

**Suheila Khalil Abu Darwish**  
**My own personal project will free me of my constraints**

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Suheila Abu Darwish was born in Ma'an in southern Jordan, a town known for its strict conservatism. She completed her secondary school education in the town and then graduated with a BSc in agricultural sciences from the Jordanian University in 1987. She was unable to find work for four years before training as an agricultural engineer, and worked in the field of agricultural guidance in Ma'an from 1995 to 2002.

In 2003, following the adoption of the women's quota in the Jordanian parliament, Suheila decided to run in the parliamentary elections. She believes that women cannot enter parliament without support. Despite the difficulties involved and the fact that her parents did not accept the idea, she was insistent. Although she did not win a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, she was ranked seventh in the quota in Jordan as a whole, while only six seats were allocated to women. Suheila gives her answers spontaneously and directly. She is at peace with herself and her experience in the elections has left her eloquent and bold. She has no political affiliation, but classes herself as a Jordanian citizen with an interest in public affairs who is striving to improve the lot of the people of her region.

**The interview**

**What is reform for you as a Jordanian citizen and as a woman?**

Human beings need to live in security and stability, and to reform is to provide a sense of security.

**What are the basic elements of any reform project for you personally?**

The reform project must adopt a participatory approach and must benefit from the experiences of others. It must also comprise plans, programmes and strategies for each sector, based on studies of the situation on the ground and the sharing of opinions, suggestions and decision-making. It should not consist of importing the experiences of others that do not correspond to our reality.

**If you were to identify what was the most important thing for reform to focus on – immediately and without delay – where would you begin? And what is the most immediate and urgent achievement in this basic field that you would like to see accomplished?**

The economy is the priority for reform, in particular the provision of food security. Any measures taken in this regard should be directed at the agricultural sector. In the political sphere there are plans, strategies and laws concerning women, in particular the labour law as it relates to working women, their promotion and work privileges. And there is a need for laws that deal with divorced and widowed women.

In the social sector the financial crisis has led to violence, drug abuse, and a prevalence of domestic violence, which urgently need to be studied and addressed.

### What is your view of the status of women in Jordan?

Women have begun to make advances but are still at the initial stages in all spheres. In politics they haven't yet received what they are entitled to. Any women who have achieved political success have done so with support, or via what is known as a *Wasita* ("intermediary"). One's qualifications are not the deciding criterion. The participation and role of women in the family are excellent. Finally, women's participation in the economy doesn't count even though they are present in all sectors and at all stages of production and labour.

### Would you make any specific demand for women?

Compared to other countries our status remains among the lowest, and women must therefore have a role in all plans and programmes. They should access this role via legislation, laws and regulations, in particular in the economic and political spheres.

His Majesty the King has launched several initiatives; however, the necessary plans and programmes haven't been put in place in accordance with the royal vision, particularly in the provinces. Their implementation has been slow despite the availability of funding. Any delays are either due to the selection of an inappropriate person or because men are hostile to the idea of women's participation and obstruct their achievements and progress in life.

### What are the most significant problems you encounter as a human being/a citizen?

This year has been a difficult one financially for Jordan as a whole, which has affected everyone. But in my work I have managed to overcome the problem of being a woman and my supposed weakness after five years of work on plans and programmes, which has brought me success and achievement. The source of my success was the fact that I worked in my own geographic region and understood the needs of the employees working with me, as well as those of the local people. And then there is the pressure of housework, as there is for all women who work outside the home (i.e. do double work), particularly when emergency issues arise.

Are these difficulties general or are they due to the fact that you are a woman? Do they differ for men and women?

These problems are due to the fact that I am a woman. Men don't feel that they have problems. Men always regard the achievements of women as lacking. Women have to trust themselves and their achievements and can't expect approval either from other women or from men. Women need to take advantage of any feedback to develop themselves. Life is a struggle for women.

What is your view of women's rights movements in Jordan?

I have been a member of the Jordanian National Forum for Women since 1990 and my purpose has been to serve women in all fields. The forum has a clear strategy and plan. Over time there has been a change of strategy and plan in order to keep up with the times. The forum has a clear role on the ground in expanding the participation of women in political life (in parliamentary and municipal elections), as well as in various areas of social participation. My experience with them has been positive.

What do you dream of as a Jordanian citizen and as a woman, even if you regard it as difficult or impossible to achieve at the present time?

As a citizen, I dream of security and stability. As a woman, I dream of fulfilling myself and living up to my responsibilities. I also dream of owning my own business, my own private foundation so that I can free myself of my constraints. I feel that women face constraints, even women in senior positions.

Have you ever wished you were a man?

I am satisfied with being a woman and would not demand physical equality. I call for equality in rights and duties, but not rights beyond the bounds of the Islamic religion.

What did you learn from your experience in the 2003 elections?

That the elections are not transparent or fair. I was honest with myself, which I am happy about. If you want to win you have to be ready to manoeuvre and manipulate because election day is full of surprises (voting after the close of polls, vote rigging, widespread voting irregularities, vote buying, etc.).