

The Political Participation of Arab Woman: & Democracy

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In Amman city, in the symposium "Woman's Participation in Public Life" that was organized by "The Union of Jordanian Woman" dated 18 – 20 May 2008, in cooperation and partnership with "KVINFO/DENMARK;" democracy was a common concern for participants in the symposium's works. It was confirmed through the various papers presented, through the testimonies, and group discussions, that the absence of democracy negatively affects the advancement of the Arab Woman's conditions as well as the advancement and prosperity of the Arab society.

The symposium aimed to develop a work program and follow up mechanisms; the matter that called for splitting participants into three groups: Woman in Non Governmental Organizations, Woman in Political Parties, and Woman in Decision Making Positions.

The first group discussed the political role of non-governmental organizations, and the importance of embodying democracy within its internal systems.

Participants from Arab countries spoke about the barriers facing woman's political participation in non-governmental organizations, the first of it being present in its internal systems, as NGOs are not allowed to interfere in politics, in addition, NGOs are subordinate to the state: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Information, or the Ministry of Culture.

Participants suggested intensifying pressure campaigns to aid associations that are liquidated. They also suggested deepening the alliance between NGOs and human rights organizations.

Vicki Therkildsen, member of the Denmark Parliament, confirmed the contrary, that the NGOs play a great role in increasing woman's involvement in politics, and that they do not require authorization from the state, which is consistent with being a non-governmental organization.

She also noted that her country guarantees the right of forming an NGO, and the right to assembly, which is in line with freedom of expression, confirming that democracy starts with NGOs.

The second group discussed the woman's status in political parties, and the democratic mechanisms present inside the parties?

Participants spoke about legal barriers, whereby there is no Parties' Law in some Arab countries or a Public Freedom Law. National constitutions in other countries do not have multi-party systems, in addition, some Arab countries are working under Emergency Law.

They spoke about social barriers, the most important being that the Parties' programs lack components that attract women. Parties also do not take real care of the youth, in addition to poverty factors, illiteracy, armed conflicts, violence against woman, with emphasis on the effects of social heritage.

They proposed intensifying the call for lifting restrictions on legal barriers, the most

important being the right to form parties.

The third group discussed the social, cultural and political obstacles that prohibit woman from reaching decision-making positions. The first of it being the absence of the acknowledgment of woman as a participant in the decision making process, inadequate benchmarks, the lack of ownership of economic resources, in addition to weakness of political life and rule of law, whereby sectarian, tribal, and clan rule prevails. Patriarchal mentality also prevails, with the traditional division of woman's roles; a matter that is clearly reflected in educational curriculums. They also mentioned the fundamentalist tides and the retreat of liberal currents.

Despite the advancement of developmental concepts regarding woman's political participation, along with international, regional and national changes, the challenges of woman's political participation are getting harder. The matter that calls for a serious stand to face of these challenges, to dismantle them, and to re-define certain terms that were smudged with their misuse, the first being the democracy concept.

It seems that we have to regularly confirm what is taken for granted and what's obvious. That democracy and human rights do not prosper in occupied countries, and that claiming democratic work, concentrating on the mechanisms without the content, creates great danger, that distorts the principles of democracy, and provides a lethal weapon to its enemies.

The freedom and empowerment of woman are directly proportional to occupational salvation and gaining access and control to resources; the matter that leads to both personal and human security.

We need to create pressurizing bodies to implement the UN resolutions regarding human rights in general and woman's rights in particular; Particularly after announcing the eight millennium developmental goals (Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender, equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability, develop a goal partnership for development). That is what came out of the meeting of the kings and leaders of the world at the beginning of the century, whereby equality among sexes was confirmed along with empowerment of women. The world's countries, namely, the 191 UN member countries that committed to the attainment of these goals by 2015 will be accordingly questioned.

What are the mechanisms of questioning the countries that do not honor their commitments? How do we regain the confidence of the world into international legitimacy and its decisions? How do liberals of the world employ UN resolutions with respect to human rights? How do women benefit from UN resolutions that are to their favor, and that world countries have committed to implement, like resolution 1325 and the resolution to abolish all forms of discrimination against women?

How can we raise the issue of gender equality, as a case that is not exclusive to women, but to fighters for freedom of their nations, and strugglers for change and democracy?!