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WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN OMAN: STATE, SOCIETY, AND
CULTURE
BY
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ABSTRACT

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Title: Women's Political Participation in Oman: State, Society, and Culture

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This dissertation studies the social, legal, and institutional factors that hinder women in Oman from advancing their political participation from the perspective of female candidates. The main finding is that larger women's political engagement requires changing laws, combating tribalism, and granting A'Shura council effective parliamentary powers. The interviews of Twenty-five Omani female candidates explain in this dissertation how cultural, legal, and institutional factors impact women's political participation and representation.

This dissertation also, investigates the links between women's social and legal status and the size of women's political engagement. The findings of the research conclude that tribalism and the use of money in exchange for votes are the major factors among all factors that limit women's chances to win elections. All participants agree that these two factors are the most effective tools in persuading voters to vote for a candidate regardless of the gender/sex of the candidate.

The finding of this dissertation illustrates that the tribal, patriarchal, and hierachal systems obstruct women's progress in the elections and affect their campaigns. They have a significant impact on women's campaigning and therefore, their chances to win and increase their representation in the elected councils.

To address the dissertation question: how Omani female candidates understood the reasons or causes of hardship to win elections, this dissertation applies standpoint theory as well as phenomenology methodology in order to critically examines women's

political engagement in Oman. The Standpoint theory enables the researcher to document, describe, and interpret women's diverse perspectives and subjectivities within the dominant socio-political structures in Oman, while phenomenology approach allows this study to clarify the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of female candidates running the elections.

DEDICATION

To my parents: Salman Al Talei whose guidance and confidence inspired me during his life and beyond, and Mathla Al Talei whose strength and persistence motivated me to achieve my dreams.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the social, legal, and institutional factors that contribute to women's slow progress in political participation in Oman. It attempts to capture the female candidates' understanding of the cultural, electoral, and political aspects of the elections experience. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the causes and the elements impact women's chances in winning the elections and their representation in the elected councils.

The 2019 Omani A'Shura elections results confirmed the status of women in the political and public sphere. The number of women who ran for 2019 elections, also, demonstrated the size of women's political participation in Oman. Of the 637 candidates, only 40 women ran, and from 86 winners, there were only two female winners (Oman Ministry of Interior, 2019).

Oman was the first country in the Gulf that allowed women to vote and run for elections. The country started its first elections in 1991, but women could participate only in 1994. Although two women won in the first elections, women have not been able to elevate their representation in Majlis A'Shura (Oman National Consultative Council or Parliament). Nevertheless, the start of municipal elections in 2011 opened a new space for women for more significant engagement. The number of women winning the municipal elections is higher than A'Shura, but the percentage of women representation remains the same.

Many arguments, including those made by Al-Hayes (2010) and Al-Yahyai (2011) consider the cultural and social values the significant challenges preventing women from being elected, whereas Al-Farsi (2009) study states that the electoral procedure and campaign organization is the most significant factor while the social was the least impactful. Utilizing 25 Omani female candidates' views and experience this

dissertation investigates the factors that obstruct larger women's political participation and kept women under-represented in the elected councils. The main finding shows that although tribalism, buying votes and male's competition are the major factors affecting female candidates chance to win, the issue of women's political engagement is more complex and social, legal, and institutional factors interlock and shape a disabling environment.

The Research Problem

This research investigates how Omani female candidates understood the reasons or causes of hardship to win elections. It also, attempts to understand why Omani women's political participation is limited and slowly progressing, even though women in Oman started practicing political rights before women in other Gulf countries. This research looks into women's political participation status, power relationships, social hierarchy, and the role of social, legal, and political factors and institutions in hindering women's political progress, through the perspective of female politicians.

The Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the overarching research question of this study: How do Omani female candidates understand and explain the impact of cultural, social, and institutional factors on women's political participation in Oman? In order to address the overarching question of this study, the research will address the following specific questions:

- 1- Do female candidates link women's social and legal status to the size of women's political engagement?
- 2- Why do only a few women win the election in Oman? And how do they explain the appointment of a small number of women in government and the state council?

- 3- What kind of political and social environment could provide a better opportunity for broader women's political engagement?

Theoretical Framework

The feminist standpoint theory is the theoretical framework of this research; its concepts are used to analyze data because the theory is about marginalized groups, and it focuses on women's experience. Standpoint theory's most important concept is that an individual's perspectives are shaped by his or her social and political experiences. The combination of a person's many experienced dimensions forms a standpoint or a point of view through which the individual sees and understands the world. The feminist standpoint theory is a method of research that is grounded in women's experiences.

Methodology

This qualitative research is using phenomenology approach as methodology which focuses on describing personal experiences of female candidates and its goal of developing a list of significant statements about how the participants experienced the elections. The main goal of a phenomenological study is to clarify the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon.

By following the phenomenology analysis steps, this research aims to reach a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textual and structural descriptions, or the essence of the phenomenon, or the experience. This description represents the concluding aspect of the phenomenological study.

This research is based on in-depth interviews with 25 Omani female candidates who ran for the elections from 1994-2019. The participants represent different regions in Oman and different education levels and social communities. The only condition for

the interviewee is that she ran for the elections, regardless of the result.

Review of the Literature

Despite the fact that women's political engagement in Oman started in the 17th century, studies and research on women's political participation are limited (Al-Ofi, 2014). However, the focus of these few studies was on the election experience in Oman in general, and on the challenges, women faced in winning a greater number of votes. Nevertheless, only one of these studies focused on female candidates' perspective on the challenges, and yet it did not discuss the experience and its impact on female candidates' views regarding the society and state. Most studies assess A'Shura, and the municipal councils' members' performance and the political process inside the councils, or they explored voters' tendencies. Among these studies was that of Al-Subhi (2016), in "Women's representation in majlis al shura in Oman: how do gender ideology, Islam, and tribalism matter?," which investigated determinants of voting for female candidates using data from the first electoral survey conducted in Oman for Majlis A'Shura. The study incorporates cross-nationally recognized factors: gender ideology, religion, and tribalism. The study used a survey to measure Omani voters' support to female candidates in A'Shura council elections. The quantitative research depended on the data collected from 500 Omani adults in Muscat. The survey included female and male voters only in the capital city governorate.

This study confirms that cultural factors such as gender ideology and religion strongly affect Omani citizens' levels of support for women in the legislature, and it finds an indirect effect of tribal nomination on support for women in the legislature. The study investigated the role of gender ideology, religiosity, and tribal affiliation in contributing to the low proportion of Omani women in Majlis A'Shura. The study found that women's underrepresentation in Majlis A'Shura in Oman has not been examined in

depth, and no "empirical studies exist that examine what impedes Omani women from making their way to the council" (Al Subhi, 2016, p. 13).

The findings of this study disclosed the strong effect of cultural factors in explaining women's legislative representation, as suggested in previous cross-national studies. Individuals with high religiosity and traditional attitudes toward women are less supportive of women in the council. In contrast to what Al Subhi (2016) had expected, tribalism has no direct effect on the self-reported likelihood of supporting women candidates. However, there is an indication of its importance; the tribal nomination is associated with traditional gender attitudes more generally. The more critical tribal nomination is to an individual in selecting a candidate, the less egalitarian attitudes toward women an individual has. This study is essential in providing the characteristics and values of voters who support female candidates. Although Al Subhi's (2016) study is valuable in providing detailed information about the characteristics of voters supporting women, it did not consider female candidates as a source of information and knowledge. However, Al –Subhi's (2016) study could be useful to this research in terms of comparison. It would be valuable to compare the Omani voters' point views on low representation of women in Majlis A'Shura with that of the women candidates' perspectives in order to assess commonalities and differences among them.

Additionally, there is Al-Hayes' (2010) study, "The social challenges facing Omani women in A'Shura elections: A field study on Omani voters' perspective." This quantitative study is based on a questionnaire that considered Omani voters' responses regarding the reasons that make people hesitate or refuse to vote for women candidates. The focus of this study is on two aspects; first is the elections education and awareness among Omani voters, and second is the voters' position regarding voting for women.

This study listed five challenges facing women candidates from the voters' perspective:

- (1) voters think women candidates are less equipped than men candidates personally;
- (2) The impact of ideology and culture of the society on political representation as the main reasons made voters prefer men over women; (3) The economic and social challenges; (4) The limited media support for women candidates, and finally, (5) Legal and administrative challenges. The study also suggested recommendations on raising awareness regarding the importance of women's political participation and it suggested training programs to improve women's skills. This study is useful concerning voters' opinions about female candidates, and its reflection on society's behavior towards women's political representation. However, the study did not deal with female candidates, and their perspective is absent.

In 2009, Oman Ministry of Social Development presented a paper titled "Evaluation of Omani women experience in Majlis A'Shura," at the Omani women symposium, held in Sohar. This paper argued that there are constructed barriers that prevent women from being integrated politically in Oman. It mentioned cultural and social factors that specifically confront women in being elected for Majlis A'Shura. This study is significant because it is the only one which studied women candidates. Although it is a study based on quantitative methods, it explored women's experiences. The study surveyed 57 female candidates from several regions in Oman during the sixth term of Majlis A'Shura (2007-2011) and gathered basic information about the female candidates who participated in the survey. Al-Farsi (2009) provided detailed data regarding the age, region, and education level of each surveyed candidate. The main question of this research is: what is the reality of Omani women's experience in the elections of Majlis A'Shura? The following sub-questions were also addressed: what are the main factors which influence women's participation in the election? What is the

impact of culture and values on women's participation? To what extent is women's participation in the elections socially accepted? What is the impact of laws and regulation in women's participation in the election? Moreover, (Al-Farsi, 2009) asked questions to understand the candidates' evaluations of the role of media and civil society organizations in supporting and encouraging women to run for elections. The aim of this study was to learn about women's experience running for Majlis A'Shura and to identify the causes which weakened women's participation and prevented them from winning seats in the consultative council (Majlis A'Shura). In addition, the study's aim was to learn about the challenges, women faced during elections' campaigns. Among the goals of this research was providing recommendations to help women wining the elections of Majlis A'Shura. It concluded that the role of media is vital to raise awareness regarding women's political participation. The media's role came first on the list of the main factors affecting female candidacy. Second is candidate's personal qualifications and her interaction with the people. Third is laws and regulations, and last is the culture and values of the society. This result is different from findings reached by other researchers, such as Al-Hayes (2010), and Al-Lamki (2008), who concluded that culture and values are the main obstacles facing female candidates. Furthermore, Al-Yahyai (2011) said that Omani society is male-dominated mentality and this needs to be changed in order to get women equal rights and opportunities. Al-Hayes (2010), and Al-Lamki (2008), and Al-Yahyai (2011) stressed the importance of media and mass communication outlets' role in educating people about elections and women's participation, as well they recommended utilizing media in elections campaigns.

Al-Farsi (2009) presented valuable data, and it is useful for data analysis of this dissertation research because it focused on issues that are part of the topic of this research. Additionally, it is possible to compare the results of Al-Farsi's quantitative

research with this qualitative research regarding the cultural and social acceptance of women's political participation. This study provides the general framework for my research, and it also informs the background level of this research's structure. However, Al Farsi's (2009) survey-based study is missing the depth and the essence of the individual experience. Answering survey questions would not likely capture the personal factor of each female candidate, instead it gathered general information. In-depth interviews, which is this research method, would reveal more profound insights and opinions of the unique experience of female candidates.

Another study about Omani women in politics is "The empowerment of Omani women and the social challenges: an anthropological study on women holding high and decision-making positions in Muscat governorate" (Alzidjali, 2002). This study discussed how to empower women in Oman and how to identify the barriers and challenges confronting women in high decision-making positions. The research mentioned how these women face negligence and diminution of their roles, but they could overcome the challenges in the end. However, Alzidjali (2002) concluded that there is a lack of women's representation in fields of political leadership and law and legislation, despite the positive change in Oman society and the respect held for working women. This study highlighted the challenges that face women even when they are holding high positions, such as considering women less qualified than men, which approved the effect of the constructed cultural values that discriminate against women and favor men. These findings are the same as females' views discussed in this research. Although women in high position is not the focus of this dissertation research, two sections discuss this issue from the perspective of female voters, appointees, and

candidate participants¹.

“The citizens perspective towards the experience of A'Shura in Sultanate Oman: A field study” by Al-Lamki (2008) specified that the objective of this study is to know and understand the Omani people’s perspective regarding the function of Majlis A'Shura in Oman, focusing on the quality that people are looking for when electing representatives. The researcher also presented people's views about the representatives' role in serving their communities through A'Shura council. Al-Lamki (2008) mentioned the difficulties people face in daily life and their expectations from representatives in solving these difficulties. The research is quantitative and focuses on the voter's perspective. Women's participation was not part of the study, but it helps in locating people's criteria for elections and electability. It also allows comparison between male and female candidates' qualifications and whether they are equally desired by women and men².

In 2009, Majlis A'Shura presented a paper, “The contribution Of Omani women in Majlis A'Shura,” which evaluated women representatives' role in the council during the fifth term 2003-2007. Al-Mukhaini (2009) conducted a preliminary evaluation of the experience of the Omani women in the A'Shura Council. The study evaluated administrative aspects, membership of women in the committees, and the main structures of the Council, as well as representation missions abroad in official delegations. The study examined the interventions of female members of the Council during the second to fifth terms. As Al-Mukhaini (2009) concluded, the most important result is that women's issues did not reach the council until after the participation of

¹ In chapters 2 female voters and appointee to the state council participants discuss several issues related to women's political participation one of them women in high positions, also in chapter 5 the female candidate participants discussed the same issue.

² This argument is discussed in chapter 3

women in the council. Importantly, women members represented Omani society as a whole, and their political concerns have not been limited to women and women's issues.

The study relied on compound standards of women's issues on the agenda and deliberations of A'Shura council and the level of representation of women in the council and its parliamentary structures. Al-Mukhini (2009) recommended establishing a permanent committee for women in the council, strengthening the relationship between constituencies and male and female members, and reviewing the division of the electoral system. Furthermore, Al-Mukhaini (2009) suggested underlining the role of the council in the development and achievements of women in the council and conducting further research and studies, and building women's capacities in parliamentary work.

Al-Oraimi (2002) looked into and tracked "the Development of A'Shura system in Oman from 1981-2000." It is a descriptive-analytical study focused on the political history in Oman and the development of political participation in twenty-year period from the early eighties till the year 2000. The research emphasized the modernization of political institutions in Oman and its evolution according to the international political systems. This study is informative as a background on how the country developed its Shura system.

