

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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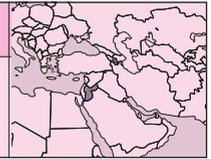
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JORDAN

ICTs help ex-Jordanian MP fight corruption and cancer



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Introduction

Throughout the last half-century, the world has witnessed an expansion in female participation in politics and civil society. This trend has not yet emerged in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.¹

Many countries in MENA, including Jordan, are undergoing a profound transformation. Popular movements in what has been named the Arab Spring have called for reforms to make governments more inclusive and more accountable for their performances, to extend social and economic freedoms, and to increase employment opportunities.

Information and communications technologies (ICTs) have been used extensively to mobilise the masses to take part in shaping the new history of their countries. Arab women who have been deprived of their rights to participate in decision making took this unique opportunity to take part in expressing their own views in the streets and the main squares in Arab capitals and others cities, from Tunisia to Yemen. Arab women became active in demonstrations.

Jordan was not an exception. ICTs gave a space to many Jordanian women to participate in political debates, and offered them a new and cheap medium to communicate on social, economic and cultural issues. It created a valuable platform and a loudspeaker for the voiceless.

Participation: Access, economic and political

The most recent survey on ICTs showed that Jordanians had nine million mobiles at the end of 2012, which means 120% of Jordanians have mobile phones. More than half of Jordanians have access to the internet.² There is also an increasing demand for social media: there were 2.653 million Facebook accounts opened by Jordanian users by the end of

the same year, which makes Jordan number 57 by country in the ranking of all Facebook users. This amounts to 41% of the population. The number of Facebook users also grew by nearly 170,000 in the last six months. The largest user age group is currently 18-24, accounting for 40% of users, followed by the 25-34 age group; 58% of all Facebook users in Jordan are male and 42% are female.³

Jordan has adopted the National Strategy for Jordanian Women (2012-2015)⁴ in order to increase women's participation in development. While Jordanian women achieve higher grades than men at all educational levels, the participation of women in the economic field does not exceed 15%, and unemployment amongst women (24%) is double that amongst men.⁵ Females account for only 5% of ministerial positions, 13% of judiciary positions, and 12% of legislative positions.

While the government makes a point of emphasising its desire to push women forward in each sector, the experience on the ground is quite different. Jordanian women received their right to vote in 1974, but it took almost 20 years for a woman to become a member of parliament: Tujan Faisal was the first woman to be elected, in 1993. In a patriarchal society, which considers women as being inferior to men, Faisal reversed the traditional stereotype.

Who is Tujan Faisal?

After the democratisation process started in Jordan in 1989, Tujan Faisal, a prominent TV anchor, an unveiled blonde woman from the Circassian community, decided to run for office. In an Islamic and conservative country, Faisal became a victim of a smear campaign engineered by Islamists opposed to any participation by women in Jordanian public life. These activities were especially hostile to Faisal, who was an outspoken feminist and had published a newspaper article refuting Islamist interpretations of women's rights in Islam. A *fatwa*⁶ declared her apostate, despite her devout Muslim beliefs, and Islamist activists tried to have her marriage rescinded. She was forced to stand trial,

¹ World Bank (2013) *Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa*, p. 52.

² www.trc.gov.jo/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2335&lang=arabic

³ www.alghad.com/index.php/article/613718.html

⁴ docs.amanjordan.org/laws/jordan/rights_31/3531.html

⁵ www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf

⁶ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fatwa

but the case was ultimately dismissed just before election day.

In the 1989 elections, no woman had succeeded in being elected to parliament. In response, Jordan introduced a 10% electoral quota for women to ensure women's representation in parliamentary and municipal elections. In the next elections, for the period 1993 to 1997, Faisal won a seat in the most competitive elite constituency in Amman.⁷ She ran in the elections with a reform manifesto similar to what the "Harak" (the Jordanian version of the Arab Spring) demands now.

Tribal and Muslim MPs were shocked when they saw her entering the parliament wearing a short skirt with the minimum amount of clothing required by law. In the parliament, Faisal was a strong hero in fighting corruption, which she considers a cancer in Jordan.

Faisal is an icon in Jordan for many women and men. Many call her the "strongest man" in fighting corruption. She opposes such statements, but she understands their context in a patriarchal society.

In 2002 she wrote an article for a US-based website called Arab Times,⁸ which is still blocked in Jordan, accusing the prime minister, Ali Abu al-Raghib, of having personally benefited from a new government policy that doubled the costs of car insurance.

The State Security Court sentenced her to 18 months in prison for spreading information harmful to the reputation of the state. Her jailing "coincided with the beginnings of the internet boom," she told me.⁹ She added that "the broad local, Arab and international support I received forced my release." She went on a hunger strike for 29 days, and King Abdullah II pardoned her after she had served 100 days in prison.

"After my release (unconditional, because I refused all deals to stop or limit my media activities), and after I was prevented from running for parliament, I resumed my fight against corruption not only as a political writer, but also as a 'legislator' by discussing new laws in detail, the way I would have done in parliament," she said. "The interest of the media in the case was logically bound to go beyond freedom of speech, and look into the magnitude of the corruption that caused such an arrest," she added. She was banned from running in the 2003 elections for having been sentenced to prison.

At that time, Faisal was boycotted by the Jordanian media, as no media outlet dared to publish her articles. Nonetheless, from outside the walls of parliament, Faisal continued to campaign for women's rights and democracy in the country.

Faisal had also been prevented from continuing to teach at a private university. While she was banned by the state-controlled TV, radio and most printed media, the relatively uncontrolled internet space offered an outlet for her views. Many people believed that she had emigrated or was living in exile, she noted.

