

Towards the Political Empowerment of Jordanian Women

Executive Summary

In Jordan, in terms of political empowerment, women find themselves significantly marginalized. The major gains that they achieved in terms of educational status have yet to be translated into gains in political status. The question remains: how to understand the factors that have created this weak political empowerment and how to develop a strategy to address that concern.

The main argument of this report is that to be effective, such a strategy to promote women's political empowerment will need to recognize the linkages between issues and different target groups. In other words, whether one aims to change negative attitudes towards women's empowerment, or to strengthen positive trends, the issue of target groups is central. It is true that 'society as a whole' can be considered as a target group particularly when addressing the negative perceptions that society holds towards women and women's political empowerment, which run across society. But a strategy that fails to respond to different sub-groups in society is likely to be over-simplistic and ultimately ineffective. For this reason the survey which was conducted for this study considered differentiated factors such as age, gender and education to be useful in defining different target groups.

It is often assumed that women as a whole are a 'natural' target group for programmes to enhance women's political empowerment. However, this study reveals that this is not necessarily a wholly reliable assumption. In some ways, many women demonstrate 'prejudice' against women in much the same manner as do men, though admittedly to a lesser extent. In this case, when aiming to change negative attitudes towards women, it might be more effective to target 'society in general' (i.e. men and women).

Differences between men and women are evident, however, in terms of their attitudes towards changing the existing rules and regulations in order to offer women increased opportunities for political empowerment. In this case, women demonstrate more willingness than men. Thus for future potential positive trends in terms of women's political empowerment, women generally represent a better target group than men.

Overall, the survey reveals that youth represent the most responsive target group. Among all age groups, they consistently demonstrate the least prejudice against women's empowerment. The younger age group was also the most eager to provide women with an opportunity to achieve greater political empowerment by supporting change in the electoral law and an increase in the quota for women in parliament.

The survey reveals that the role of education in shaping public attitudes toward women and women's political empowerment was more ambitious. At best, its role proved to be a mitigating factor but not a determining one. This highlights the need to strengthen gender-sensitivity in the education system in order to reduce society's prejudice and negative attitudes towards women's empowerment.

Structure of the Report

The report covers three major topics: first, women and international instruments of human rights; second, Jordan's position in respect of these instruments; and third, how women's legal status has

been affected by these instruments. The report also identifies areas of legal concern relevant to the legal status of Jordanian women.

The report also examines the status of women in Jordan in other areas including education, health, economic empowerment and the family. The report recognizes that considerable achievements have been made in terms of improvements in women's status, but nevertheless highlights areas of particular concern in respect of women's health and economic status.

Chapter one serves as an introduction to the political system and political processes in Jordan. The historical background to women's political participation and involvement in the political process is also provided. Chapter two provides a detailed analysis and assessment of women and parliamentary life. The chapter notes that the achievements of women candidates have so far been very modest.

Chapter three examines the reasons behind this limited role of women in the formal parliamentary political process. This analysis in this chapter is informed by the findings from a survey which was carried out specifically for this report. The sample and methodology used in the survey are available in the appendix of the report. The issues identified as contributing to the obstacles facing women's political empowerment include the degree of prejudice expressed by Jordanian society towards women and women's political empowerment. Other issues examined are the impact of the family, education, tribalism, and the media on women's political empowerment.

Chapter four sets the foundation for addressing the constraints which have limited women's ability to achieve greater political empowerment. A central concern is how to address the prejudice exhibited by society towards women. Other issues covered include addressing political apathy, which tends to affect women negatively. A recommendation concerning reform of the electoral law to enhance opportunities to increase women's political empowerment is suggested. The chapter also discusses the issue of the skills needed by women to be effective candidates, as well as the relation between these skills and the different target groups.

Chapter five, "The Journey Ahead", provides specific recommendations for short and longer term interventions to increase women's political empowerment. These can also serve to generate indicators against which to evaluate progress towards gender equity. These recommendations are based on three assumptions: first, the importance of identifying target groups; second, that addressing public perceptions towards women is an important but not sufficient factor related to achieving women's political empowerment. This leads to the third assumption, the need to address issues of direct relevance to political empowerment in general and also to women's political empowerment in particular. The chapter also recommends actions to address weakness within the electoral law and the political party system.