A more related paper to the issue is "Omani Women's Rights Between Legislations and Social Practices and Values" by Alyahyai (2011) Which emphasized the advanced legal status that Omani women enjoy, and social practices that suppress women's rights. Alyahyai (2011, p. 8). said "the Omani policy assures that justice, equality, and A'Shura consultation are the foundation of rule, and the pillars of all political, economic and social life aspects." She stressed that Oman had changed women's status in the state, and in turn, amended laws made before this to harmonize

with this modern view of equality for women. Al-Yahyai (2011) argues "These changes have been implemented to remove all traditional barriers that discriminate against women's participation in Omani society." However, she did not mention the discriminatory laws which remain as legal barriers facing women, such as the citizenship laws, which give men the right to pass their citizenship to their children when they are married to non-Omani women, but the law does not treat women who are married to foreigners equally. However, she suggested in order to overcome the social barriers, Oman should first increase appointing women in the government: "the promotion and participation of women in national life is a major priority" (Al-Yahyai, 2011, p. 6), and second, increase the appointment of women to the state council. She mentioned that the government immediately appointed more women in the state council after no women were elected in A'Shura election in 2007³.

Al-Yahyai (2011) saw this as a political message that meant the government believes in women's participation and capabilities. Nevertheless, the question raised here is: if the government believes in women, why did the number increase only up to 14 female members out of the 70 total of the state council seats. Why did the government not increase the number to the edge to reach equality? Al-Yahyai (2011), in addition to her two earlier points, argues third that Omani women need to free themselves from the basic inequality built into traditional and tribal Omani society. Fourth, Omani women need to be educated about their equality and rights, rather than accept the intimidation of male family members. Fifth, the male-dominated mentality

³ 14 women out of 70 members were appointed as state council members by royal decree 107/2007: <https://qanoon.om/p/2007/rd2007107/>

While there were 7 female members of the council out of 55 members appointed for the previous term in 2003 by royal decree 73/2003: <https://qanoon.om/p/2003/rd2003073/>

in Omani society should be changed, and men must learn to change their views and treatment of women and learn to respect women's equality in modern Oman. She concluded that "some social-cultural practices reveal contradictory dimensions between legislation and conservative social values and the more modern ideas of social and legal equality gained. Such practices originated from tradition treat women as undependable persons" (Al-Yahyai, 2011, p. 8). Generally, this study, although it does not focus on women's political participation, gives an overview of the legal and social status of women in Oman. However, the problem in this study is that Al Yahyai (2011) centers a pro-government voice. As a result, the women's voice is not heard, and that is the gap. In contrast, this research is trying to fill by focusing on the story of women candidates and uncover the meaning of their experience and reflect thoughts and opinions.

Al-Haj's (1996) "The Politics of Participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: The Omani Consultative Council" is about the political participation in Oman generally, and women's participation was mentioned briefly to highlight the challenges facing modernization policies in Oman. The challenges mentioned in study are related to my research discussion on women's social status. He argues "the most important challenge to Qabus' regime, however, comes from modernization and its values which conflict with traditional Omani culture" (Al-Haj, 1996, p. 568). He mentioned that this also happened in all GCC countries, writing "religion and traditional values are still important in all political, economic and social processes. They are a vital force in the daily lives of the masses" (Al-Haj, 1996, p. 568). It is understood that these factors play an essential role in defining gender roles in society, and how they affect women negatively more so than men. When Omani women were given the right to participate in the elections in 1994, a major change happened in the country; "The only significant difference between Oman's Council and those of the other GCC states is that for the

first time, two women, Shukur bint-Muhammad Al-Ghamari and Tayba bint-Muhammad Al-Ma'wali, were nominated as members of the Oman consultative council by Sultan Qabus" (Al-Haj, 1996, p. 569). He said that women's participation in Oman gave them certain rights that were still denied to women in Kuwait, Bahrain, the U.A.E., Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and that was true until the rest of GCC countries followed and granted women political rights. In addition to that, Al-Haj (1996) discussed the political dynamics and he described Oman as a conservative society, and said it would have been difficult for Sultan Qaboos to make such a critical decision like allowing women to be part of the political practices and the affairs of the country, "without the approval of the religious establishment" (Al-Haj, 1996, p. 569). This statement explains the structure of society and shows how far women's roles are constructed in social life and the minds of the people. This part of society and culture is useful to my research concerning factors affecting women running for elections.

In the study, "Women in Parliament and Politics in UAE: A Study of the First Federal National Council Elections," the goal of Al-Dabbagh and Nusseibeh (2009) was to analyze the entry of women into parliamentary life in the UAE, after the elections in 2006, and to contribute to the global debate on closing the political gender gap. The study included women as both voters and candidates for the first time. It is based on interviews with members of the Federal National Council, surveys of the opinions of male and female candidates who participated in the UAE elections, and archival material from the election campaigns, and this study investigates vital themes in the nature of the roles women play in the political process. The findings of this study demonstrate commonalities between the experiences of both male and female politicians, as well as critical gender-specific challenges. Key recommendations, based on the findings, include continued support of government for a more inclusive political

process, quality training for candidates and parliamentarians, closing the gender gap in citizenship status, and strengthening the role of the Federal National Council. This study is close to my research in terms of its methodologies; conducting interviews with female candidates and focusing on the gender gap closing, but it is different in several other aspects. This study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, interviews, and surveys. I will use only interviews. The objective in this study is analyzing the parliamentary role that women play inside the council, while the focus of my research is the experience itself according to female candidates' own perspective and the impact of gender roles on this understanding.

In their book, *Women's Empowerment in the Sultanate of Oman*, Al-Amrabi and Al-Farsi (2013) discussed how women in Oman enjoy the legal rights to participate in all kinds of work and be a partner in developing the country. The book presented a critical-historical background about women in Oman since the early 1970s and documented the first women engaged in various types of work and profession. One chapter in the book discussed women and political participation. Al-Amrabi, and Al-Farsi stated that Oman government provided all opportunities for women to work and participate in decision-making and consultation, the government empowered women by creating conditions and possibilities for women to have the capacity to participate in decision-making related to their society, preparing women to be able to identify the aspects of women's empowerment, and to recognize themselves and their value in society (2013, p. 144). Despite all facilities and preparations, women did not participate in more significant numbers and did not win enough seats. Al-Amrabi and Al-Farsi (2013) explained, "women in Oman should not wait for victory to come without collective women's effort to gain people's trust" (p. 147). Contradicting the previous statement, they argued that, women in Oman, despite low participation in politics,

"enjoy huge deal of appreciation and trust, and were given the right to represent her society in the municipal and social services councils equally to men" (Al-Amrabi & Al-Farsi, 2013, p. 149). Explaining the small numbers of women representatives in these councils, Al-Amrabi, Al-Farsi (2013) said that, Omani society has been exposed to modern practices in the past few decades, which granted women rights that were denied before, and also said that a low percentage of women's representation is a global phenomenon, not limited to Oman society. However, this study mentioned a survey conducted in Muscat in 2001-2002 regarding women's participation in the elections of Majlis A'Shura as voters and candidates. The results of this survey showed that the main reason behind electing a limited number of women is women's reluctance to participate in voting and nominating themselves. The low numbers of women's representatives, traditions, and social values prevent them from political participation, in addition to male candidates' competition. Also, females were afraid to lose jobs when elected and after one term or two they cannot return to their public sector job (Al Farsi, 2013). The law in Oman requires elected representatives to resign from their jobs and they are not allowed afterward to occupy a job in the public sector. Other reasons women mentioned in this study are related to women's qualifications and limited knowledge of parliamentary work, and not having the capability and the stamina to execute the responsibilities of representation. Generally, although this study presented important work and data about women's political participation, it discussed some of the issues superficially. For example, while mentioning women voters as a major force in the elections, Al-Amrabi, Al-Farsi (2013, p. 153) automatically linked this as a way for women to win more seats as if women's votes directly translate into the election of women candidates. It could be a significant factor; however, it cannot guarantee women's votes would go to women candidates. However, there is no information

available regarding who votes for whom in Oman elections. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether female voters vote or not for female candidates.

One common argument in these studies is the assumption that the hardship and challenges are exclusively women's problems, and only women should look for solutions without getting support from state and non-state actors and institutions. Al-Yahyai (2009, 2011) and Al-Amrabi and Al-Farsi (2013) are convinced that the leading solution for women's advancement is in the hands of women themselves since the government provided all facilities, and opportunities equally for women, in addition to providing a legal framework for women in order to engage and participate fully. They discussed challenges such as media roles and traditional culture and values that hinder women from political participation, yet they did not mention that the state/government who controls the media and the public sphere can play the major part in solving or complicating women's social and cultural challenges.

Most studies in the literature review considered the social values as the major challenge that face female candidates in the elections; however, my argument is the female candidates' challenges are more complex than the limitations of traditions and social norms. My assumption is that people in Oman do not withhold votes for women because of their gender, rather it happens for a series of complex reasons, the least important of which is the candidate being a female. In this dissertation research I will present a multi-level analysis that puts into consideration the political, legal and social factors' impact on the outcomes of the elections in Oman concerning female candidates.

There are several studies done on other Gulf countries which benefit my research, such as *Women and Politics in Kuwait* by Olimat (2009). The study demonstrates a historical overview of the women's rights, and the constitutional framework of Kuwaiti politics and women's struggle for political rights and political

participation. It discusses later the outcome of the elections of 2008 and 2009, when women participated for the first time in the elections. The study examines the obstacles women faced during the elections, which made them retreat from previous progress: "There is no doubt that women in Kuwait have made remarkable levels of success in the socio-economic fields but lagged far behind in the area of political development. This explains their inability to win any seats in the Eleventh, or the Twelfth Assembly" (Olimat, 2009, p. 206). These obstacles were identified, in the study, as follows: the timeframe available that election period was not long enough for women to organize themselves and get ready for the election, another obstacle was the massive competition among female candidates; and the study also mentioned that there was rivalry, animosity, and division within the women's movement. In a fascinating section, the study dealt with other challenges that women candidates face, such as "lack of confidence in female candidates," saying "Kuwaiti women demonstrated their lack of confidence in their gender when they voted overwhelmingly for male candidates" (Olimat, 2009, p. 209). The researcher said that one of the challenges is that women failed in building coalition and bridges with existing political forces. The maturity of the women's movement in Kuwait was also under question whether it did the job required in gathering women after the failure in increasing representation in the last two elections. The researcher said, "It is astonishing that, even though Kuwaiti women's movement has been active in public life over fifty years, its maturity into an orderly, disciplined and specific-goal oriented movement has been deeply questioned" (Olimat, 2009, p. 210). One of the significant reasons that led to this situation is that women needed to "put their house in order" so that they could be successful in participation in politics. Re-emphasizing the critique of the maturity of women's movement, as Olimat (2009) mentioned "It is obvious from the past two elections that women had little

confidence in their gender" (p. 201).

This study gives some indicators about what kind of challenges women candidates might face from and within the women's community. These indicators of Olimat (2009) are used in questions directed to Omani women candidates, but with caution, since there is not an Omani women's movement. However, the gender aspect is included within the questions of the research to understand to what extent women candidates in Oman are aware of problematic gender issues and to understand their standpoint from those issues.

In *Gender and Politics in Kuwait: Women and Political Participation in the Gulf*, the study by Al-Sabah (2013) focused on the struggle of Kuwaiti women for political participation and the positions women hold in society and politics. Al-Sabah discussed the discourses surrounding feminism and civil rights. Al-Sabah (2013) articulated women's history and contribution to Kuwaiti state, from independence and the writing of the constitution in the 1960s, through the Iraqi occupation in 1990 to the struggle for the right to vote and stand for elections in the twenty-first century. He stressed that Kuwaiti women gained more acknowledgment, especially after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. Since then, Kuwaiti women's experiences extended to a range of new roles in Kuwaiti society, including government, education, employment, civil society, and the media. While two different experiences, the Kuwaiti women's struggle towards political rights and the Omani women's struggle towards more extensive representations in elected councils, my research can benefit from Al-Sabah's (2013) study, particularly on the extended roles of women in the society, government, and civil activism as a post-political rights era.

In her book *A most masculine state: gender, politics, and religion in Saudi Arabia* Al-Rasheed (2013), examines the Saudi woman's status through analysis of

different categories of Saudi women and their diverse approaches of expression: education, consumption, literature, demonstrations, and religious interpretation. Al-Rasheed (2013) provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities Saudi women have experienced since 9/11 and highlights the complex relationships between gender, religion, tradition, and the state. Presenting her analysis, Al-Rasheed (2013) insists that Saudi women have been viewed, not only through the standard lens of religion, but also through their interactions with contemporary capitalism, the state as both patron and patriarch, and social media.

Al-Rasheed (2013) explores persistent gender inequality in what Saudis and outsiders consider a unique situation. She also examines the intersection between gender, religion, and politics; this intersection spread women's exclusion in Saudi Arabia. She used different kinds of sources, ranging from contemporary novels to newspaper articles, social media postings, websites, and reports from NGOs and governments' departments, in addition to interviews. This book is rich in information and its analysis insightful, and it features gender inequality on multi-levels. It is helpful as a gender analysis-based research, which is similar to the approach of this research in terms of examining the intersections between various aspects of politics, states, and culture.

There are other Gulf and Arab studies and research that provide background and in-depth analysis of women's political participation which can be useful in deepening knowledge, emphasizing obstacles and challenges, and highlighting similarities. However, this dissertation research does not seek generalization; on the contrary, it aims to reach the special meaning and the unique experience of female candidates in Oman, the meaning and perspective of which is absent from research and scholarly studies thus far. As the goal of this research is to generate new knowledge about

women's lives, and to capture in what manner political experience changed, added or deepened their views about themselves and the world around them, this dissertation tries to present women as knowledge actors who generate new ideas and truth from their side rather than being only the subjects of research and studies.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory seeks truth through two central understandings; knowledge is situated and perspectival. The primary concepts of standpoint theory are social and political experiences that shape individuals' perspectives, and it explains how a woman's experience forms a standpoint, or a point of view, through which she sees and understands the world around her. Besides, knowledge is socially situated; it is a social product developed from a specific social position as well as, marginalized groups, who are socially situated in ways that make it possible, for them, to know and see things, and ask questions about their lives and the world around them, more than it is for privileged groups.

Standpoint theory research focuses on power relations and begins with the lives of the marginalized, such as women lives. According to standpoint theorists, dominant groups in society construct social values. Women as a "marginalized" group accept the values of the powerful groups that shaped women's perspective about themselves and their roles and gender. This emphasis on experience led to considering the standpoint theory as a theoretical framework for this research.

The goal of the theory is to "start off thought and research from women's experience, lives, and activities." (Harding, 2004, p. 1). Women's lives, experiences, and perspectives are central to culture, politics, and knowledge as standpoint theory proposed. Moreover, its theorists identify the theory as political and social epistemology (Wylie, 2004), and it is described as an interpretive framework devoted

to clarifying how knowledge stays fundamental to sustaining and changing the unjust system of power (Collins, 2004). Feminist standpoint theorists argue that gender is one dimension of social differentiation that may make a difference epistemically (Wylie, 2004). Collins (2004) says that inequality of race and gender reflects a greater degree of complexity. Despite the complexity, however, every woman is unique. If researchers analyze each woman in her uniqueness, systematic analysis is avoided (Collins, 2004).

