lies in the strength of her choice, in the context of her society and traditions."

It is worth noting that the percentage of women's representation in the US Congress does not exceed 17%, which is a relatively small percentage in a country like America where women constitute 52% of the population. The average age of women in Congress is also higher than that of men, largely due to the unique challenges that women face. If a woman is young and has children, for example, it is more difficult for her to leave her family and relocate to Washington.

In meetings with candidates for the US Congress, I noticed common challenges between them and the Jordanian woman candidate, despite cultural differences. Sarah Palin, who ran for the vice-presidency, for example, had won her gubernatorial seat in Alaska with only 600 votes compared to 400 votes for her competitor at the time. Alaska's population was then 6,000 people, and it has since grown to 10,000. It is also worth mentioning that voter registration is the number one challenge in US elections, and it was also a significant problem in the recent Jordanian parliamentary elections.

Finally, in a meeting with Dr. Karen O'Connor, head of the Women and Politics Institute at American University and a researcher in this field, she pointed out that women's studies and policy research are interesting fields in the US and the world. A World Bank study on the Middle East has also shown that "the best way to achieve economic growth and democracy is to include and engage women in economic development."