

Chapter three: Obstacles women face

1. Introduction

The analysis in chapter 3 and chapter 4 is mainly based on the findings of a survey conducted specifically for this study. The main purpose of the survey was to understand whether Jordanian society harbors prejudice against women in general and in particular against female politicians and potential female candidates in elections. The survey also aimed to identify those factors which either limit or increase women's opportunities for more political empowerment.

3.1 Is Jordanian society prejudiced against women?

The survey investigated whether respondents perceive women and men as "equal in principle". The majority of respondents (61%) considered that women and men are not equal in principle, while 5.9% of respondents were undecided. What is particularly worth noting is that women appear more likely to respond in the negative than men (62.% of female compared to 60% of male respondents).[Table3.1] This is particularly disturbing since it appears that the notion that men and women are unequal has been internalized by women themselves.

It is sometimes assumed that those who have had more experience of education will tend to have a positive attitude towards equality between men and women. This survey did not reveal a strong correlation in this respect: 63% of respondents from illiterate up to high school level thought men and women were unequal, compared with 60.3% of those with university degree or higher. [Table3.2]

It is to be expected that the general perception of inequality should also be revealed when examining attitudes towards society's image of women. On average 38% of respondents considered that society's attitude towards women is 'positive'; 27% considered it to be 'negative'; 23%, thought it was 'neutral'. [Table 3.3]

Those who thought that society's attitude towards women is either 'positive' or 'neutral' also had in common an acceptance of existing social values. It might be inferred that they will perceive less necessity for society to change itself. These two categories ('positive' and 'neutral') combined represented 66.2% of total respondents, which is slightly higher than those who did not believe men and women were equal in principle.

However, there was a noticeable difference between male and female respondents in terms of their perception of society's attitude towards women. Among female respondents, 30.7% thought society's attitude towards women is 'positive' compared to 45.2% for male respondents. 32% of female respondents thought society's attitude towards women is 'negative' compared with 22% of male respondents. 25% of female respondents thought society's attitude toward women was 'neutral' compared to 21% of male respondents.

It can be inferred that women are more aware than men of the limitations society places on their potential, and thus their desire for change is stronger. This is one positive tendency which can be capitalized on. [Table 3.4]

There are two observations which can be made in relation to the age factor and society's perceived attitude towards women. The older group (42+) were significantly more likely to perceive society's attitude towards women as being 'positive' (46.4% compared to 38% across all age groups). This group was also the least likely to think that society's attitude towards women is 'neutral' (16.6% compared to the average of 23%). In contrast, a large proportion of the younger age group (18-25) considered society's attitude to be 'neutral' (29.7%). The older age group tend to be most satisfied with society's attitude towards women and thus are the least eager for change.

A similar, or possibly stronger, sentiment is observed among the least educated of the group. For example 54.5% of the category 'illiterate or with school certificate' thought society's attitude towards women is positive, compared to the average of 38%. They were similar to the older age group, in that they were also least likely to see no reason for society to change itself. [Table 3.5]

The most extreme form of prejudice against women is expressed in the unlawful practice referred to as "honor killing". On average 60% of respondents considered honor killing as unjustifiable - a clear expression of rejection of such behavior. However, a significant minority (27%) of respondents thought honor killing was justified. 16% respondents were undecided on the issue. [Table 3.6]

Men were more likely than women to believe that honour killing is justified: 36% of men compared to 18% of women. More female respondents were 'undecided' than men on this issue (20% compared to 11.6%). The fact that so many people - men and women - appear to endorse such a fundamental abuse of human rights is an issue of extreme concern. [Table 3.7]

Age affects attitudes towards honor killings. 31.2% of the older age group of respondents thought honor killing was 'justifiable' compared to 22.6% of the younger age group respondents. The other age groups fell into the average category around 27%. [Table 3.8]

Education is a mitigating but not a determining factor. 36% of respondents in the category illiterate or with high school endorsed honor killing compared to 23% of university degree holders or above. However, the assumption that receipt of higher education reduces the likelihood of prejudice towards women was not proven: 30% of Ph.D holders considered that honor killing is justifiable, compared to the overall average of 27%. The survey therefore appears to indicate that education has had only a limited and modest impact on attitudes concerning such abuse of rights.

It is often suggested that negative attitudes towards women are a result of textbooks that fail to present positive images of women. However, this survey does not find this to be the case: 77% of respondents thought the image of women in text books was positive. 71% of male respondents agreed. 83% of female respondents thought the image of women in text books was positive. [Table 3.9]

3.2 Public attitudes towards women's political empowerment.

In this section, public attitudes towards women's political empowerment are examined. The survey reveals that in Jordan, public attitude reveals a clear prejudice against the political empowerment of women. This sentiment is shared by female respondents, although their prejudice is not as clear-cut as that of men.