Furthermore, on the other hand, standpoint theory aims "to bring women's groups consciousness into being" (Collins, 2004, p. 252). This makes standpoint unique because it investigates each individual's experience and at the same time explores the group voice, which allows researchers, not only to present a new perspective, and add knowledge to epistemology, but also to observe whether the individual's voice can become a group voice through studying other women's experiences. Collins (2004) says, "coming to voice as emblematic of women's collective coming to voice reinforced this notion that individual and collective voice or standpoint are the same" (p. 252).

The United Nations (2019) indicated that "gender equality is fundamentally a question of power" stressing the world is a still male-dominated which "ignored, silenced and oppressed women for centuries – even millennia".⁴ The UN (2019) highlighted that despite women's achievements and successes "their voices are still routinely overlooked", and their opinions ignored, with everyone paying the price for "inequality and oppression." Stressing that "increasing the number of women decision-makers is essential," the UN Secretary-General remarked that women still face major

⁴ On the women's international day in March 2019, the UN Secretary-General Antoni Guterres said that from climate change to the weakening of commitment to multilateralism, gender equality and women's rights are fundamental to addressing each of these. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1034341>

obstacles in accessing power.⁵

According to Standpoint theorists, the theory gives a voice to marginalized groups by allowing them to challenge the status quo as the outsider within. Women as marginalized or oppressed groups⁶, due to social and economic inequalities, did not have a voice in social and political spheres, nor were they offered the opportunities to present their perspective in social science research and inquiries, Collins (2004, p. 249) explained that “Inequality has been revised to reflect a greater degree of complexity, especially that of race and gender.” However, standpoint theorists do not seek to prove women’s oppression, Hekman (1997, p. 343) mentioned Hartsock (1981) writing that “feminist standpoint is a mode of method that is approaching life and politics, rather than a set of political conclusions about the oppression of women”. Collin stated that “Standpoint theory argues that groups who share common placement in hierarchical power relations also share common experience in such power relations” (2004, p. 249). Hierarchy is one of the reasons for inequalities that women face in general, and as Wylie (2004, p. 348) said: “the oppressed may have an intimate knowledge of local power”. Emphasis on rejection of hierarchy is one common theme in feminists’ research. The feminists’ “opposition to hierarchical relationships is a rejection of all inequalities in power and authority,” and Hammersley (1992, p. 13) found in the feminist arguments against hierarchy in research relationship, appealing to ethical, methodological , and tactical consideration respectively.”

Standpoint theorist Harding (2004) underscores that the social location of

⁵ Only six economies in the world give women and men equal legal rights in areas that affect their work As UN indicated in the above remarks

women, as a group, or other oppressed groups could be a source of informative knowledge privileges about themselves and the nature of social relations. Therefore, "the experiences of oppressed groups can become an important source of critical insight" (Harding, 2004, p. 7) because each oppressed/ marginalized group can learn to identify its unique opportunities to turn on oppressive features of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks, how it is structured, and how it affects women's perspectives about their gender and role in the society.

The feminist standpoint theoretical framework enables researchers, studying marginalized groups, to be producers of knowledge, because the oppressed groups might have a close knowledge of local power that conventional science would not reach with its traditional methodologies. Standpoint research "[draws] attention to unexamined factors that enlarge existing interpretive and explanatory hypotheses and by generating entirely new research questions" (Wylie, 2004, p. 348).

Strong Objectivity

An important concept of standpoint theory is the "strong objectivity." Harding (2004), who created this concept, says that starting research from the lives of women strengthens standards of objectivity. Strong objectivity is assumed in contrast to scientific objectivity. Strong objectivity takes into consideration researcher bias, which Harding (2004) thinks, can never really be removed. She argues that a researcher's life experiences will always be a lens through which they view the world and later, their research. Harding (1991) presented strong objectivity in contrast with the "weak objectivity" of supposed value-neutral research. Standpoint provides a different understanding of subjectivity, in which the concept of the individual, or subject, is seen as a collective view of social relations. Standpoint theories are not about individuals

reporting their experience but groups coming to understand the social relations in which they are involved" (Wylie, 2004, p. 339). Thus, providing better objectivity or stronger objectivity of a situation from their different locations. Harding (2004) suggests seeking "stronger" objectivity rather than complete objectivity or neutrality is more useful for research.

Objectivity, as Haraway (2004, p. 97) explains, is not about dis-engagement but mutual and unequal structuring, and it is about taking risks in a world where we have no clear and distinct ideas about any experience and knowledge. Moreover, Harding (2004) clarified that standpoint approaches had to learn to use the "social situatedness of subjects of knowledge" methodically as a source for "maximizing objectivity" (p. 136).

Strong objectivity shapes the insights of the feminist standpoint theory, which emphasizes the significance of starting a research project from the experiences of those who have been conventionally left out of the production of knowledge. Standpoint argues that more objective and more relevant knowledge can be produced from the experiences of groups left outside of the institutions in which knowledge about social life is generated and classified. Standpoint theorist Harding argued that knowledge produced from the point of view of subordinated or marginalized groups may offer stronger objectivity because of the motivation of these groups to understand the views or perspectives of those in positions of power. Harding (2004, p. 128) explains that objective locations in any social order will generate enlightening critical questions that do not occur in thought that begins from dominant group life. Harding suggests that starting research from the lives of women "actually strengthens standards of objectivity"

Situated Knowledge

“Feminist objectivity means quite merely situated knowledge” (Haraway, 2004, p. 98). Feminist standpoint theory identifies knowledge as a social product developed from a specific social position. Moreover, the perspectives of marginalized and/or oppressed individuals can create more objective accounts of the world. Through the outsider-within technique, these individuals are placed in a unique position to point to patterns of behavior that those captivated in the dominant group culture are unable to recognize. Theorist Haraway (2004, p. 91) says that positioning is the key practice grounding knowledge structured around the imagery of vision, explaining that, politics and ethics ground struggles for the contests over rational knowledge. This was/is designed and defined by the dominant group's values and culture. In order to conduct feminist standpoint research, Haraway (2004, p. 89) advises researchers to seek perspective from those points of view, which, first can never be known in advance, second promise something quite extraordinary: strong knowledge for constructing the worlds less organized by strength of domination, and third provide element of hope for transformative knowledge.

Standpoint theorists (Harding, 2004 & Smith, 2004) argue that all knowledge claims are socially located, including those of modern sciences. Therefore, they are infused by local values and interests. Moreover, since we are located, what we know of others is conditional upon that location. Because of this notion of situated knowledge, research focused on women produced concerns, and interests were not only, not women's, but counter to women's needs and desires. Smith (2004) stresses the need for feminist research to carry out women's concerns, ideas, and perspectives.

Women's Perspective

Standpoint theorists explain the significance of studying the world from

women's perspective due to the fresh concepts that women provide for knowledge. Society and institutions imposed "the concepts and terms in which the world of men is thought as the concepts and terms in which women must think their world" (Smith, 2004, p. 22). Researching society and culture and other issues related to women's lives from the "point of view of women's place" produce different perspectives. Smith (2004) says, "the values assigned to different aspects of the world are changed," because it is, no longer, a single dominant view constructed by powerful groups (p. 22).

In addition to new sources to knowledge, starting off research from women's lives, creates "less partial and distorted accounts, not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and the whole social order" (Harding, 2004, p. 128). A scientific research's goal, rather than a feminist project's goal, is to produce new knowledge and "women lives, and experience provide the ground for this knowledge" (Harding, 2004, p. 128).

Standpoint theory claims that marginal lives, like women's lives, provide, for feminist researchers, better grounds for certain sorts of knowledge, and as well, it claims that women's own lives are the best starting points, because their own lives can provide important resources of such research. Standpoint theory argues that women's lives also provide for other different, and sometime, oppositional, projects, yet are such valuable resources (Harding, 2004, p. 129).

Although the standpoint approaches suggest women's lives as a starting point, they not only explain women's perspective, but also discover laws, rules, traditions, values, and institutions that govern and form our beliefs, and sometimes our behavior towards specific issues and relations. Standpoint uses women's lives and perspective as a tool to explore societies, governments, religions, and politics from inside. Feminist research seeks to understand the sum of a compound of activities, separated into many spheres, by which our sort of society is ruled, managed, and administrated. Theorists

believe that the governing of society is done in "concepts and symbols" that help political and cultural institutions to rule us; moreover, we, through concepts and symbols, participate in the ruling. These governing processes of societies are prepared as social units established "externally to those persons who participate in and perform them." (Smith, 2004, p. 23). In our world, as Smith (2004) stressed, the governing conceptual mode is designated by men and the world organized in natural defiance; the home is assigned to women. Separation of spheres, in this modality, led to the absence of women's experience and ignored her sphere, as "home" is not vital and dynamic to politics and governing processes.

Standpoint theory came to make women's direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of their knowledge, and how they see and explain the world around them. This allows researchers to understand and analyze society and politics from a different point of view. A woman, investigated in feminist research, "brings the world into her grasp in making it observable and in understanding how it works, and how the world comes about for her and how it is organized so that it happens to her as it does in her experience" (Smith, 2004, p. 29). However, Smith (2004) argues "a woman lacks the inner principle of her own activity. She does not grasp how it is put together because it is determined elsewhere than where she is" (p. 32-33). Here comes the researcher's role in grasping the exploration of her experience as a method of discovering society (Smith, 2004, p. 33).

The outsider within

Standpoint theorists emphasize that "the only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within; therefore, "we can never stand outside" (Smith, 2004, p. 28). Harding (1991, p. 125) said that " women are valuable strangers to the social order." And "women, and especially women researchers, are " outsider

within." This concept of the "outsider within" as (Collins, 2004) coined while studying black women's lives, means closeness and remoteness, at the same time, from power hierarchies, neutrality, and objectivity. It is an irregular ability to see oneself through the eyes of the dominant group, it is a yearning to bring equality to the viewpoint of the outsiders, so they are more visible to the insiders.

According to Collins (2004) insiders' awareness of political or social justice must raise to value the unappreciated experiences of outsiders. However, outsiders such as women, have a more conscious consciousness of themselves and of insiders, who are seen to have power over the outsiders. Outsiders within regularly confront power hierarchies that seek to marginalize groups. Standpoint theorist Collins (2004, p. 103) said that "women's status as "outsider within" can be used to produce feminist thoughts that reflect a standpoint on self, family, and society".

Methods and Methodology

According to Christensen, Johnson, and Turner (2010) the main goal of a phenomenological study is to clarify the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a person, or a group of people, around a specific phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) described hermeneutical phenomenology as a means to combine hermeneutic and phenomenology so it is possible to describe and interpret the lived experience as told by participants, while transcendental phenomenology requires, through bracketing, that the researcher set aside prejudgetment, and use a systematic procedure to analyze data.

Phenomenology is a study of "people's conscious experience of their life-world" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013, p. 26). As a philosophy, it has had an impact on all qualitative research (Merriam, 2013, p. 25). I chose phenomenology because of its focus on the experience itself, and its explanation of how experiencing something is

transformed into consciousness. Phenomenologists, per Merriam & Tisdell (2013) are not interested in categorizing, simplifying, and reducing phenomena to laws, and they are interested in our lived experience. Manen (2007, p. 58) said that qualitative researcher is identifying a phenomenon as "an "object" of human experience."

Phenomenology is different from other qualitative research because of its emphasis on the assumption of essence or essences to shared experience. Phenomenologists consider these essences "the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013, p. 26).

The "tools" of phenomenology help the researcher to bracket the experiences of different people, analyze them, and to compare them to each other, in order to identify the "essences" of the shared experience or the phenomenon. Therefore, the mission of the phenomenologist is to illustrate the essence of the basic structure of experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013, p. 26).

The process of bracketing, in phenomenology, is called "epoché," which means to refrain from judgment. "Epoché" is one of the phenomenology tools where the everyday understandings, judgments, and meanings, are set aside, and the phenomena are revisited. Merriam and Tisdell (2013, p. 27) explain that these prejudices and assumptions are "bracketed" or temporarily set aside so that researchers can examine consciousness itself.

However, the challenge of "epoché" as Moustakas (1994) argued is to be transparent to ourselves, and allow whatever is before us in consciousness to reveal itself so we may see the phenomenon with new eyes in a naive and completely open manner. The result of "epoché" is a fresh start and new knowledge.

In addition to "epoché" or bracketing, there are other strategies or tools that are unique to phenomenological research such as phenomenological reduction which is the

process of continually returning to the essence of the experience to derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) emphasized that each angle of perception adds something to one's knowing of the horizons of a phenomenon. Imaginative variation is the next step in conducting phenomenological research. The aim of this process is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience. Moustakas (1994) summarized the imaginative variation as the "how" that communicates to conditions that illuminate the "what" of experience. An imaginative variation involves viewing the data from various perspectives. This description represents the structure of the experience being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013). Creswell (2013, p. 62) stated that the result of phenomenology is feeling: "I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that." Phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals (Creswell, 2013, p. 62). The standpoint theorist, Harding (1988, p. 3) said that "Phenomenological approaches can be used to begin to understand women's worlds."

Data Collection and the Researcher as a Tool

Data collection, for a phenomenological research, depends on multiple in-depth interviews, as primary source. Creswell (2013) suggested conducting 5-25 interviews with participants who have all experienced the phenomenon. Another primary tool of qualitative research is the researcher. He or she is a primary instrument of data collection and analysis, where the overall purpose is to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives (Merriam & Tisdell, 2013).

According to phenomenology methodology, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews. The data collected from these interviews are used as the primary source. The participants are female candidates who ran for the elections in Oman.

I collected data from documents such as Oman's laws that are related to political

rights and participation like Oman Basic Law, the election laws and regulations, and those which are related to women's legal and social status like citizenship law, personal status law, and the non-governmental associations law. Other documents such as books, studies on political participation in Oman, and women's rights and women's issues are assets to the research. I used, as well, some universal sources such as the United Nations publications on women's issues and women's political empowerment. I use these sources and other international organizations' definitions of gender roles, gender power relations, and women's empowerment in addition to other concepts that might frequently appear through the dissertation.

My personal experience as a candidate and a journalist could be another source of data collection, especially data that is documented and can be referred to as a source of information. Using the "epoché" concept of the phenomenology, I "bracketed" my personal experience, so it is highlighted and separated.

Ethical Consideration and Limitations

Ethical considerations or "notes, guidelines, and policies," as Merriam & Tisdell, (2013) indicated, as useful as they are, cannot replace the conscience of the researcher. While conducting this research, I respected the considerations and ethical issues. Prior to the interviews, I explained the research topic and its objectives and procedures to each participant, made sure that they understand the process, assured the participants that I strictly observed the confidentiality of the data. Although a participant might not mind having their names written in the research, I still gave them the option not to include the names according to their wishes. In case some of them had political fears or would suffer any social or official consequences, their real names are not mentioned in the research.

