

Politics & Beyond: The Need for a Holistic Approach to Empower Women

In this paper, [Suha Ma'ayeh](#) discusses the legal, social and economic barriers that hinder the participation of Jordanian women in politics. She also argues that it is important to look beyond the modest measures designed to increase the political representation of women.

Introduction

Jordan is seeking to boost the representation of women in the decision-making process as the country embarks on an ambitious drive to modernize its political system. Having more women in politics could indeed lead to democratic gains and make women's voices heard. It would also depict Jordan as a progressive country dedicated to improving women's rights and boost the country's image on gender equality issues globally.

Jordan, however, remains until now far from reaching that goal. The path remains riddled with challenges as a result of a patriarchal system, social norms, limited female participation in the workforce and a slew of laws that discriminate against women and sideline their role in society.

The Government's Recent Measures Are Not Enough

Last year, the government took several measures intended to empower women in politics, in response to recommendations proposed by a committee appointed by the King.

But without a broader approach that addresses the social, legal and economic barriers that hinder their participation in politics, those measures carry the risk of remaining mere window-dressing.

Laws governing political life were promulgated in April and May 2022. A new election law made it mandatory to include at least one woman on the electoral lists. It also increased the female quotas from 15 to 18 seats in the future legislature. Moreover, the new Political Parties Law stipulates a minimum 20 per cent of women as founding members.

Additionally, the government made amendments to the constitution in an attempt to grant women equal rights to men. It finally included the word “Jordanian Women” (*Urdiniyat*) to the title of the second chapter of the constitution so that it reads, “The Rights and Duties of Jordanian Men and Women”.

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Prior to the latest constitutional amendments, the government tried to encourage political parties to become more receptive to female candidates. In the last parliamentary elections in 2020, the Council of Ministers announced amendments to Article 12 of the Financial Contribution System in Support of Political Parties No. 155 of 2019 to provide financial incentives for parties that included women and youth candidates on their electoral lists. The amended article stipulates that a political party that nominates six candidates in three voting constituencies receives 20,000 Jordanian Dinars (or 28,000 US dollars). Another 15 percent were added to that amount if women or youth candidates under the age of 35 were included.¹

In the 2020 parliamentary elections, 360 women ran for elections out of 1,674 candidates, up from 258 women in the previous elections which took place in 2016.

The incentives encouraged 73 women to run for the first time in political party lists. Unfortunately, they did not succeed in winning any party seat.

The requisite 15 women were elected, down from 20 in the previous parliament. Nevertheless, the increase of women candidates signaled that women were still eager to have a voice.

Women Underrepresented in Politics

In October 2022, King Abdullah appointed three more women to the Senate, bringing the total number of females to ten out of 65 members of the upper house of parliament.

Around the same time, the government of PM Bisher Khasawneh also increased the number of female ministers in cabinet from two to five in the fifth reshuffle to the government since it was appointed in October 2020.²

It is not that common to have more than a few women in ministerial positions. But in 2018, the government of

¹ نظام المساهمة المالية في دعم الأحزاب السياسية رقم (155) لسنة 2019.pdf (moppa.gov.jo)

² https://petra.gov.jo/Include/Inner-Page.jsp?ID=46007&lang=en&name=en_news

Prime Minister Omar Razzaz set a precedent when it appointed seven female ministers.

The latest increase in the number of women in the senate and in cabinet is a positive step but it does not reflect a consistent policy towards including more women in politics. In fact, according to the Council of Foreign Relations' 2021 Women's Power Index, Jordan ranked 128th globally in the 'Political Parity Score'.³⁴ Moreover, according to the July 2022 Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum, Jordan ranks 125th out of 146 and 136th out of 146 in terms of 'Economic Participation and Opportunity' and 'Political Empowerment' respectively, even though the country ranks 66th out of 146 in terms of 'Educational Attainment'. This indicates that despite Jordan reaching regional parity in secondary education, it still lags behind in terms of political empowerment compared to countries such as Saudi Arabia (132), Lebanon (110), Tunisia (68) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (30).⁵

Mixed Messages

The government seems to be sending mixed messages. Promoting women's political empowerment while undermining their rights at the same time is counterproductive.