When asked who was more suited to high public position, men or women, 60% of respondents replied that such jobs are more suited to men. There was a clear difference between the responses of men and women: 71% of male respondents thought high public positions are more suited to men, compared with 49% of female respondents. [Table 3.10]

Faced with a choice between two candidates with equal qualifications, a man and a woman, 72% of respondents stated that they would choose the male candidate. Men showed most bias in this respect: 86% would choose the male candidate compared to 58% of female respondents. [Table 3.11]

The job of "member of parliament" was considered to be more suited to men than to women: 67% of respondents adopted this position. Again, men were more biased in favour of their own sex: 77% of male respondents considered men to be more suited to the post of member of parliament compared to 58% of female respondents. [Table 3.12]

When asked whether the post of prime minister was more suitable for a man or a woman, 69% of respondents considered the post to be a man's prerogative. Again there was a gender difference: 81% of male respondents compared to 58% of females considered the post more suited to a man. [Table 3.13]

In terms of the comparative suitability of men and women for the post of judge, 85% of respondents considered that the post of judge was more suited to a man. Again there was a gender difference, with 93% of male respondents stating that the post was more suited to a man, compared to 78% of female respondents. [Table 3.14]

In response to the question whether they would object to being a member of a political party headed by a woman, 43% said they would object, with a breakdown of 54% for male respondents compared to 33% for females. It is interesting to note that the majority of women (63%) had no such objection. [Table 3.15]

The above findings demonstrate that significant obstacles face any woman who may wish to exercise her right to stand for election. To a large extent, this may explain the weak performance of women candidates in various parliamentary elections so far.

3.3 Literacy, family and tribalism : influences on voting behavior

This section examines the factors which determine the voting behavior of the Jordanian electorate. It considers the role and influence of tribalism, the family and education on voting behavior. The preliminary working assumption is that the pattern of voting behavior tends to place women at a disadvantage and therefore serves as a further obstacle facing women searching for greater political empowerment.

The study reveals the relative importance of key variables in terms of determining voting behavior when choosing parliamentary candidates. The factors identified as important are family and tribal considerations (36%); the qualifications and personality of the candidate (34%); the candidate's program (18%); religious factors (6.7%) 'other factors' (3.5%) and political party affiliation (1.9%). [Table 3.16]

Based on such findings one can make the following general observations. First, Jordanian parliamentary elections are significantly influenced by family and tribal considerations. Second, parliamentary elections tend to have weak program basis. Even when a candidate is chosen on the basis of factors other than tribal or family basis, it is the candidate's personality and qualifications which matter more than the candidate's program. Respondents clearly consider a candidate's political party affiliations to be relatively unimportant.

Female voters tend to be less influenced by tribal considerations than male voters (23% compared to 27%) Family considerations influence female voting behavior marginally (but not significantly) more than their male counterparts (12% compared to 10%). However, women are more likely than men to be influenced by a candidate's personality and qualifications (39% compared to 29%). There is no significant difference between male and female respondents in relation to the influence of a candidate's program (20% among male respondents compared to 17% among female respondents).

Level of education tends to influence voting behavior in two ways. First, respondents from the lower educational level (illiterate to high school) were more likely to choose a candidate based on their tribal base (45% compared to an average of 25%). Second, those from the higher educational level (university degree and above) are more likely to choose a candidate on the basis of the personality and qualifications of the candidates (39%). Educational level does not appear to influence choice of candidates based on program or party basis. These responses confirm the hypothesis that there exists only a narrow focus when choosing candidates in any given election, with the emphasis on the individual's family and personality, rather than their program or policies. [Table 3.17]

Age has an impact on voting behavior but is not as influential as might be expected. The younger group (18-25) tend to be less influenced by tribal considerations when choosing a candidate (19% compared with 25% average). They were more likely to be influenced by family considerations (19% compared to 11% average). [Table 3.18] The findings of the survey indicate that the older age groups are more likely than younger groups to consider religion as an important factor when choosing a candidate.

These findings may help inform the debate about strategies to support women who choose to stand for parliamentary election. There are certain openings that women may find encouraging, but the overall structure of society and voting behavior tends to be to women's disadvantage. The most obvious disadvantage is that of tribalism. Tribalism as a basis of voting is clearly not in favour of female candidates. The importance of 'family' on choice of candidate is also likely to strengthen existing trends rather than to encourage new and different bases for choosing candidates.