The participants in this study are 25 individuals from various regions and

districts in Oman. I selected the participants based on their experience in the election. The only inclusion criteria are that the participant must be a female who ran for the elections. I was sensitive to the participants' needs and made it clear that meeting them would take place in any venue they feel comfortable, at a time convenient to them. I sent e-mail or texted participants a short letter explaining the process of the research and inviting them to participate in the study. Participants were informed about the nature of the study prior to their participation. They were aware that they could withdraw at any time. They were also informed that the research would not be an evaluation exercise for anyone, person, or organization. They could choose not to respond to any of the questions.

I made sure that participants understand there would be no risk or harm to them in participating in this research. I would be the only person with access to the raw data. Moreover, there were no direct benefits (monetary or otherwise) for participants.

I understand that being a female researcher who was a candidate might have been a limitation for me in conducting this research; however, I believe that would not affect my analysis and discussion, rather it would help in understanding and exploring more rooted in the experiences of participants female candidates. Using the phenomenology tool, epoché or bracketing would suspend judgment regarding women's experience in politics in Oman and made me, instead, focus on the analysis of the participants' experience. During this process, I blocked my biases and assumptions in order to explain this phenomenon according to the participants' understanding. Through this process, I constructed the shared meaning of the election experience and reached a more profound understanding of small women's political participation and under-representation phenomenon in Oman. I used the phenomenology tools to clarify and enlighten how female candidates understand and comprehend this phenomenon.

Lester (1999) said that humans have different personal perspectives, and therefore, my personal perspective stems from my experience, which is different from other female candidates' perspectives due to several factors such as social status, knowledge, education, other lived experiences, and economic and political backgrounds. Being a former candidate as well as being a female helped me to understand and gave me an additional tool to analyze with exclusive insight that would lead to a profound realization for women's experience in the elections and their relations with society and state authorities.

I hereby, bracket my experience. I ran for A'Shura elections in 2003, I was 32 years old, and married with two young daughters. Fifteen women ran during that election hoping to increase women's representation in Majlis A'Shura. I was the first female candidate running in my district, and among the very few in the governate, and in the country, there were less than 90 females who ran in four terms. I ran for two main reasons: first, because people asked me to run. The people who asked were sheiks of the most prominent tribe in my district. 6 male candidates were competing for the same seat. 3 male candidates were affiliated to the same, most prominent tribe in the district. The second reason was that I believed strongly in women's political participation.

My family supported me. My husband accompanied me in meetings with sheikhs and influential people in my district. My campaign was weak and depended on a few volunteers, and some relatives helped at their convenience. I think if I had had better campaign and early preparation, I would have had a better chance in winning. However, in 2003 there were many restrictions on campaigning. For example, it was not allowed to have banners or pictures in public places, no interviews in the media, and no public speaking; basically, the election campaigns depended totally on the door to door and person to person communication. During the campaign, I felt people were excited, and

I had strong support from different categories of the society. I did not feel rejection or refusal because of my gender. Nevertheless, I encountered loyalty to tribal affiliation as a challenge, and the use of money and buying votes, and those were the main reasons that made me lose, yet I cannot ignore that if I had better campaign and planning, I would have had a good possibility to win.

I got the third place among seven candidates, I lost by only 102 votes. People thought that was a good result for a female who ran for the first time. However, that was not my opinion. I thought if authorities had stronger regulations against the use of money, I would have won. Issues which affected my chances were people who promised to vote for me then changed their minds, and the most prominent tribe in my district, of which its sheikhs asked me to run, did not endorse me publicly because there were three candidates from that tribe running. Also, many people did not vote despite their promises; they did not take voting, nor voting for me, seriously.

My new perspective emerged after the elections. I felt tired and disappointed from both authorities and influential (sheikhs), and I thought, it was only 102 votes, it could have been possible. I was not sure if I was going to repeat the experience, I had conflicting ideas and feelings. Nevertheless, it was a rich and deep experience, and I think a female candidate cannot avoid the construction of a new and different perspective about the significant aspects of her life, society, state, and culture. Although I blamed some people for compromising their votes for money and others for not voting, I had an appreciation for most of the people who supported me and treated me respectfully. I met people who are honest and aspire for change; however, they knew that change would not happen if A'Shura powers remained insignificant and did not meet people's aspirations.

The Participants

I conducted 25 interviews with female candidates who ran A'Shura and Municipal elections in Oman from 1994-2019. Among these, there are 5 winners: two-time winner in A'Shura elections. Tayba Alma'awali who won 1994 and 1997. Also, Sana Alma'ashari, a two-time winner in the Municipal elections, won the first Municipal elections in Oman in 2012, and she is currently serving her second term after winning the 2016 elections. Fatima Alsinani also won the first Municipal elections in 2012. Fatima and Sana, however, ran for A'Shura council elections in 2019, and lost. In 2020 they were both getting ready to compete in the next Municipal election, which was set at the end of the year. However, because of the spread of coronavirus, the election was postponed until further notice. The other two winners are Tahera Al'lawati and Fadīla Al-Ruhaili, both of whom won A'Shura elections in 2019. Four of five female winners were from the Muscat governate; only Fadīla represents a district outside the capital city area. Having winners among interviewees helped in understanding different perspectives from different standpoints. Furthermore, some of the female participant candidates ran twice or three times, and some ran for both A'Shura and Municipal councils, which gave room for comparison and recognizing several aspects regarding women's experience in the elections.

I encountered several difficulties in conducting the interviews. I started preparing for the interviews after I was granted the IRB approval to conduct the interviews in mid-November 2019. Before traveling to Oman, I contacted 46 female candidates, and most answered positively; however, not all wanted to participate. Some refused because they were frustrated because of the election result; 2019 was an election year for A'Shura council, and they said that election was unfair, and they did not want to be part of it. Nevertheless, finally, I persuaded 25 female candidates to answer my

questions. I set meeting appointments before traveling to Oman. I was in Oman in the first week of March 2020. Unfortunately, it was complicated to conduct all interviews face to face. I managed to meet two female candidates and interviewed them face to face before the social distancing and lockdown were enforced. Besides, I had to leave Oman a week before my scheduled date because of airports and travel restrictions.

Some female participant candidates preferred written answers instead of sitting for an interview in one of the video applications. I agreed, and most were flexible enough to answer further questions and give more clarifications. However, even those who agreed to sit for face-to-face interviews could not use video calling applications because of telecommunications restrictions from Omani authorities. When trying, there were terrible networks and connections. Therefore, the only convenient option was WhatsApp. 10 female candidates sent me written answers by email and app text messages, and when clarification or further information was needed, they would send text messages or recorded voice messages. 13 female candidates agreed to answer all questions by recording voice messages; some were flexible to answer more clarification questions at different times; among this group, few female candidates combined recorded and written messages. I was able to sit with only two female candidates in Muscat.

The participants represent all of Oman's governorates, except two governorates; Musandam (north) and Al'wusta (mid-west), where no female candidates ever ran. The age of female participants is between 35-57; the minimum age to run in Oman is 30. Some of the candidates ran twice or three times; they were 31-32 when they ran for the first time. The participants' education varied. Two of them have a Ph.D. degree, and they are the two winners of the A'Shura elections in 2019, 3 of the participants are studying for their Ph.D. at the time of the interview, 5 have a Master's degree, 4 have a

bachelor degree, 3 a high college diploma, and 4 have a high school diploma. Regarding participants' marital status, there are 17 married, five single, two divorced, and one widowed. Participants' work experience ranged between 15-25 years. Most of them have participated in community work and volunteering. One of them who did not have work or job experience, had volunteered in serving the community.

Because all of the participants are public figures, everyone except for three participants asked to have their identity anonymized. One participant agreed that to have her name attributed to some of her answers, while electing to anonymize other components of her answers. Participants wanted to speak freely and express their ideas and feeling. However, they did not feel safe when talking about issues they considered as sensitive political issues that might upset authorities.

Organization of the Research

This dissertation includes seven chapters: Chapter 1 is the introduction which includes the research problem, question, theoretical framework, and methodology. Chapter 2 outlines women's political, social, and legal status, and presents an overview regarding Omani women's participation in economic and workforce. The chapter focuses on the history of women's political participation since 1994 when women were granted the right to vote and nomination. Also, it highlights women's role in decision-making and leadership positions. The chapter included views of 10 Omani female voters and leaders on women's political participation and the challenges facing female candidates in the elections.

Chapter 3 focuses on how culture and society influence women's political participation in Oman and examines how women candidates understand the impact of cultural and social structures, such as tribalism, religious ideologies, and gender roles. The chapter also explores the reasons which motivated female candidate to run, and the

role of their families in supporting them or not during the elections. The chapter includes a comparison, from the participants' points of view, between female and male candidates' challenges.

Chapter 4 focuses on women as a marginalized / oppressed group, and discusses the impact of hierarchy, power relations, and gender relations on women's candidacy and how these factors affect, from the female candidates' points of view, their performance during the campaigns and the elections period, and also discusses how gender relations determine voters' decisions and concludes with their preference in the election. Chapter 5 focuses on the structured values and gender inequality as disabling environment for women' political participation. This chapter discusses the impact of the state's law and policies on women's political participation in Oman, and how women candidates evaluate the influence of state and institutional factors in encouraging or hindering women's involvement in politics.

Chapter 6 includes the female candidate participants' understanding of their election experiences and their new perspectives concerning society, culture, and state policies related to women's political, legal and social status. The goal of this chapter is to discover and understand the female candidate participants' final standpoints through investigating regarding their description of their experience in the elections and how they explained the factors that made them win or lose the election. The chapter seeks to uncover women candidate participants' understanding of the impact of cultural, social, and political factors on voters' decisions, and therefore, on women's political participation. Finally, Chapter 7 includes the conclusion, summarizes the research questions, the participants' experiences, and perspectives on the impact of cultural values, society's tradition, and state policies on women's political participation in Oman.

Each of the dissertation chapters includes introduction, discussion and analysis section, and summary. Next is an opening chapter presents women status in Oman. It gives an overview of the legal, social, and political background regarding women. Also, it highlights women's role in decision-making and leadership positions. Chapter 2 focuses on the results of A'Shura council election of 2019 and it includes reflection on the results and the appointment of the state council. The reflections collected from interviewing 10 Omani female voters and leaders on women's political participation and the challenges face female candidates in the elections.

CHAPTER 2: WOMEN'S STATUS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN OMAN

The goal of this chapter is to present women's status in Oman at several levels: historical, legal, and social background and to explore women's perspective regarding reasons that discourage women from significant participation in public life. This chapter starts with the history of women's involvement in politics in Oman and discusses the reasons that prevented women from progressing in politics. This chapter also, discusses and compares women's views and perspectives about the factors holding women from achieving a solid win in the elected councils and being appointed for the state council membership and high government positions.

Women in Public Life

Women's in the GCC countries started practicing their political rights in Oman because Oman granted women the right to vote in 1994 before other Gulf states⁷. However, universal suffrage, for men and women, did not happen until 2003⁸. Before 2003 only selected number of Omanis could vote in A'Shura election. The Royal Decree 94/2003 states that all Omanis who completed 21 years old could vote except personals of military and security services.

While Bahrain was the first country in the Gulf that granted universal suffrage for women in 2002⁹, women in Kuwait enjoyed their political rights only in 2005. At the local level, Qatari women granted the right to vote and run in the municipal elections in 1998, while Saudi women granted this right in 2015¹⁰. United Arab Emirates granted

⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15288960>

⁸ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Oman.pdf
<https://amp.theguardian.com/world/2002/oct/25/gender.stuartmillar>

⁹ https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/Bahrain.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.sasapost.com/arab-women-and-elections/amp/>

the right to vote for a selected number of citizens in 2006 to choose 20 members of the 40 members of the National Federal council¹¹.

Women in Oman represent almost half of the society population at 49.5% (National Center for Statistics and Information, 2017). However, women's representation in elected and appointed councils is low. Women's underrepresentation puts Omani women in a similar situation of women in other Gulf countries; “the only significant difference between Oman's Council and those of the other GCC states is that for the first time, two women, Shukur bint-Muhammad al-Ghamari and Tayba bint-Muhammad al-Ma'wali, were nominated as members of the Oman Consultative Council by Sultan Qabus” (Al-Haj, 1996). Al-Ma'wali and Al-Ghamari were nominated by a local committee, and then they were elected by the people of their districts in Muscat in 1994; after the results of the elections, Sultan Qaboos issued a royal decree confirming and approving the people's choices (Royal Decree 74, 1994).

Oman started its first elections in 1991, and women were not allowed to run for seats in the Consultative Council of Majlis A'Shura, but they were granted the right to vote along with men. A specific group of voters only could vote that time. They were selected by local authorities according to individual level of education and job ranking¹². However, three years later, in the next elections in 1994, women could run as candidates for A'Shura Council. In that first election, women won two seats. From 1994 till 2019, Omani women did not occupy more than two seats at any given time. For example, in the sixth term of parliamentary election, in 2007, women didn't win seats in Majlis A'Shura. In some terms of Majlis A'Shura women had one seat, as in

¹¹ <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/timeline-of-womens-right-to-vote-around-the-world-1.1635917>

¹² In 2003 A'Shura election all Omanis above 18 could vote for the first time.

2011. In the 2015 elections, Ne'ama Albusaidi was re-elected. She was the only female member since 2011. The total number of seats in the A'Shura council is 85. In 2015, only 20 women ran for the election while there were around 600 male candidates. The number of women candidates declined from previous elections in 2011. However, the number of female candidates increased to 40 in the elections of 2019, while male candidates' number was 597. Nevertheless, the seats women occupied remained at only 2, which is the maximum seats women have held since 1994.

At a more local level, Omanis also vote for representatives in the municipal elections. In the municipal elections in 2016, 23 women and 731 men ran for the 202 seats in the 11 municipalities in the entire Sultanate. Seven women were elected for the municipal councils' seats in 2016 (Oman Elections Council, 2016). Previously, in the first municipal elections in 2011, four women were elected. Sultan Qaboos usually appointed members of the government and the state council. There were 84 seats in the state council. Fourteen women were appointed as members of the council, along with two women ministers and one woman as undersecretary in the government until November 2019. On Nov 7th Sultan Qaboos announced 15 women among 85 state council members and four women ministers among 29 in the government cabinet (Oman Observer, 2019). The only civil society organizations allowed to deal with women's issues are the Omani Women's Associations; there are 65 Omani Women's Associations in Oman¹³, and the ministry of social development provides permits to all

¹³ According to the MOSD website there are 59 Associations and 6 branches in some large districts:
[https://www.mosd.gov.om/index.php/ar/2013-12-29-09-44-45/2013-12-29-09-44-31#:~:text=%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%84%20%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9,%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B9%20%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%20%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A9.](https://www.mosd.gov.om/index.php/ar/2013-12-29-09-44-45/2013-12-29-09-44-31#:~:text=%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AC%D8%AF%D8%B1%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%84%20%D8%A8%D8%A3%D9%86%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%A3%D8%A9%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9,%D8%A3%D9%81%D8%B1%D8%B9%20%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%8A%D8%A9%20%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%81%20%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A9)

(Ministry of Social Development, 2020). Nevertheless, women's rights organizations are not allowed in the country because Oman Association law prohibits the civil society organizations from working on politics or any issues related to politics including criticizing the policies of the government (Royal Decree, 14/2000)¹⁴.

