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## Session 1:

### Empowerment of Women in Politics and Media

## Women's Empowerment and Achievements in the Arab World: The Empowerment of Women in Politics - The Jordanian Experience

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The empowerment of women has been an ongoing process for over six decades, since the establishment of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in 1946. Shortly after that date, the tragic exodus of the Palestinians from their homeland took place, and the impact was tremendously devastating to Jordan and the Arab world at large. In the absence of human security, hope and the opportunity for good education were shattered. All Jordanian girls who had been sent to Palestine for their matriculation level of education had to leave their schools abruptly and return home with utter disappointment.

Amman, the capital of Jordan, was still at the beginning stages of its development. Only elementary and secondary levels of education were available for both sexes. So women turned toward Beirut for its renowned American Junior College for Women (AJCW). However, due to the conservative nature of Jordanian society at the time, it took a lot of determination and persuasive negotiations with families for them to agree to send their daughters as far as Lebanon in pursuit of their education. Yet, AJCW had such a distinguished reputation and status as a women's college in the region that it was not long before Jordanian women could realize their dreams of higher education. For almost two decades AJCW remained an important institution in the Jordanian context. In the meantime, political and social changes in Jordan started having an impact on the way of life and people's thinking, and so the first university was estab-

lished in Amman in 1962. It was coeducational!

Naturally, the Jordanian alumnae who returned home with bachelor's degrees in the various disciplines available at AJCW, whether in the humanities, the sciences, or the arts, "broke the mold," and using their unique perspectives to bring about genuine change soon immersed themselves in the labor force. Realizing the importance of setting an example for other women, and enlightening members of their own society to encourage a new regard for human rights and equitable social and political development, many specifically chose to work in the field of education. This was a very important dimension for the empowerment of women. Since then, Beirut College for Women (BCW, formerly AJCW) graduates have proved to be highly motivated in whatever work they have been involved in — realizing that their country really needed them to make use of their education and the positive attitudes and values they acquired during their college years. They had the benefits of being away from home, making decisions regarding their own future, and making good use of the rich academic and socio-cultural diversity they had been exposed to in the Lebanese environment.

Empowering women — whether politically, socially, or economically — became more of a need that had to be addressed seriously and systematically on the national level in order [for Jordan] to keep up with regional and global changes and challenges. With the advent of the United

Nation's call for a "Women's Decade" in the 1970s as well as ongoing amendments to the Jordanian Constitution, women could enjoy the right to vote and the right to run in parliamentary elections.<sup>1</sup> However, the political situation in the country was rather complicated due to the outcome of the Arab-Israeli war in 1967. The last general parliamentary elections took place just a few months before June 1967, and from that date until the late 1980s, democratic political activities for the representation of people in legislation were almost nonexistent. Since this was rather an embarrassing situation for a country like Jordan, an alternative to parliament was formed in 1978 by appointing 70 men and women to act as a body to monitor governmental performances without the right to withhold confidence. This body, the National Consultative Council, ran from 1978 to 1984 and while women were formally included, their token representation was not up to women's political ambitions at the time. It was appreciated, however, as an official declaration of women's constitutional rights in public work and decision-making posts. Three BCW graduates out of a total number of nine women, in fact, participated in the Council throughout its six-year duration. Another positive addition to the empowerment of women in Jordan was the appointment of a woman as the Minister of Social Development in 1979, coinciding with the adoption of the national strategy of integrating women into development.

In the meantime, the Jordanian people were questioning the very important matter of the absence of a parliament. This issue was becoming more and more debated by all Jordanian activists, NGOs, and civil associations. Eventually, the general elections of 1989 took place with the active participation of women. For the first time in Jordanian history 12 women ran for election in several electoral constituents; but the outcome was disappointing for all of them, as they found out that society at all levels was not yet ready for women MPs. It was interesting to realize that women were luckier with being appointed rather than elected! People on the whole, and specifically females, did not trust the abilities of women in public work. "If there are men in parliament to defend women's rights, there's no need for women to be there..." This statement was heard from some of the male elected MPs! Yes, women in 1989 ran to the polls most enthusiastically - to vote for men!

Nevertheless, the snowball had begun rolling, and in the following general elections of 1993, one out of three female candidates made it successfully to be the first

woman MP in Jordan. But, again, four years later, the 1997 general elections proved to be a disappointment. None of the 17 women candidates made it to the House of Deputies. These elections were a setback to the advancement of women in the legislative realm versus their advancement in the executive one. In fact, while there had been an increase in the appointment of women ministers, and women appointed in other various decision-making posts in the different areas and sectors, women were basically non-existent on the electoral scene. Women were simply not getting enough votes to carry them to parliament. As a compensating measure, more women were thus appointed to the Senate (the King's Council).

In response to the urgent calls of women's groups and women's federations to increase the number of women in leadership, the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW)<sup>2</sup> was established in 1992. JNCW aimed from the start to be "a policy forum... to reflect the desire of the government to optimize the participation of women in economic, social, and political life" in Jordan. Subsequently a quota for women was passed in parliament. This was finally implemented in the recent elections of 2003, thus making it possible to have six women MPs among a total of 110. Not very impressive, I suppose, but it was the quota system that made it possible.