"[The internet] gave me a huge and unprecedented opportunity to express my opinions and ideas to people who want to receive information," she explained.¹⁰ "The internet also gave me and is still giving me a hand in fighting cancer," she added. Faisal knows what cancer is, as she has been suffering from it for ten years – she covers her head with a modern hat because she is losing her hair.

"ICTs help people share information which leads to more transparency, and helps to fight another type of cancer, but one which is more dangerous to the state: corruption," said Faisal.¹¹ She added, "Corruption is the worst type of cancer."¹²

When the Arab Spring buds started in Tunisia and exploded in Egypt and Libya, the Spring was bound to impact on Jordan. On the day of the first big pan-Jordan rallies, in January 2011, Faisal was confined to bed suffering the effects of chemotherapy. Yet the demonstrators were shouting her name: "God bless your times, Toujan!"

If what is said about the patient's morale being a crucial factor in combating cancer is true, then that dose of people's love sustained over years of imposed intellectual exile in her home country was more effective than the chemotherapy, and its gentle touch outweighed the harshness of the medical treatment: "I felt the 'blessing', no less!" she said.¹³

Her fans number in the thousands. She appears frequently on Al Jazeera satellite TV. She also writes regularly for the Qatari daily *Al Raya*, which many Jordanian websites republish, and which has attracted a wide readership.

A carrot and stick approach

Faisal's is a representative story of a pioneering woman working tirelessly ahead of the Arab Spring. That phenomenon started three years ago already

7 This means that she chose to run in the most difficult constituency in Jordan's capital.

8 www.arabtimes.com. The article can be reached in countries that block it at: www.arabmail.de/16_3.o2jordan.html

9 An email from Faisal answering the writer's questions on 13 April 2013.

10 Ibid.

11 www.filmirsad.com/opinions

12 For more information on corruption in Jordan, see GISWatch 2012 - The internet and corruption, at: www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/internet-and-corruption/jordan

13 An email from Faisal answering the writer's questions on 13 April 2013.

– when desperate Tunisian young people used new media in challenging a police regime. The wind of the Arab Spring has reached Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Jordan.

However, Jordan has been hesitant to make adjustments to its policies and implement changes to manage the new situation, and has also tried to keep control over new media. The country amended its constitution in 2011 in response to demands for political change; but in response to the new media influence, the government tried to pass new laws to control the new “technology for freedom”. The Press and Publication Law constitutes the principal tool used by successive Jordanian governments to control the press. Law No. 18, 1998 was amended through Law No. 17 in 2011, which expanded the definition of “publication” to include “electronic means, digital or technical”. This means that news websites are considered newspapers and the Press and Publication Law is applicable to news websites.

Officials also use the “carrot and stick” approach *inter alia* to interfere in web news content. One of the carrots is advertisement, and there are many examples of how government officials use a “soft containment” policy to control the press.¹⁴

Nevertheless, political news websites are flourishing in Jordan because “old media” is considered less free in reporting corruption and the wrongdoings of the government. There are more than 500 political news websites; 40 of these sites have formed a union.

Conclusions

Jordan has fallen to 121st place out of 135 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report for 2012. The country dropped four places following a decrease in the scores for the economic, education and political sub-indexes.¹⁵

Closing this gap will change the future of women – gender parity can no longer be treated as a superfluous concern.¹⁶ To overcome the challenges, the Jordanian think tank institute SIGI-Jordan¹⁷ suggests tackling three types of poverty that impact on women: a poverty of knowledge, a lack of available opportunities, and skills poverty.

The first step to overcome gender imbalance is deciding to do something about it. The internet is not only a means of communication, but a tool to support democratisation and development. It is also a vital tool for connecting people and acting

as a forum for exchanging and sharing opinions and ideas. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter all offer a forum where information and materials are exchanged between millions of users daily.

In repressive societies, the internet provides new channels for voiceless minorities and vulnerable groups who have been deprived of access to the means of public communication. As the World Bank puts it in a report on gender equality in the Arab world: “Sitting on the sidelines waiting to be invited in is no longer an option... The sooner women have an equal opportunity to contribute, the sooner the region will benefit from this vast, untapped human potential.”¹⁸

It is clear that ICTs are important tools for bridging the gender digital divide between men and women, and can play a vital role in women’s empowerment. Democratisation will not be achieved without freedom of expression. Pluralism and diversity means many voices and not a one-note chorus. Recycling discourses to satisfy donors and improve their corporate image at home and abroad is not sustainable.

Action steps

It is time to take into consideration the following steps in Jordan:

- Explicit efforts are necessary to create opportunities for women in the public sphere and to facilitate greater participation by women in the political realm. This is a prerequisite to foster women’s participation in politics.
- New media are part of the information society and offer a huge opportunity to consolidate democracy and to promote development. The internet is a simple and cheap medium for communication and education and a vital tool in fighting for gender equality and defending women’s rights, as well as ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable groups are not subject to discrimination. Internet access is an essential human right for every person in Jordan.
- ICTs can empower women in achieving social, cultural and economic development. NGOs are encouraged to offer training to women in rural areas, particularly in the use of social media, such as blogging, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. ■

14 www.alarrabnews.com/newsView.php?id=1170

15 www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2012.pdf

16 www.weforum.org/women-leaders-and-gender-parity

17 www.sigi-jordan.org/pages/index.php?news=335

18 www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/03/14/missing-voices-gender-equality-in-the-arab-world