Omani women's status puts them in the world context of women's struggle in reaching leadership roles in public life. Norris & Inglehart (2011, p. 126) said, "A fundamental problem facing the worldwide process of democratization is the continued lack of gender equality in political leadership." Social and economic structures unite to prevent women in Oman from reaching leadership positions, and these have succeeded, despite education accessibility and job opportunities provided for women. The inability to deconstruct such structures stresses gender inequality in those societies and encourages people to keep them. Norris & Inglehart (2011) said that, despite moves toward gender equality in many spheres, there still exist barriers to the entry of women into elected office. In addition, Jennings (1983, p. 367) indicated that the

"key institutions in such domains as education, the economy, and law structures are designed to deny women equal opportunities and protection that are awarded to men. The result of women occupies structural niches that are less conducive to activity. This situation encourages women and men to reside in separate spaces in both public and private life. Women are expected to uphold the family's honor and reputation, and that is a very important role."

Also, Coffé & Bolzendahl (2010), emphasized this idea of dividing spheres and explained that, controlling socioeconomic characteristics and political attitudes disclose that women are more likely than men to have voted and engaged in private activism, while men are more likely to have engaged in direct contact, common types of actions and be more active members of political parties.

¹⁴ The royal decree 14/2000:

<https://www.mosd.gov.om/images/rules/Law%20of%20National%20Associations.pdf>

Women as voters, as well, face sociocultural obstacles, including lack of education, lack of awareness, family relations, tribalism, religion, and economic dependence. Women have difficulties because of these issues, but they also became part of society, which in many cases confirm and approve these biases. Generally, women could not change the perspective about their role in society and emphasize the idea that they are as competent as men in political participation because they grew up with clear division between females and males roles; politics and political participation is males' role. As explained by Jennings (1983, p. 364) females and males are socialized into different participative roles and "boys and girls learn that adult political expression is more male."

The most significant obstacles facing women in Oman are the social and cultural factors, especially when women try to establish equality with men as indicated by Alyahyai (2007; 2011) and Al-Farsi (2009). Women's demands of rights and equal citizenship threaten men and their traditional privileges; the society, in this case, tends to stand on the side of men. While Oman society is seen as open and more accepting of women's public engagement, women are still experiencing hardship in making decisions about their health and reproductive rights. For example, the government did not formally prohibit female genital mutilation (FGM) despite Oman's ratification of Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CIDAW) in 2006 (United Nations, 2006).

Although women in Oman enjoy rights under the law, laws have little impact on social behavior towards women. Alyahyai (2011, p. 3) said, "Despite these laws, social barriers and values challenge women when they seek to claim their rights." She also illustrated that traditionally minded Omanis who may be worried about social consequences of the entry of women into public life continue to hinder Omani women

from perusing aspirations. Alyahyai (2011) concluded that it is a global issue. Generally, she says, women's rights are slowly coming to the attention of male-dominated societies in cultures around the world. Indicating that this happens even in developed countries, laws are not enough solely, to end various forms of discrimination against women.

I would argue that, although this is a global issue and is a familiar debate around the world, one cannot deny the importance of the legal environment that grants and protects women's rights. Many women activists in Oman and the Gulf tried to fill the gap that governments left in educating women of their rights and raising awareness about social and cultural biases. Alyahyai (2011) argues all the burden falls on the Omani women and suggests that they must overcome the old traditions, and then they need to create their new self-image and roles in society and move from past cultural norms to modern norms.

Nevertheless, Alyahyai (2011, p. 13) asked crucial questions that need to be addressed:

“How will Omani women benefit from legislative and judicial rights? And how will Omani women learn to empower themselves and their communities? Finally, and most importantly, are Omani women willing to overcome social barriers and traditions to claim their equality with men?”.

However, Alyahyai (2011) did not ask questions about empowering women by changing the existing legislation regarding women's rights.

Al-Ghanim (2013, p. 89) stressed the heavy burden women carry because of the limited and restricted platforms where they could express themselves, “Society does not give women the chance to express their opinion on issues of liberation and women's rights even in the freest of atmospheres, such as those that govern universities and academic conferences.” Moreover, laws do not grant equality nor traditions or religion, and even society does not view women as equal. Coffé & Bolzendahl (2010, p. 319)

argue that “Women’s lack of political resources such as political interest and information may be rooted in social processes such as gender socialization.” People in Oman would argue that most women who run for the elections lack political knowledge and information and that they do not even have interest in politics. They would say that women engage in the election for social status, not because they are skillful and educated about public life and political practices.

I would emphasize that Omani women often do not exercise their existing rights because of societal pressures and a lack of legal knowledge. When they do, family and society place before them additional barriers such as unsympathetic government officials, prejudiced judges, and disapproval. Thus, even though there are laws that protect women, a more considerable effort must be made to create a supportive, gender-sensitive environment that addresses the legal rights of women in the implementation of such laws (Al Talei, 2009).

Alyahyai (2009) suggested four recommendations to close the gap between legislation and social practices and values: first, that Omani women need to free themselves from fundamental inequality built within Oman’s traditional and tribal society. Women should present role models, loud voices and build capacity on women’s rights and duties towards themselves, communities, and their nation. Second, Omani women need to be educated about their equality and rights, rather than accepting intimidation of male family members. Alyahyai (2009) gave an example of young mothers who need to be educated on how to raise girls equally to boys, and as well, she emphasized the role of Omani women’s associations. Third, she suggested that male-dominated Omani society must learn to change its views and treatment of women and learn to respect women’s equality in modern Oman. Alyahyai (2009) also said that media could lead by example and education in promoting male and female equality.

The recommendations of Alyahyai (2009) are practical, but then again, her position is leaning more to the government side and placing more responsibilities and obligations on women's side and society. Omani society should be granted several public liberties such as freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, because it is necessary to legally permit freer discussion and practice of women's rights activism. Freedom of association, and freedom of expression are also needed to discuss political, cultural, and gender issues. People should be able to practice citizenship rights and choose to work with the government or work independently. It is critical to allow NGOs and individuals to lobby for their interests and be able to practice that peacefully without fear of legal consequences.

Women's Legal Status

Al-Azri (2009) suggested that Oman's government should intensify legal education on women's rights not only for women but also for the entire society because educating only women would not lead to the desired result, stressing the importance of media's role on launching awareness campaigns regarding women's legal rights. The role of media was also stressed by Al-Farsi (2009), Al-Yahyai (2011) and Al-Amrabi & Al-Farsi (2013). Furthermore, he suggested issuing explanatory notes for all laws and legislations related to women, particularly the personal status law, which is the family law in Oman. Most importantly, he suggested that women should be part of the committees preparing and discussing laws concerning women's issues. Alongside this, the conclusion of Oman's Women's Symposium (2009) recommended establishing special courts for women's issues, and women should be granted positions as judges. Concerning the elections, the symposium recommended designing programs for women candidates and helping them in building capacity and confidence, as well as teaching female candidates how to run an election campaign. Included in the

recommendations was the reforming of Oman's women association to be ready to host women candidates' election. The conclusion recommended establishing alimony funds to facilitate divorced women's lives and help them with living expenses, and to provide women with support from women on socio-legal levels. However, Omani women in need or with limited resources, as specified by the Ministry of Social Development, receive a social security allowance, although this allowance is not limited to women only. The recommendation suggests a special fund for women who cannot afford living expenses after divorce, especially when the male in charge cannot afford or does not provide financial support.

Emphasizing educating society, all members of society, in these recommendations was notable because usually when discussing women's issues, women are in charge of solving and finding the solutions for difficulties and challenges, while other members of society do not share the responsibility. However, mentioning a "society" does not mean directly male members of society. Refraining from mentioning male members explicitly from most recommendations means that men or males do not share the same, if any, amount of responsibility. It also means that researchers and social workers and legal professionals do not want to provoke society values by provoking men's dominant power and men's mentality domination.

The papers presented at Oman's Women's Symposium (2009) agreed that raising the legal awareness of women is a crucial factor in empowering women in political, social, and economic arenas. Nevertheless, none mentioned raising the legal awareness of male members of the society. Mostly men are excluded from the burden and raising awareness related to social and legal issues, which gives the impression that men are well educated about such issues. Alternatively, it implies that men are not part of the equation that puts women and social relations on the scale. While affirming the

importance of women's education, there is discrimination regarding the number of women who have access to Sultan Qaboos University. Women are required to attain higher marks than men to attend¹⁵. The State justifies this discriminatory rule by referring to the fact that women do better than men in schools, and claims it is, therefore, attempting to achieve gender balance (Seikaly, Roodsaz, & VonEgten, 2014).

In a study done for the European parliament, Seikaly, Roodsaz, & VonEgten (2014) stated that women appear to have equal access to justice; however, information about equal treatment of criminal acts on this issue are scarce. Seikaly, Roodsaz, & VonEgten (2014) mentioned an Omani government study published in 2003 which showed that crimes against women are rarely reported, particularly domestic violence and rape. They concluded that once a crime is reported, the judicial system does not discriminate against women. However, no evidence was provided, and while women have equal access to courts and other judicial institutions in cases involving disputes with other citizens, companies, or the government, equal treatment and fair judgment are not granted at all times.

Women in Oman face employment challenges in both the public and private sectors. Part of the challenges are related to the work environment, and the other part is related to social and personal issues. One of the challenges is that most females prefer to work in the public sector because of its benefits and assurance of long-term employment. However, government organizations and ministries hire a larger number of males than females. Although both males and females prefer working for the public sector than private, women do not get the professional and career-oriented training that is designed for women. Also, workplaces are not equipped with specific facilities such

¹⁵ Oman Human Rights Association published article about education discrimination:
<https://en.omanhhr.org/why-is-it-necessary-for-girls-to-outperform-boys/>

as nurseries in order to make the work environment more positive for females. Among the reasons that hinder women from participating fully in the labor market is that women are not encouraged, as Al-Shukaili (2009) said, to move from their hometowns or city and work in other areas. Above all, there is the impact of societal values and communities' customs and traditions on what women study in college and universities. Most women in Oman, as Al-Shukaili (2009) mentioned, would study majors that are compatible with parents and relative views about decent jobs for women, such as teaching and various jobs in the medical sector,¹⁶ although there are not any job restrictions in Oman legislation. Women were granted the right to private land ownership in 2008 after a Royal Decree was issued to amend the government land entitlement system, which was a significant move for women, as they became entitled to obtain government land on the same conditions as men without discrimination (Royal Decree, 125/2008).

Women are disproportionately affected by unemployment in Oman. Women represent 49.5% of Oman population, 12.4% of them participate in the market labor force with a 13.19% unemployment rate in 2019, while the unemployment rate among men is 1.63% and youth is 8.41%. Women face a higher rate of unemployment among all society categories despite women's literacy rate of 99%, whereas men's rate is 98.46% in 2017 (Theglobaleconomy.com, 2017). Furthermore, according to a study done by Sultan Qaboos University, female students achieve higher grades in science, mathematics, and the English language at school level and university level (Shabiba Daily, 2017).

¹⁶ According to Oman's national center for information and statistics, women working in the education sector are 28% from total female employment in the public sector. Male employees in the education sector are 19% from total male employment in the public sector. https://www.ncsi.gov.om/Elibrary/LibraryContentDoc/bar_Omani%20women%20%20Partnership%20and%20Development_1aa796c1-fe38-4f5c-859d-0d2062cb5fd6.pdf

Women's participation in politics, education, legal rights, and work opportunities and environment affect women's ability to participate as these factors impact women's personal and economic independence. Discrimination against women appears when a woman decides to run for the elections. In this case, the argument arises about women's qualifications and skills, although young women were denied equal opportunity to compete in Oman's colleges and universities. Preference for men, in both private and public sectors, leaves women with limited work possibilities; therefore, females' dependency on male relatives financially limits free choices and making personal decisions regarding running for elections and involvement in the public sphere. Al-Azri (2009) mentioned that women in Oman are not part of committees discussing and preparing laws and legislations related to women's issues. Not including women in such committees excludes women's perspective in issues that concern them the most and affect their empowerment and their ability to reach their potentials.

Indications from 2019 A'Shura Elections

Winning two seats in 2019 parliamentary election for Majlis A'Shura, brought back the question about women's electability in Oman, and about the social and practical issues facing women during elections' campaigns. These issues will be discussed intensely in the next chapters. The two women who won the elections in 2019 are Tahera Al-lawati in Matrah and Fadila Al-Ruhaili in Sohar. The first from the capital city area and the second is from Sohar, a district in the al-Batina region of northern Oman. Since 1994, the more significant number of women candidates and the total number of women winners were from Muscat districts.

Among the 40 women who ran for 2019 A'Shura election, one of them drew the attention of Oman's voters for her different campaigning methods and qualifications. However, the discussion about her was not limited to direct elections

issues, and it extended to social and religious values. When Basma Al-Kiyumi, a young Omani lawyer, who wears no headcover, “Hijab,” decided to run for the election she faced sharp criticism regarding her dedication to Islam and Oman traditions and values¹⁷. However, Al-Kiyumi continued her campaign and lost the elections. The result of the elections raised several questions not only about personal choices and how they affect political competition, but it raised questions also about whether religious dedication matters if the candidate is a male and under what form. These questions will be discussed in the following chapters. In the next section of this chapter, I present an analysis of the outcomes of the 2019 Omani elections concerning women’s participation and experience.