Even when personal qualification is taken into account, women's chances of competing against male candidates remain rather weak. As shown earlier, if faced with a choice between a male and a female candidate with similar qualifications, 72% of respondents would chose the male candidate.

But there are some positive opportunities. When asked to choose between a female candidate with better and higher qualifications than a male candidate, 63% of respondents stated they would choose the qualified female candidate. [Table 3.19]

The relative lack of importance of either the program or party politics as the basis for choosing a candidate reduces the scope for women to be able to overcome the gender obstacles to their entry into political life. Research into voting behavior elsewhere (i.e. outside the context of Jordan) indicates that in situations where voters tend to choose candidates on the basis of their political party, or their program, then a female candidates who adopts a strong program or affiliates to a strong party will have the opportunity to overcome some of the gender barriers to election. Whether or when this could occur in the context of Jordan, and what else can be done are discussed in the final two chapters.

3.4 Media as an obstacle to the political empowerment of women

In order to make a reasonable assessment of the potential role of the media in enhancing women's political empowerment, it is necessary to consider three basic indicators: first, women's access to the media as active contributors (i.e. access to jobs associated with media, most notably in journalism); second, the role of the media in an electoral campaign and finally the relation between the media and political parties.

In 2003, of the total of 543 registered members of the Journalist Association, only 89 (16%) were women.⁽¹⁾ Among official media outlets, female personnel occupied two out of six managerial posts at Jordan Radio and TV authority, one out of 10 managerial posts at the Department of Publications and Press.⁽³⁾ Of the 114 personnel working for the Jordan News Agency (Petra) only 17 were women.⁽⁴⁾

In 2003, out of the total of 230 journalists working for Arabic daily newspapers, 35 (15.2%) were women - a similar ratio to the one at the Journalist Association. At the English daily newspaper, the Jordan Times, 14 of the 37 journalists were women. This percentage, 38%, is considerably higher than that which is found at the Journalist Association. It is perhaps relevant to note that the Editor of the Jordan Times is a woman.

In terms of the weekly newspapers, 19% were women (36 out of a total of 189).⁽⁵⁾ In percentage terms therefore, women journalists had better representation in the weekly newspapers than in the Arabic dailies. However, in 2003, four of the 19 weekly newspapers did not employ any female journalists or writers.⁽⁶⁾

The combined total of female working journalists in relation to the total number of working journalists including all daily and weekly papers was 85 out of 356 (24%). This compares to 16% share of total registered journalists. The fact that the ratio of employed to registered journalists is more favorable for women than men could be interpreted as potentially supportive of women's economic and political empowerment.



When considering the role of the media in relation to campaigning, two issues need to be considered. The first is the image of women in general and the candidates in particular, and whether the media portrays women positively or negatively. The second concerns women's access to the media during their campaign.

The study reveals that 47% of respondents think the media presents a positive image of women's political participation, 39% thought they present a negative image, and 14% of respondents were undecided. There were marginal differences between male and female respondents: 49% of male respondents thought the media presented a positive image compared to 45% of females. 36% of male respondents thought it was negative compared to 41% of female respondents. [Table 3.20]

Regardless of gender issues, the sheer number of candidates in a parliamentary election (765 in 2003) places a structural limitation on potential access to the media for candidates. The absence of a party base for elections makes it almost impossible for any media outlet to provide access to so many candidates. In practice, the media tends to be characterized by its absence from the campaign process rather than by its presence - whether positive or negative. In the case of Jordan TV or Radio their role tended to be confined to analysis of election results and to the occasional interview with individual candidates. The daily newspapers tended to respond to the election in the week before the vote, offering a very general assessment, with the occasional detour into a particular issue raised during the election, but this could hardly be considered as campaigning.

There were very few advertisements in the daily newspapers. The use of TV as a channel for campaigning advertisements was almost non-existent.⁽⁷⁾ In this context, it is hardly surprising then that the most common forms of campaigning were leaflets, posters, visits and taking part in debates.

Among the recognized functions of political parties, one valuable role is that they can provide their candidates with media coverage especially through exposure in those newspapers which are affiliated to the party. In a sense, this relation between the affiliated media and the party helps to finance their campaign by reducing the cost of coverage. In Jordan, for a number of reasons, this tends not to occur. At the beginning of 1995 there were 17 daily and weekly newspapers affiliated to political parties. By the end of the year, 12 had ceased publication. In 2003 only one daily was listed in the Media Guide as being affiliated to a particular political party.

The above factors create a situation where the role of the media is not as important in the election process as could be. The combination of a large number of political parties and many candidates combined with the limited number of media outlets means that it is extremely difficult for any candidates to benefit from coverage during the campaign process. The situation for women is likely to be even more challenging.