A child rights bill endorsed by parliament in September 2022 with amendments to article 17 will inevitably limit the role of women in society. The article deprived mothers from having a say in decisions concerning their children's education and left that role only to fathers or male guardians.

Not to mention that the subordination of women is already embedded into the laws. For example, under Article 8 of the Nationality Law, Jordanian women married to foreigners cannot pass their citizenship to their spouses and children.

Besides, the Personal Status Law discriminates against women. A divorced woman loses custody of her children if she remarries and women who receive alimony need their spouses' approval in order to work.

³ The political parity score is an aggregate measure of the representation of women in a country's government

⁴ Women's Power Index | Council on Foreign Relations (cfr.org)

⁵ *WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf (weforum.org)

Lack of Economic Empowerment and Other Obstacles

The slow progress in women's participation in politics is also linked to economic empowerment. Sadly, women's participation in the labor force stands at only 13 per cent,⁶ one of the lowest rates in the world of a country not at war, according to the World Bank. Jordan is also the third lowest in the region. Iraq and Yemen lag behind, with female participation in the workforce standing at 11 and 6 per cent respectively.

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Low wages, harassment and gender-related biases in hiring, the burden of childcare and the lack of access to decent transportation are among the main reasons that prevent many women from joining the workforce. According to the World Bank, the gender wage gap for women and men working similar jobs with similar education and experience is about 17 percent in Jordan's private sector.⁷

Furthermore, the fact that many women aren't financially independent limits their ability to launch their own campaigns and engage in politics. Not

to mention that Jordanians in general cast ballots for tribal candidates, while a patriarchal system makes it difficult for women to win through direct competition. Besides, women who ran for elections faced political violence and were either electronically harassed, cyberbullied, or verbally abused because of their gender.

A study conducted by the Jordanian National Commission for Women showed that almost 65 per cent of women who assumed public and political positions experienced some form of gender-based violence.⁸ The study, which surveyed 287 women, found that violence was highest among elected women, with 72 per cent exposed to political violence.

It is not easy to change social norms in a patriarchal society. Despite changes made to the school curricula, women continue to be stereotyped. Politics for the most part, is not considered a women's domain. It is not common to have female ministers in unconventional ministerial posts. But a few women stood out. The highest position was assumed by former minister of planning Rima Khalaf in 1999 when she was also appointed as a deputy prime minister.

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=JO>

⁷ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/publication/state-of-the-mashreq-women>

⁸ shorturl.at/oCSU6

What Needs to be Done?

Increasing the participation of women in politics requires a holistic approach to empower them economically, eliminate laws that discriminate against them and beef up efforts to stem all forms of gender-based violence including political violence.

The government and civil society also need to join forces in order to address the core issues affecting women, such as patriarchy in society which hinders women's participation in politics and in the labour force.

They also need to work together to debunk the stereotyping of women both in school curricula and in society. Jor-

dan needs to be serious about adopting policies that promote gender equality such as improving the wage gap to allow women to become financially independent.

Awareness campaigns are also important to shed light on the important role of women in politics. Women constitute half of the society and their participation in politics will result in democratic gains as Jordan has supposedly begun embracing political reforms.

But most importantly, if there is a genuine will to empower women in politics, then there is a way.

Suha Ma'ayeh is a freelance journalist and researcher based in Amman. She has written extensively on domestic politics, Arab spring protests, foreign affairs, terrorism, elections, and corruption, including the crisis in southern Syria and the influx of refugees. Her work has been published in *The National*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

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Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.
Jordan Office
23, Isma'eel Haqqi Abdoh Street, Sweifieh
11183 Amman, Jordan
info.jordan@kas.de

Resident Representative:
Dr. Edmund Ratka