Despite the sophisticated election campaign that Al- Kiyumi’s team put in place, Basma did not win. The question sparked on social media was why did Basma Al-Kiyumi not win? The first reason that comes to mind is that Al-Kiyumi did not win because she is a woman or because she did not wear Hijab. However, the answer is more complicated. There are several reasons: the first is related to the character of Basma and her personal choices in life; the second is related to the situation of competition on the ground, and finally, other reasons are related to the powers of the Shura Council itself. Basma Al-Kiyumi, especially at the beginning of her campaign, faced a vigorous campaign against her because she did not wear the Hijab, and this was a reason for targeting her by the conservatives who claimed that Basma does not represent the Omani citizens or women because the Omani Islamic values consider Hijab an obligation of Muslim women, which she must follow. Although many of these

¹⁷ In social media, especially twitter, people, expressed their opinions freely and considered Basma is not a good representation for Oman’s society’s values not only for women, see @BasmaMubarak, for example, see: <https://twitter.com/BasmaMubarak/status/1184182976889921541>

conservatives were impressed by her electoral vision and professional career, they could not avoid seeing her without Hijab covering her hair. Among these were people who were calling her for guidance until she wore the hijab. Talking to several Omani voters, who supported her, they concluded that “without a doubt that Hijab matter played a fundamental role” in not voting for Basma (personal communications, 2019). Despite the voices and people that endorsed her, this issue resulted in a counter campaign.¹⁸ People who defended her on social media arrived at deep religious debates in comparing the Hijab to corruption, and asking about which is more important in the life of the Omani citizens. This campaign was not the first against Basma. Al-Kiyumi (2017) published an article in which she talked about the harassment inflicted on her in official institutions. Al-Kiyumi was harassed because she is a lawyer, who does not wear the Hijab, and in this article, she defended her right to choose what to wear as long as she did not violate any laws.¹⁹ Basma's personal choice is a private issue that impacted her even in the election race.

A group of Omani citizens said that the first reason that made Basma Al-Kiyumi did not win was not wearing Hijab (personal communication, Oct 27-29, 2019). Most of these Omani citizens supported her, including women wearing Hijab. A school principal in Muscat (personal communication, Oct 28, 2019) said “after the fierce attack she (Basma) was subjected to, I expected that she would not win, some conservatives worked hard to stir public opinion on the pretext that she was “Safera” without wearing Hijab or Unveiled.” The School Principal explained that “Our society is unaware of positive engagement with an ideological difference,” and our judgments of others stem from the principle that an intellectually different person is absolutely wrong (personal

¹⁸ See <https://twitter.com/BasmaMubarak/status/1184506127842709509>

¹⁹ The article and the discussion about not wearing Hijab: <https://www.alfalq.com/?p=10666>

communication, Oct 28, 2019). She also mentioned that the dominance of the collective mind is enormous, and no one dares to deviate from this collective mindset, or it will wage a senseless war against him or her.

Another Omani citizen (personal communication, Oct 27, 2019), a male working in the health sector in the eastern region of Oman, said that he wished that Basma had won. However, the health worker mentioned that he was not wholly convinced because Hijab is a religious obligation, and if she had won, she would set an example for many girls and women, and she would have been in the spotlight being a member of the Shura Council. He believes that not wearing the Hijab is a sin, which should not be encouraged. Therefore, he said, there was no doubt that not wearing the Hijab had a role in not securing enough votes for her to win. He also mentioned other causes, such as tribalism and male-dominated society (personal communication, Oct 27, 2019).

Because of her lack of commitment to wearing Hijab, many men and women abstained from voting in Basma's favor, especially in light of the presence of other candidates who appear more religious and conservative and perhaps more representative of the Omani people, even in terms of the outfit. Talking about Omani people leads to the second reason, which is the tribe's strength concerning the other three candidates who got more votes than Basma Al-Kiyumi in the election results. There were two men and a woman, and these three got close vote counts, and Basma followed in fourth place by a big difference. The main issues that distinguished these three contenders from Basma that they are originally from the district they ran in. Also, for the first and second, who won the elections, they are both well-known sons of the district of "Bowsher," and have run in, and were elected representatives in the previous

election.²⁰ Additionally, they have a great legacy and experience that people trust and they displayed more commitment to society's values and traditions.

Reem Al-Zidjali, who placed third, was well-known for Bowsher's people, and compared to Basma, she wears Hijab. Tribes and families supported these three candidates. Before the election period, Omani citizens indicated that Basma was not socially active in Bowsher, and she had a more national vision than district specific. The discussion of women, societal norms and values, society and gender, and campaign management will continue in the chapters assigned for female candidates.

Women in Decision-Making Positions

Considering the new appointments of 15 female members in the state council and two new female ministers on November 2019, and following the announcement of the parliamentary (A'Shura) results with two female winners, I interviewed five female members of state council and five female voters to explore their reaction towards both appointments and elections concerning women's status in politics in Oman. I asked the female state council members and the female voters the questions regarding the mechanism of appointments, the challenges of appointing women for state council and cabinet compared to A'Shura council, and whether or not they think that women's numbers in appointed positions should be equal to males' number, and whether or not, they think that having a more significant number of women in appointed and elected positions would impact policymaking in Oman.

Answers to these questions carried exciting ideas and they are discussed in the following section of this chapter. It was most interesting that, although all ten females

²⁰ See the result of 2015 elections: <http://www.elbalad.news/show.aspx?id=1764280>

agreed that appointing more women has a positive impact on policymaking in Oman, they differ sharply in equal representation and the gender role gap.

According to Oman state basic law article (58) (bis 1) indicates members of state council, known as Majlis Al Dawla, are selected from the following categories: Former Ministers, Undersecretaries of the ministries, and their equivalents. Other categories are former ambassadors, former senior judges, and retired senior officers. They are also selected from those who are known for their competence and experience in the fields of science, arts, and culture, and from professors at universities, colleges, and higher institutes. This is in addition to dignitaries and people in business, and persons who had performed excellent services to the Nation. A final category is whomever His Majesty the Sultan chooses and who does not fall under the previous categories (Royal Decree 101/96, 1996). All members are appointed by a royal decree every four years since the establishment of Majlis Al Dawla in 1997.

All state council female members who participated in this chapter's questions specified that they were selected because of their distinguished work or academic experience. It was clear for them why they were appointed for the state council. One notable exception said that she doesn't know why she was appointed; "Maybe because of my community work." Sabah Al-Bahlani (personal communication, November 29, 2019) was appointed for a second four-year term in the state council. She is known in Oman for her long-time community work on health education and children with disabilities. Badria Al-Shihi, who was also appointed for a second term and elected by state council members as the first deputy to the president of the council, explained that she, additionally to her remarkable work and academic expertise, "represents women clearly and appropriately to Oman society" (personal communication, November 26, 2019). Al-Shihi holds a Ph.D. in Chemical engineering and worked in an oil company

for ten years before she started teaching at Sultan Qaboos University in 2005.

Lujina Mohsen Darwish is a well-known businesswoman²¹. Likewise, she was appointed for a second term in 2019. Darwish said that she was appointed for her accumulated experience in business and economics as well as serving in A'Shura and being active in several civil society organizations, “I have contributions in political, social and economic fields in addition to volunteer work not only on the local and national levels but also internationally” (personal communication, November 28, 2019). She mentioned that selecting state council members depends on “specific and smart criteria represented on the qualifications of the member” (personal Communication, November 28, 2019). Aisha Al-Darmaki, who was appointed for the first time, said that she was selected to represent the “intellectual and women categories” (personal Communication, November 30, 2019). Al-Darmaki is a known writer and university professor. She holds a Ph.D. degree in Arabic literature and has been the head of board members of Oman Cultural Club for several years since 2014-2019. Aisha Al-Ghabshi is a new member at the state council but a longtime anchor at Oman National Television. She was the director of the Sultan Qaboos Award for culture, arts, and literature before she retired in 2017, and she holds a Ph.D. degree in Media studies. Al-Ghabshi, also highlighted her qualifications as the reasons behind her appointment but also summarized as all other female participants that it is a royal decision made by the Sultan of the country (personal communications, November 19-December 2, 2019).

All participants in this chapter's questions, whether appointed state members or female voters, agreed that women appointed to serve in State council/Majlis Al Dawla

²¹ She was elected twice for Majlis A'Shura and served two terms from 2001-2007

are usually known for their remarkable experience and academic knowledge in the fields of their expertise. However, female voters did not have a clear idea about the selecting mechanism from the categories mentioned in the basic law of the state. A female voter mentioned that “we do not know how these members are selected” and “it seems that qualified women are selected” nevertheless, it is not clear how the selection process happens or who nominates these women or men for state council membership (personal communications, November 23-December 3, 2019). Although appointments come from the head of the state, the Sultan, according to the categories specified in the law, there are questions concerning some categories like the last two categories: persons who had performed excellent services to the nation, and whomever his Majesty the Sultan chooses and who does not fall under other categories mentioned in this law. According to the law, selecting women's criteria is equal to men's, yet the number of women appointed is far from equal despite women's qualifications and distinguished careers and expertise. This situation raises a question regarding who selects women for leadership positions, whether the decision is made by the Sultan of Oman solely or with the assistance of advisors and councils; ultimately, the decision is made by males who can, if they want, to appoint more or less number of women depending on their values and their perspective on women's political leadership. It could be said that the absence of women from governmental decision-making positions could also explain why women have less presence in Majlis Al Dawla.

State Council Versus Majlis A'Shura

All-female participants said that electing women in parliamentary elections and winning seats in Majlis A'Shura is hard, and female candidates face significant challenges compared with selecting female members to state council membership. Most participants (8) said that there are no challenges to confront women's appointment to

the state council because appointing women comes from the highest authority in the country. However, two participants mentioned challenges that could hinder the appointment of women in the state council such as the availability of qualified women in specific areas of expertise like military, security, and tribal leadership, because usually men are the army leaders and the Sheikhs of the tribes. Al-Darmaki, (personal communication, November 30, 2019) mentioned also that selecting women for Majlis Al Dawala is based on “objective standards” more than it happens for Majlis A’Shura, because “the government insists on having women’s representation in all positions and forums.” The state council member defended appointing more men than women in the council despite the “objective standards” by saying that the total number of men with experience is more than the number of women because they have been in high positions longer than women, especially in specific areas like in military, security, tribes and even in Majlis A’Shura. While Al-Ghabshi (personal communications, November 19-December, 2019) mentioned another challenge that could discourage the government from appointing a more significant number of women, related to “women’s refusal to be under the light and to be seen.” Al-Ghabshi explained that many women in Oman are content with their lives and do not seek a higher position; they do not want to compete and be in the public sphere. The newly-appointed state council member says, although women’s appointment faces another challenge that is represented in “male officials who do not believe in women’s capabilities,” she thinks the major challenge is that “women do not demand their rights and do not seek to get them” (Al-Ghabshi, personal Communications, November 19-December, 2019). The second term appointee Al-Shihi (personal communication, November 26, 2019) supported this notion of women's hesitation and advised that “women should change the society’s perception regarding women’s qualifications and capabilities, and “we should, as women, get out

of the circle of our shyness and the social determinants.” Al-Shihi (2019) recommended that women should educate the younger generation to overcome such challenges. Stressing that male domination in the state council is the norm, Darwish, (personal communication, November 28, 2019) thinks that the reason behind that could be “the rejection of Omani women to be involved in politics and public life.” She also stressed that male domination in the council does not mean “inequality or imbalance in the selection system.” The business-woman affirmed that Oman’s government provided for women’s “fairness and equality,” and Omani women have been treated as “full partner” in building the country; therefore Omani women should work harder, learn skills, and get qualifications to attain national and international experience and they should work with civil society and social organizations (personal communication, November 28, 2019). Darwish (2019) agreed with Al-Darmaki’s (2019) idea regarding the reason behind men’s domination in the state council, which is “qualified men outnumber women” with the same qualifications and expertise. Darwish also agreed with Al-Ghabshi’s (2019) idea which refers to women's attitude towards politics, and said that “women should not content themselves with their family and social duties, they should balance the duties of private and public lives, prioritize and manage time” (personal communication, November 28, 2019).

Although most of the participants agreed on the basic issue that the appointment of women to the state council does not face challenges because the process is a royal order, it is interesting to analyze the reasons some of the participants highlighted explaining the small number of women appointed to the state council. While most of the female state council members think that women do not face challenges due to the appointment, they also stressed that they were selected because of their remarkable qualifications. Moreover, while all of the members believe that many other qualified

Omani women deserve to be members of the state council, some of them would justify the Sultan or the government refraining from appointing more women for the same reason, which is the scarcity of qualified women. Even with regard to the argument related to men's superior qualifications in specific fields, as mentioned earlier, female participants argued that women also have better understanding and experience in other fields, an issue that all female participants agreed on.

Regarding the challenges facing women in reaching Majlis A'Shura, the female participants in this chapter mostly agreed that women face significant difficulties which could not be compared to the challenges of appointing women to the state council/Majlis Al Dawala. Nevertheless, participants vary on prioritizing the challenges. Their opinions range between reasons blaming only women for failure to win the elections, and reasons which blamed the society's values and male domination mentality. According to the female participants, there are two main challenges pulling women back and preventing them from winning: the first is women themselves, and the second is social values. However, participants mentioned other challenges that contribute to strengthening the wall of difficulties women must overcome to reach their goal. For example Al-Shihi said that loyalty to "hometowns, tribes and family prestige as well as social reservation on women's presence in a mixed political environment" adds to the challenges facing women during the elections " (personal communication, November 26, 2019).

While most of the participants considered society's rejection as the main obstacle standing in front of women candidates, one participant said: " I think the Omani society overcame this issue a long time ago, I do not think that people would refuse to vote for women because of their gender." This female voter also said: "it could be a challenge in a few areas only, not all women face this challenge. Generally, I think

if women in Oman are qualified, they have chances to win.” She highlighted that in an election process, we “cannot force people to vote for a woman if she is not qualified.” Another female voter stressed the idea that “Omani people do not reject women’s presence in Majlis A’Shura; on the contrary, people are supporting especially men;” she gave examples of mayors of some districts in the country, who encourage women to run for the elections. She supported her position by mentioning that people reelected several women to represent them in A’Shura. Her justification for electing more men than women is that men have significant or long experience and an understanding of public life and know how to communicate with people.

Furthermore, this female voter said that “a small number of women is not an imbalance; it is an expected result for the small number of women candidates.” Also, she mentioned that despite the small number of women candidates, people kept voting and electing women in all terms except for one term wherein no woman won. Other participants mentioned that there were many qualified women; some of them are more qualified than male contenders, but they could not win. Unfortunately, qualifications are not enough. Al-Ghabshi, who considered running for A’Shura election in 2019 but refrained because she did not want to be “involved in political games,” said she saw that people were expecting from the elected member to be his/her personal agent, not the district representative (personal communication, November 28, 2019). Al-Ghabshi found herself in politics despite this, after her appointment in November 2019 as a state council member. Her advice to qualified women who seek running for parliamentary election is to be “close to the community not only by volunteering, but also by being truly a community member;” not for the goal of winning the election, but being entrenched in the society and trusted by people (Al-Ghabshi, personal communication, November 28, 2019).

