

Omani Women Political Participation: Elections' Challenges and Electors' Confidence

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The Sultanate of Oman has witnessed remarkable developments in the regulations, laws and legislations pertaining to women. The government of the Sultanate has taken several measures in order to support women, raise their status in society and ensure their effective contribution to the country's development. This was done mainly through the provision of educational opportunities. Omani women are considered regional pioneers in many fields and they hold leadership positions in government, private and civil sectors, as well as some ministerial, diplomatic and parliamentary positions.

However, although Omani women have held many political and diplomatic positions since the beginning of the renaissance of Oman in 1970, their representation is still weak in the elective Shura Council. This can be attributed to several factors, including social, cultural and financial factors, that may affect women's success in the electoral process. Omani women have enjoyed the right to run and vote - parliamentary representation- in the Omani Shura Council elections since 1994. The opportunity for women to participate in legislative councils was expanded in 1997 by appointing women as members of the State Council (members are appointed by the government). However, it wasn't easy for Omani women to secure a place in the Shura Council (the elected council) and their representation remained limited and has never exceeded 2%. This study sheds light on the reasons behind such low representation. It discusses the challenges and difficulties that women candidates face as well as the factors behind their inability to gain voters' trust. It also explores the different ways women candidates use to overcome such challenges and puts forward several recommendations to enhance the political participation of Omani women.

Following a descriptive-analytical approach, the study employs two main social science survey methods: open-ended interviews with (20) of the (43) female candidates of the ninth period of the Omani Shura Council (2019) and focus groups with (57) sample-driven male and female registered voters of the same electoral period.

The study explored the women candidates' personal experiences and delved deeper into their stories in an attempt to get an in-depth understanding of what they experienced when they ran for elections. The candidates spoke with such transparency detailing the challenges they faced and how they reacted to and dealt with such difficulties. They shared their insights and the lessons they learned.

On the other hand, finding a representative sample of the voters proved a difficult task. People were reluctant to participate or share their views although they were assured of anonymity. The focus groups with the voters focused on the criteria they used for choosing a candidate in the last elections (2019) as well as their views on women's political participation through Shura representation. The study aimed at understanding why voters will not vote for women candidates.

The findings of the study unsurprisingly point to the dominance of conservative social and cultural factors. These relate to the predominance of the masculine tribal affiliation which supports the man for their belief that he is the one endowed with special capabilities to represent the tribe. Society's view of roles that men and women should play reflects the dominance of conservative traditions which view the political tasks relating to the Shura Council to be a man's business whereas a woman's role is seen as pigeonholed to the welfare of her home and family. In addition to managerial (i.e. challenges relating to the management of the electoral process), legislative, institutional and financial challenges, perhaps one of the most prominent findings of the study is that society would more readily support a female candidate if she possesses leadership qualities, enjoy societal and tribal acceptance and have been actively involved in social service.

The findings categorise the challenges that Omani women face in running for the Shura Council as follows: challenges related to women candidates' personalities, experiences and readiness; challenges related to the culture and social fabric of society; challenges related to the election campaign and competition process; and challenges related to the Shura Council election system and how friendly it is towards women participation.

Based on its findings, the study proposes a set of recommendations that may contribute to enhancing the participation of Omani women in the political and parliamentary field, which fall into four categories:

1. Recommendations for national policies and plans: The necessity of developing a national strategy to enhance the participation of women in the political and parliamentary sphere, as it will contribute to accelerating a fair political representation of Omani women.
2. Media and awareness raising: The study found that the Omani society's view of women is confined to traditional roles that see that political and parliamentary work for men and that they do it better than women. Therefore, it is important to work on developing awareness programs directed to the community in its various categories, especially from a young age in schools and higher education institutions, by including the importance of the participation of women parliamentarians in school curricula, not focusing on stereotypical roles of women, and encouraging girls to participate in student councils and other representative councils in order to inculcate political culture from a young age. The media also plays an important role in presenting the image of women as capable of political action. A national media plan can be adopted to raise awareness and educate the community in the parliamentary field.
3. Training and development programmes: The current study found that Omani women still need support in the political field, as it is a new field for them, and this support needs to be in training programmes, especially with regard to the required knowledge and skills for managing electoral campaigns. The establishment of a training institute to qualify women who wish to run for the Shura Council may serve this aspect appropriately.
4. Recommendations regarding the electoral system: The study found that the current electoral system (individual elections) constitutes a major challenge for Omani women to have appropriate representation in the Shura Council. It is; therefore, necessary to improve the electoral balance for women, by allocating certain seats (quotas) to women in general or to female candidates who obtain the highest votes in any governorate, but did not win, to be represented in the Shura Council. In addition, there is a need to intensify the penalties for violators of the electoral law, in order to stop illegal practices in electoral campaigns that can affect women candidates' chances to win.

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