It is worth mentioning at this point that Jordanian women were given the same rights as men in the 1952 Jordanian Constitution, but the premise of empowering women was only adopted as a strategy for women's development some 30 years later with the launching of the UN Decade for Women. Plans of action to ensure gender equality have since been drawn up for implementation. A lot of work has actually been done so far. To cite a few examples, Jordanian laws have been amended to ensure labor rights for women, have increased access to better education and healthcare services, and for quite a while now the serious issue of domestic violence towards women and children has started to be addressed.

Over the years women in Jordan have acquired a patriotism and national awareness that have been strong motivating factors for them to work for the love of their country and to serve it to the best of their abilities. They have learned a lot from the suffering of people around them, and so they have turned toward political, educational,

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and social involvement. Generally speaking, while we are witnessing today an increasing number of Jordanian women who have contributed to and benefited from the development of the country, there remain numerous social obstacles for women to overcome in realizing their political aspirations.

First, there has been the traditional socio-cultural framework within which women function, and there lie the constraints of gender that thwart attempts at freedom of movement, individuality, and self-expression. Second, the economic status of women is a crucial factor of empowerment, success, or failure. Women, on the whole, are financially dependent on fathers, brothers, husbands, or even sons. Hence, lacking the minimal requirement of economic independence for running for election, for instance, women find themselves in debilitating and disappointing situations for any self-fulfillment and achievement. Third, despite the crucial role of the leadership (the state) in Jordan and its policies and directives in bolstering and pushing women further toward decision-making positions in society, successive Jordanian governments have, paradoxically, also implemented some measures that have not been at all supportive of increasing women's empowerment. For example, the one-person one-vote formula in the electoral law implemented since the 1993 general elections, has been absolutely disadvantageous for women in the following elections. Other examples in legislation are the Family Status Law, the Penalty Law, and the Citizenship Law, which need to be addressed seriously in order to empower women in the family framework and in society. Lastly, there are the personality traits, qualities and capabilities of women themselves that are a hindrance to their advancement due to family background and upbringing, domestic violence, male-female discrimination, and backward attitudes — all of which most, if not all the time, lead to a lack of self-confidence and a poor self image.

So, the question of what constitutes success and personal achievement for Jordanian women arises here. Have women been successful in their own endeavors, and if yes, how far have they reached? And what are the parameters of success?

Even though success is more or less relative, it must be admitted that a lot of success has been achieved in Jordan. However, I find that this success has been mostly individual. Much remains to be done.<sup>3</sup> There are still women in Jordan who join millions of women and girls around the world in a daily struggle to exercise their basic human rights. And there are still women in the Arab world, including Jordan, who are far from having attained their goals of equality, freedom, self-fulfillment, and development. And despite the statistical indications

of the high enrollment of females in schools and universities, education has not necessarily been a conclusive factor for women to obtain their fair share in their families, the work force, and the upper strata of management and policy making. Moreover, despite the laws that give women and men equal rights on paper, at the grassroots level women seem to be always lagging behind.

Women's rights are human rights and should be addressed as such. Until this is widely accepted, women everywhere, including in the Arab world, will always find themselves yearning for the attainment of those rights with the motivating motto: "...to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield..."

## Endnotes

1. There have been supportive measures on the international level for the advancement of the status of women. For example, the UN International Decade for Women (1976-1985), the Four World Conferences: Copenhagen 1980, Nairobi 1985, Mexico 1990, Beijing 1995, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) among others. At the local level: the Jordanian Constitution (since 1952), the National Charter of 1991, and the Cabinet Decree of 1992 which established the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), a semi-official entity with the mandate of: (1) Promoting women's roles in the public sphere, as well as coordinating between NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and government on women's issues, (2) Assuring the implementation of gender mainstreaming in planning in public institutions which rejected any form of gender-based discrimination, and (3) Reviewing all legislation related to women.
2. The JNCW, headed by Her Royal Highness Princess Basma Bint Talal, is a focal point for governmental institutions regarding women's concerns. Its establishment demonstrated the seriousness of the successive governments' intentions to invigorate the democratic process in an overall framework of reform. It was assigned to officially represent Jordan in all regional and international bodies and conferences relating to women. The Cabinet Decree of September 21, 1996 delegated a pivotal role to JNCW as a semi-governmental organization reporting directly to the prime minister — thus given the authority articulated by the Beijing Platform for Action — to act as the primary focal point for the government in all areas related to women's affairs. It played an active role in training female candidates in preparation for the 2003 parliamentary elections. The 1999-2003 plan is a gender mainstreaming initiative at the national level for gender equality. A very significant contribution of the JNCW in empowering women was the municipal elections of 2000 — first by appointment and then by elections. It was an accomplishment at the grassroots level of local governance.
3. See report on the Status of Jordanian Women (UNIFEM), Arab States Regional Office, 2004, Chapter 3, pp. 47-61.