A decreased number of women candidates is another challenge concerning A’Shura elections, which allows “the male-dominated mentality [to] stay steadfast,” (Voter# 3, personal communications, November 23, 2019) a female voter said, explaining that fewer women candidates reduces their chances to win. A more significant number of male candidates brings a greater number of male winners. Another female voter (Voter# 2, personal communications, November 29, 2019) indicated that, although the number of women candidates increased in the last election to 40 female candidates, it is still a small number when compared to the number of male candidates. She said: “it could be because society still prefers males as representatives for social and tribal considerations.” While the female voter put that as a possibility, Al-Bahlani does not doubt that “society is not ready to choose women” (personal communication, November 29, 2019). She explained that society in general and women in particular, vote for candidates who come from their tribes or their community. Therefore “even when professional and capable women ran, they were not elected” (Al Bahlani, personal communication, November 29, 2019).

Evoking her experience in running elections, Darwish mentioned additional challenges, but they were different from the rest of the female participants; relating these challenges to election campaign management and the election agenda, she said: “these are number 1 priority” (personal communication, November 28, 2019). She also highlighted the impact of the small number of women candidates, which allowed for and contributed to men outnumbering women winners. Darwish who won the parliamentary elections twice in 2003 and 2007, said that “women do not provide the appropriate time and resources for the election campaigns,” and that is because “women are too busy with their families’ commitments and that is why women, also, do not consider running for elections” in more significant numbers as it is seen among male

candidates (personal communication, November 28, 2019).

Two observations could be noted regarding the challenges facing women in the elections; the first is that all women participants agreed that women candidates face additional and different challenges from those that men face. For instance, even if and when women are qualified and pay the appropriate time and resources to the election campaign, she could face other factors that require additional effort. Furthermore, gender roles play a significant factor in hindering women from considering running for the elections. A small number of women candidates also limits women's chances of winning more broadly.

The second observation is that the major challenges mentioned by a female who experienced the elections are entirely different from other challenges mentioned by other female participants, whether they are voters or state council members. The fact that Darwish won two elections draws the attention to a different understanding of the election experience and adds a new perspective to the collective knowledge about women and their limited participation in politics. Moreover, it is an indication of what might other women candidates, who are the targeted category of this dissertation research, say about their own experience and understanding concerning the challenges and the process they went through during the election periods.

Announcing the new members of the state council directly after the announcement of A'Shura results indicates the state's direction, specifically regarding empowering women's presence in the political sphere and decision-making positions. A female voter said that selecting 15 women only as state council members is "absolutely enough" because it is consistent with social values and the collective mind which is predisposed to males. She explained that increasing women's numbers is a sensitive issue that could lead to "community congestion, which the country is not

ready to face because of people's lack of awareness." On the other hand, as she mentioned, "the government cannot reduce the number because it would contradict the state policy in encouraging women's involvement and participation at all levels and spheres" (Voter# 1, personal communications, November 23, 2019).

This argument could explain the status quo of women in Oman because Oman has been seen as a progressive country in terms of women's rights when compared with other Gulf countries. Omani family law, for example, granted women rights that were previously, and are currently, denied to other Arab women; for example, the right to divorce a husband and to be paid by her husband for nursing babies. Women in Oman also enjoy other rights that are still problematic in other advanced countries. However, Omani women have to overcome several legal and social issues to gain a few more rights. To overcome these issues, women must be part of the political and legislative procedures, and for this to happen, a more significant number of women are needed in the legislative bodies and at higher positions, where decision making is taking place.

Furthermore, with Oman being considered as progressive in the arena of women's rights, the government should work to maintain the reputation of the country. They can pave the road for women, primarily because of the top-down nature of policy implementation in Oman. Most of Oman's plans and national strategies are decided and enforced by the government, as is the case with most monarchies. In 1994 when a royal decree was issued announcing the full and equal political participation for women, people thought that was progressive, and at that time, women ran for the elections, with two winning and being re-elected the following term. Whenever the Sultan appointed a new female as a minister and members in the state council, no one rejected or refused women in their new positions; on the contrary, people were thankful and appreciative. Nevertheless, women's progress is slow, and heavily dependent on the top-down

decision. The question which arises here is: why is the government hesitant regarding appointing a more significant number of women in the cabinet and the state council? Especially considering current government members announce their faith in women and their beliefs in equal and full participation of women. The answer could be one of the participant's answers mentioned above, either because some government officials do not believe in women's participation, as they often announce, or because the government tries to balance between the results of majlis A'Shura elections, considering it as an indication of people's preference, and the government's orientation to a more progressive role for women.

Women in Policymaking

Women's perspective and experience have a positive impact on policymaking in Oman, and females' experiences could benefit development plans, especially in specific areas. Having women in leadership and decision-making positions would change laws and national strategies. This statement is the only answer upon which all women participants in this chapter agreed, without doubts or hesitation. Female state council members and female voters, as well, established this idea that there are some fields and areas in social and educational sectors that need women's perspective and knowledge. Participants said that women know better than the males in such fields, including in education, child-care, and women's issues.

Appointing women ministers is also the Sultan's decision. Currently, in 2019, there are only four women ministers in Oman government, and two of them were appointed on November 7, 2019. The state member Al-Bahlani said that more women participating at higher levels as ministers, undersecretaries, and CEOs of companies in "developing policies results in tangible gains creating conducive and more sustainable development" (personal communication, November 29, 2019).

Nevertheless, some female participants expressed their views regarding women's number in appointed positions and described it as "enough," affirming that the "government knows better" and female appointments "depend on the state vision." Most of the participants (8 out of 10) said qualifications are more important than the number. A female participant said, "one qualified woman could be better than twenty unqualified women;" therefore, a woman could be a better representation for women than many others.

A female voter argued that there are some female ministers who did not make a difference during their service, she said: "It is not vital to have an equal number of men and women in high positions, most important to have women in these positions and this number is increasing." (Voter# 4, personal communications, December 2, 2019)

Although Al- Bahlani stressed that it is crucial to have a more significant number, she was thankful that the number of women in an appointed high position is increasing and said: "it is good as a start" (personal communication, November 29, 2019).

The number is not increasing, nor it is the start for Oman's government to have four women ministers. Since 2011, when a new female was appointed as the Minister of Education, there have been only two female ministers until the announcement of 2 new female Ministers for Communications and Art in late 2019. The start was in 2004, when three new women ministers were appointed as ministers of Higher Education, Tourism, and Social Development, in addition to a female appointed Minister of Crafts, who did not have a cabinet portfolio, in 2003.

When asking female participants, whether they think the number of females appointed as ministers or in the state council is enough and suitable representation of women, this question provoked few participants' strong feelings about equality, although the question, in the beginning, was not about equality. A female voter said:

“in principle equality between men and women is impossible” (Voter# 5, personal communications, December 3, 2019), from her point of view; this is about ratio on the one hand and success on the other hand. There are more qualified men than women in many fields, she explained, and that is the reason why the government cannot find easily qualified women for the higher position. She said: “government is looking for qualified women, and they cannot be found.” Men are available; therefore, they are appointed in a bigger number than women in high and decision-making positions. As for success, this female voter asked: “why it is important for women to hold high positions in order to be successful? And why when women hold higher positions; they must be equal to men. I do not believe in this” (Voter# 5, personal communications, December 3, 2019).

While Al-Bahlani described having four women ministers as a good start, she demanded more women appointments in such positions; “more women with different backgrounds are needed in Majlis Al Dawla” and she explained that women could make a big difference in creating favorable policies to serve the community (personal communication, November 29, 2019). Half of the female voters think that a more prominent number of women in the state council and at the ministerial level would be better for policymaking. However, they do not think an equal number of men and women is necessary.

Furthermore, they think the current number of women representatives in government is enough and suitable for the time being. Al-Ghabshi emphasized that “equality will never happen,” nonetheless, women’s numbers should be more significant in government and state council because women’s population is as significant as men (personal communication, November 28, 2019). They are educated and have the experience and qualifications in several fields of specialization. Al-Darmaki stressed that “increasing women’s number in political positions is a

fundamental matter, it shows the appreciation of the government for women's skills and expertise in various areas" (personal communication, November 30, 2019). She added that "although there are four women ministers, the number should be increased" whether in the government or the state council, and she explained that increasing the number of women would create support them in the eye of the society, saying this "would open the way for women to Majlis A'Shura seats" (personal communication, November 30, 2019). Al-Shihi commented that the percentage of women ministers in Oman is more prominent than other Arab countries, which is around 14%, and according to her, appointing, two new women ministers "indicates that the Sultan (Qaboos) have confidence in women's capability in holding responsibilities in the state's executive branch in addition to the legislative branch" (personal communication, November 26, 2019). She expressed her hopes that women get more empowerment with the support and the understanding of the people.

Despite consent on the importance of women's qualifications and perspective, participants' positions varied regarding the equal representation of women in government, the state council, and majlis A'Shura between strongly disagreeing and strongly agreeing with appointing a more significant or equal number of women to men. Half of the female participants had a problem in talking about an equal number of women's political representation because they did not want to compromise other issues like education, skills, proficiency, and other qualifications. However, they also did not want to talk about equal rights. Some expressed reservations about women having equal rights to men, and some did not want to appear like they were criticizing the government for not appointing a more significant number of women at leadership and decision-making positions. Three of the female participants expressed their opinions about equality and equal rights explicitly. They think women are born to fulfill specific roles,

competing with men is not among them. One of them said: “I am against who says that women should be in decision-making positions like men, I do not think women can perform like men in Majlis A’Shura.” She explained that women, because they are married and have kids, do not have the time nor the energy to pursue political and leadership positions, stressing her belief that “men are protectors and maintainers of women” while mentioning the Quran Surah An nisa 34 *“Alrrijalu qawwamoona AAala alnnisai bima faddala Allahu baAAadahum AAala baAAadin wabima anfaqoo min amwalihim*), which means: “Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth”.²² Therefore, women have different roles in the family from men’s role.

Al-Ghabshi said that women's rights do not exist even in democratic countries in Europe and other developed countries (personal communication, November 28, 2019). She explained that many women do not wish for high positions, they think of “staying home taking care of her children,” and this is much more important for them than “competing with men in their daily duties” (personal communication, November 28, 2019). Al-Ghabshi divided women’s and men’s roles according to “our traditions”; it is the man’s job to go out and provide for his family, and it is the woman’s role to stay home, raise children, and take care of them,” hence, it is impossible, “that women become equal to men.”

A female voter participant expressed her disagreement with equal representation of women, but for a different reason. She articulated that women are capable of doing what men do; however, society is not as supportive as it is supposed to be. The female voter mentioned that rejection women confront, even from other

²² - see for full translation: <http://www.alquranenglish.com/quran-surah-an-nisa-34-vs-4-34-in-arabic-and-english-translation>

women, makes them hesitant and leads them to withdraw from the public sphere. She added that women sometimes feel the burden of responsibility, and they think that they might fail in fulfilling their promises and duties.

Only two female participants answered, “yes, women should be equal to men in their leadership level” because women have the insight into family needs; therefore, they can have a more exceptional contribution to the development of the country. Of these two females, one is a voter and the other a state council member. Although the female voter was positive about equal numbers, she highlighted that “increasing number should not compromise the quality.” Moreover, women who are appointed for high-level positions should be “distinctive and know how to represent women.” The state council's first deputy Al-Shihi thinks that representation should not be reflected in numbers. It is “not necessary to have an equal number” to men. From her point of view, it is necessary to have “fair, effective, and influential representation” rather than representation depends on a big number (personal communication, November 26, 2019). Hence, selecting women with high qualifications that are suitable for the position is the most crucial aspect for successful institutions.

Darwish has different approaches for the equality problem. She supports applying the quota system in both councils. However, she thinks it is difficult to ask for quota in the executive branch because the nature of the jobs requires specific qualifications and proficiency. These kinds of positions in the government should be open to competition and qualification standards. Darwish emphasized this should be applied for both men and women equally, saying ‘nothing but efficiency and equal opportunity to compete,’ and highlighting that many women in Oman have managed high position with proficiency and made strategic plans and decisions,. As a result, “there is no place for misunderstanding that men are more capable than women in such

positions” (personal communication, November 28, 2019).

Female participants raised questions about: what is the good and the fair representation of women? Is it a significant number or qualifications? This argument about quality and number started while answering the question about equal representation of men and women in elected and appointed positions. It was a problematic question for them, and their answers reflected this reluctance towards demanding a more significant number of women. Female participants think that a qualified woman is a better representation than many who are not. They all agree that efficiency and remarkable expertise should be the master standard in selecting men and women. However, some of them could not determine whether women could be equal to their male counterparts.

Female participants also mentioned that giving equal opportunities and fair legislation would have a positive impact on males and females. Al-Darmaki said “when appointing men and women, we should first look for qualification, an appointment should not happen because of the social or economic status of the appointees. All candidates should be equal when nominating either of them” (personal communication, November 30, 2019).

Al-Bahlani said, “We are half of the society I think it is important that women in a leadership role serve their country and participate in development” (personal communication, November 29, 2019). Although Al- Ghabshi thinks that equality is impossible and will never happen, not only in Oman but also in other democratic and developed countries, she says that women’s representation should be according to women’s percentage in the population. Al-Shihi mentioned the concept of “fair representation” and “effective representation” while avoiding using “equal representation” (personal communication, November 26, 2019). A female voter said:

“I do not believe in absolute equality between men and women, but I demand equal opportunities in employment and education and other civil rights” (Voter# 1, personal communications, November 23, 2019). Another female voter participant highlighted that if we talk about number, then women should be appointed in equal number with men especially when qualified women are available; the problem from her point of view, is that people do not know the procedure of the nomination for high positions in Oman like ministers, undersecretaries, and state council members. Usually, a royal decree would be issued to announce a new appointment for high positions in the government or CEOs of companies owned by the government. According to personal communication, a few Oman officials said that they did not know about the nomination until they saw their names published, or in some cases, a high ranking official would call telling the nominee that a royal decree is about to be issued including his or her name. When Darwish mentioned that nomination should be done only according to “merit and efficiency,” and this standard should be “equal for men and women,” she seemed to confirm the common perception of how the nomination is happening (personal communication, November 28, 2019).

People in Oman view nomination for high positions as an award or a reward for the nominees then appointees. According to the State Basic law article (58) (bis2), the Sultan of Oman can select individuals who provided remarkable service for the country, in addition to, selection could include any other individual whom the Sultan perceives her or him as a good nominee. The state council member Al-Darmaki highlighted that nomination should not happen according to “social prestige, financial capabilities, or other considerations;” and she stressed that nomination should look into the nominees’ “expertise and qualifications equally” (personal communication, November 30, 2019). Overall female participants’ perspective is that fair representation and a good

representation of women in elected and appointed positions should be based on merit, efficiency, and qualification. Despite some participants have reservations on using the word or demanding “equality,” they agreed that men and women should be nominated and elected according to their qualifications and skills, not for other non-related considerations.

