



On Activism: An Interview with Amal Sabbagh*

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IWSAW

1. How do you define activism? Tell me about the pioneering work done by the Jordanian National Commission for Women and what it has achieved in the area of women's political rights?

Sometime during the past few years I came across a web page that classified terrorism as an activist action. Since that time I have been very careful with the use of the term "activism," and think that the task of defining it has become a rather elusive and tricky one. This being said, I would rather not define it but talk about some of the work of the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) which can be viewed as comprising a group of activists within the conventional meaning of the word.

Since its establishment in 1992, JNCW considered women's political participation as one of its priorities. Hence the National Strategy for Women and its update brought the issue to light, gave it a whole domain, stressing both political participation at the grassroots level as well as the national level. At the community level, JNCW's role was pivotal in paving the road in 1995 for women to run in municipal elections and win for the very first time in Jordan's history. This was achieved through intensive training of 99 women appointed as members of municipi-

pal councils. These appointments were made possible through the initiative of Her Royal Highness Princess Basma bint Talal, JNCW Chairperson.

However, the disappointment of the women's movement following the failure of any of the 17 women candidates who ran for parliamentary elections to win prompted JNCW to team up with women's NGOs to campaign for a quota system. Meetings with decision-makers and a two-week petition-signing campaign resulted in collecting 15,000 signatures, and making the issue a public one. The press joined forces and called for a quota for women. In 2002, JNCW held a national conference in preparation for the parliamentary elections of 2003, which demanded the executive authority to introduce a quota system. Providing a quota system for women in the 2003 parliamentary election was one component of the "Jordan First initiative," which was developed by a royal commission.

Currently the government is considering a new electoral law, the debate on the most suitable law is still ongoing, JNCW and its partners decided to provide decision-makers with three scenarios that may fit any of the suggested proposals. Our demand is to have a quota system; this will enable women from all governorates to participate if

the electoral system stays as is, or through “winnable” positions if the proportional system is adopted, or a combination of the two. We are seeking to have at least 15-30 percent of the seats reserved for women at different levels. Certainly this would help in creating a critical mass that would hopefully contribute to changing the prevalent stereotype of women’s role in public life. Moreover, it would ensure that women’s voices are heard.

2. What triggered your interest in calling for the adoption of a quota system in Jordan? The current number of seats reserved for women is six and I heard work is being done to secure another six. Can you tell me more about that?

Of course the 1997 elections were a turning point in convincing many women activists, as well as men, that a quota system is needed at least on a temporary basis to break the psychological barrier that exists to women’s representation in parliament. We were convinced that quota systems are effective tools to ensure representation of women in decision-making positions. It is a way of leveling the field, specifically in patriarchal societies, where the woman’s role is confined to the private/domestic sphere.

The quota system is provided for in the Jordanian electoral law. Seats are already allocated for minorities in Jordan (nine seats for Christians and three seats for Chechens/Circassians). In the recent debate over a new electoral law, some voices suggested the elimination of the quota system for all these groups including the quota designated for women. Certainly, this would jeopardize the efforts made by JNCW, as the national women’s machinery in Jordan, in partnership with the Jordanian women’s movement. Lessons learnt from other countries’ experiences demonstrate that the quota system has to be extended for more than one election to ensure effective results. In the Jordanian context, we need a longer time to ensure that the system yields the expected results.

We realize that the quota system introduced in 2003 was not flawless. In fact, the quota system was used successfully by small tribes, which could not compete with larger tribes except by resorting to the women’s quota sys-

tem. Our new proposals to the government try to circumvent such loops that may be abused.

3. What were the major obstacles you faced while working on introducing a quota system and how did you overcome these obstacles?

Working on women’s rights in societies in transition is never easy. In any traditional society undergoing modernization, some aspects may be easier to change than women’s issues. The latter can become very thorny since women are suddenly turned into symbols of a culture that people are afraid to lose.

In working for a quota system, there are also more issues at stake. Would the reserved seats mean less men in parliament, or would they be added over and above those seats already occupied by men? So a new type of hidden power struggle could evolve.

Of course there were some decision makers who dismissed the whole idea on the premise that “women are already equal (!!!), so why should we give them a quota?”

I believe that His Majesty King Abdullah II’s belief in the importance of women’s participation was the needed blessing to tip the balance after five years of advocating for a quota system. The large base of support that we built was also crucial in:

- a. making the quota system a public issue for debate,
- b. preparing the population in general for the idea.

Also the fact that the six reserved seats were added to the 104 seats that the electoral system allowed for rather than deducted, made the issue more acceptable to men parliamentarians.

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Endnotes

* Dr. Amal Sabbagh is the Secretary General of the Jordanian National Commission for Women. She has held positions within the Ministry of Social Development in Jordan and was Director of the Regional Centre for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development in the Near East (CARDNE).