It is noteworthy, that most of female participants did not want to criticize the state’s policies not only because they thought such issue is sensitive political issue but also because they did not want to confront the social and cultural values which they think is their obligation to uphold. This shows the power of the dominant culture and the control of social and official institutions such as educational and media institutions that emphasized the role of women in preserving the traditions and respecting the values of the society. Moreover, the female participants highlighted the importance of qualifications for both men and women, and mentioned that some female ministers did not make a difference while they were in the high position; however, they did not mention that there were male ministers who did not make a difference and they were not qualified. This shows that female participants evaluate women with different standards than those they apply to male ministers. Nevertheless, the participants’ approach showed a concern towards women’s representation in the sense that they wanted a qualified female minister who can represent women well and encourage the government to appoint more women. The participants were aware that men have the ground and the power, and women need to advocate their qualifications and skills and persuade the male-dominated government that they deserve a better and fair representation even if it is not equal. Oman as a rentier state produced a rentier society mentality, where people usually do not demand, instead they wait for the state to issue decrees and statements of appointments, and as a result, people should not invoke the

decision-makers, which is what women learnt and are used to.

Furthermore, female participants emphasized that nomination, like candidacy, should happen through competition, which allows men and women equally to display their qualifications for a specific position. Most female participants think that a large number of women do not matter as much as the quality of the female candidate or the nominee for an appointment. Although few female participants did not mention it explicitly, social values affect women's candidacy for elections and the appointment for high positions. Traditional values could lead to directly not voting for women or appointing them. Furthermore, it could happen indirectly, as well. For example, a woman hesitates to run for election because of gender roles that society assigned to her, and her priority is her house and children. Also, she may have the perception that serving in public life is not among her duties; it is a man's responsibility.

Although a female participant mentioned that qualified women compared to men are few in Oman, another participant highlighted that less qualified women only apply to specific fields such as military and security in addition to tribal leadership since women cannot be "Sheikh" of a tribe. However, most participants agreed that qualified women are available, and they should have equal opportunity in nominations and candidacy. Furthermore, all-female participants agreed that women are better qualified in education, social development, women's issues, childcare, and entrepreneurship. Nevertheless, women have social challenges that not only affect their candidacy and winning the elections, they also affect the decision maker's orientation in the size of women's appointments for the high positions in the government and elected councils.

Modern or Traditional?

Modernizing women has been a cumbersome task, and it is hard to determine the factors that impact the process. It is also delicate and sensitive because it touches

every aspect of women's lives, from the very bottom to the very top. Initiatives and policies that require a change in social values or disturb the status of family and women confronts a hard resistance from various sides of the society: government, political, legal, economic, and religious institutions. Al-Haj (1996) said that

"the most critical challenge to Qabus' regime, however, comes from modernization and its values which conflict with traditional Omani culture. Modernizing political and economic institutions implies some form of Westernization, and whenever the process of modernization has had an impact in the Gulf region, it has contributed, to some extent, to secularization (p.568)".

To the religious people this is unacceptable. Within this rough environment, women need, first to galvanize their efforts, and organize themselves and women's rights supporters, second, to educate, third to move forward. The absence of women's movements in Oman and the gulf avert reaching the egalitarian Gulf society.

Furthermore, the social and political hardships that the older generation of women activists and candidates faced when trying to network and gather support for equality hindered younger generations from being advocates for more advanced, balanced roles for women. Kandiyoti (1988) argues that despite the obstacles that classic patriarchy puts in women's way, which may far outweigh any actual economic and emotional security, women often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives.

The Oman basic law of the state(Royal Decree, 101/1996) grants equality and the Omani government signed the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2005; however, there are few reservations which are not lifted yet, including the citizenship law, and some of the national laws have not confirmed with the equality clause in the Basic Law and the provisions of CEDAW to ensure that the laws do not discriminate against women (Al-Talei, 2006&2009).

Since there are 65 branches of Omani Women's Associations across the country with over 10,000 female members and they all work under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Development, the ministry should work with the OWAs to provide skills training and create centers that offer elections campaign management and opportunities for networking between women candidates (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). The OWAs should organize classes in both rural and urban areas for female voters on issues concerning women's representation and supporting qualified female candidates. Few female participants mentioned that active civil society organizations and independent women's associations would play a fundamental role in empowering women politically. However, the absence of free and active civil society deepened the challenges that Omani women face because they cannot advocate their issues and defend their rights. The law of civil society organizations does not allow any political activity within the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), and it requires NGOs to obtain permits for any events and activities. Discussing women's rights and political participation could be unfavored by some institutions and therefore, it could put NGOs under question and investigations. The Establishment of independent women's NGOs, alongside with the existing women's associations would help in educating women about their legal and political rights and how to exercise their rights effectively.

Summary

This chapter aimed to present Omani women's status and provide information about women in the social, political, and public, legal, and economic spheres that are related to women's political participation in the election and other public and leadership positions. Historical background about women's involvement in public life and politics were part of this chapter's goals, in addition to an overview analysis concerning the

results of the 2019 election regarding women candidates and female winners. Most importantly, this overview is supported by 10 female participants' views and opinions regarding challenges facing women's appointments for high positions and women's candidacy and electability.

This chapter asked questions about the challenges and difficulties facing women in public life and elections, and women's political participation in Oman and investigated the factors that pull women back and reverse their march to broader public and political participation. This situation leaves women under-represented in the elected councils, the government, and the civil society organizations. This chapter presented women's perspectives, from women who are or were involved in the field of politics and public life. The mainstream assumption was that female participants' perspective regarding women's involvement in political participation would highlight different reasons other than social values and male-dominated culture, as the significant reason behind women's limited participation.

I assumed, in Oman's case, that political environment and legal restrictions are the first main reasons that pull Omani people, including women, back. While the second reason would be women's personality and qualifications, because with few elected women, people had consented that they were qualified and better than male candidates. For some women who lost, it could be that they were not qualified enough. However, the answers of various female participants from different backgrounds showed different prioritization of the reasons. Although the political environment and legal restraints were mentioned, as well as women's qualifications, they were not the leading reasons behind women's inadequate political participation. Traditional gender roles and male-dominated culture produced by social norms and cultural values, according to female participants' perspective, were the leading factors pulling women backward. However,

they think that female candidates' lack of confidence and campaign management skills play a massive role on female candidates' failures to win seats in Majlis A'Shura.

Additionally, the absence of women's movements and women's rights organizations adds to the challenges that women face. The legal framework of NGOs and political associations applies many restrictions on civil voice and public liberties and human rights groups, which makes people, especially women, hesitant from engaging in politics because of fear of punishment. When a woman decides to run for an election, political and legal restraints added to social resistance and male-dominated culture, forms thick layers of challenges. If family support is absent too, a woman in many cases cannot continue as it has happened in some cases. Female participants emphasize that women more than men need to be prepared for elections at many levels, such as educational, social, political, and legal aspects. Female candidates also need family support, specifically from male relatives, who would participate in presenting and approving a new role for women, which is not traditional but positive for women and society.

Regarding appointing women for high and leadership positions as ministers and state council members, female participants said that although the mechanism of nomination is not known for the public, qualifications and efficiency should be the standards of nomination, and that should be applied equally to female and male nominees. However, female participants think that women appointed for the state council and cabinet are qualified despite the small number of women appointees compared to males' number. They also mentioned that the result of A'Shura election affects the number of female appointees, which is usually bigger than females elected in A'Shura (2 elected vs. 15 appointed in 2019). However, appointing women for the state council and cabinet does not pose any challenges compared with challenges

female candidates face in the elections.

Exploring females' perspectives in this chapter presented rich and various ideas and views regarding women's political participation in Oman. Perspectives varied according to females' experiences, education, and social values. A remarkable difference is noticeable in views between female participants who experienced public positions and ran in elections, and the voters who never experienced running in the elections. Views also varied between females who held high positions in the government and females who did not. That is what makes, according to standpoint theory, every woman unique because of her experience and her point of view. The focus of this dissertation research is to investigate female candidates' perspective and experience concerning women's political participation in Oman, and the females' views presented in this chapter offered perspectives from different social locations and different experience than the experience of the female candidates' views and perspective, and these various experiences and perspectives allowed the researcher to compare and reach better and a more complete understanding of women's political participation in Oman in the final analysis and discussion.

The next chapter discusses the reasons that motivated the female candidate participants to run, as well as the social and cultural challenges and difficulties they encountered during running in the elections. Additionally, the female candidates compare the challenges they face to the male candidates' challenges, while stressing the factors impacted their chances of winning the elections.

CHAPTER 3: FEMALE CANDIDATES, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Omani female candidate participants presented a wide range of challenges they encountered while running in the elections and coming out to the public sphere. From family opposition, tribal discrimination, and limited resources to religious restrictions and the spread of money in exchange for votes, female candidates tackled and navigated unpaved roads aspiring for more political participation. These challenges and other controversial issues such as women's votes and male domination, and quality versus quantity of representation, are the topic of this chapter. It aims to explore female candidates' perspectives regarding the impact of social and cultural values on women's political participation in Oman, and to understand why the participants were motivated to run in the elections. This chapter's goal is to describe and interpret the participants' perspectives on the challenges of the election experiences and issues surrounding it according to the concepts and the techniques of phenomenology method and standpoint theory by seeking "stronger objectivity" on the factors which prevent female candidates from progressing in the elections. This chapter explores several issues related to female candidates such as the positions of the candidates' families regarding their candidacy, challenges they faced as politician versus males' challenges, and the society's reaction to female candidacy. Also, it looks at how gender inequality, and gender roles impacted voting for female candidates. This chapter discusses the perspectives of 25 female candidates on cultural and social values as factors in the elections and whether these factors formed an environment which hindered female candidates in obtaining larger political participation.

Females Motivations for Candidacy

Thirteen out of twenty-five female candidates, or more than half of the participants, mentioned political participation, women's rights, and women's issues as

the main reason behind their decisions to run for the elections. Four participants said that people in their communities suggested they run and then they decided, and six said that they ran to serve their country and community. Changing society and bringing new ideas was the goal of one female candidate, and one said she ran only to change the election campaign structure to a new form with specific design and goals. However, each female candidate had her own story to tell about how she decided and announced her candidacy. Most participants, although they said they ran because they believed in women's role in politics, did not specify a single issue that related to women that they wanted to advocate for. Also, they used more general and broader issues such as "serving community and country". Eman Al-Ghafri was the only female candidate who said that she ran because it is her right as a woman to participate and to "fight all kinds of inequality and discrimination against women."²³

Other female candidates were not as clear about women's rights and fighting inequality and discrimination. While many ran to support women or to change society, they were hesitant to talk about inequality and discrimination against women. However, after these women concluded their election campaign, their experience made them change their perspectives about state and society²⁴. Another female candidate mentioned that her experience in volunteering, especially in women's and children's issues, provided her with skills in women's development. Shakera²⁵ said that she decided to run because she wanted to present several issues related to women in the discussion tables of Majlis A'Shura; saying, "no one talks about women's issues in

²³ Eman was interviewed on Dec 3, 2019. She ran for A'Shura in 2019 in alseeb district, governate of Muscat.

²⁴ The essence of the experience and the meaning that female candidates grasped from this profound involvement is to be discussed in the following chapters.

²⁵ Shakera ran for A'Shura in 2019 in Rustaq. She was interviewed on Feb 9, 2020. Rustaq is a district in albatina south governate, about 100 kms from Muscat.

A’Shura because most of the representatives are men.” Shakera believes she can advocate for women’s issues and help in solving some of the problems facing women through Majlis A’Shura. Ameera, Muna and Mahfūza, who all ran in 2019 for A’Shura, also said that they ran because they believe in women’s political role and they wanted to support women’s issues and their communities in Majlis A’Shura. They mentioned that women are still not given full opportunity to display their skills and qualifications. Furthermore, they wanted to change perception concerning women’s ability to represent and lead.

In A’Shura elections of 2019, Fadīla Al-Ruhaili²⁶ won one seat of the two reserved for Sohar²⁷, and her motivation was her belief in women’s role in political participation and women’s roles in the society at large. Fadīla explained her vision about women’s role in A’Shura, saying “I am convinced that the Majlis has legislative and monitoring powers that can rise to people’s aspirations; however, such powers require a special qualifications that a representative should have in order to serve. I believe strongly that women are qualified for such role and mission.”

Working with people, especially women, in the community and in the NGOs, pushed most female candidates to run for elections. They considered serving their communities and people a life-time commitment. They thought they would serve people better as elected officials because they know the problems and how to solve them. They explained that they felt responsible to do more to help people and they thought that running to win a seat in Majlis A’Shura or the municipal councils would give them a stronger platform to continue serving people and communities. Sana Alma’shari was elected twice in 2012 and 2016 for the municipal council in Al’amerat

²⁶ Fadila was interviewed on March 7, 2020

²⁷ A district in albatina governate, it is 200 kms from Muscat.

district in the capital city governate. She won in the first municipal election announced in Oman in 2012. It was remarkable that four women won in the first municipal councils' elections in the country, at a time when women were still struggling to win more than two seats in Majlis A'Shura. Sana highlighted that her volunteer roles in the society led her to make the running decision, saying,

“After the official announcement of the municipal elections, I realized that I can serve my community and I was close to people because of my volunteering, I thought there are issues under my expertise in education and social development, as well my interest in environment, and public health issues, I thought that being in the council will provide me with a unique opportunity to push and help in changing laws in the municipal sector.”²⁸

Another example is Zahra Al-Hinai who spent her entire career working with people, especially poor families and people with special needs or disabilities²⁹. In 2019, she decided to run for A'Shura elections in Alseeb³⁰, one of the capital city's districts. Zahra explained that she ran because of the experience she gained working with people for 26 years. Nevertheless, Zahra did not think about the elections before people approached and asked her to run.

Another female candidate said that her work in the community as head of women's association and volunteer teams pushed her to run for Majlis A'Shura election three times. The last was in 2019, when she lost for the third time. Salema Al-Farsi has 20 years of experience in education:

“my community service in the women's association in the district and other volunteer groups made me close to people and their needs, as well being in the education sector for long years made me known among teachers and parents, that helped later in approaching them when I ran”.³¹

²⁸ Sana was interviewed on Nov 23, 2019.

²⁹ Zahra was interviewed on Feb 9, 2020. Zahra's life was focused on helping communities. She is a professional researcher in the field of disabilities since 1994.

³⁰ One of the largest capital city's districts and the most populated.

³¹ Salema was interviewed on Dec 18, 2019.

Salema's goal was serving people in social and education issues, and to show the country that women could be successful representatives in Majlis A'Shura. Losing two elections did not stop her from running for the third time, realizing that losing might be her result.

Defending people's rights and advocating for women's rights was the force which motivated other participants to run for the elections, despite the initial idea of running being prompted by someone else. The idea of direct political involvement was attractive to them because there was a belief that they could accomplish more by being representatives in Majlis A'Shura. The trust of the people and evaluation of their capabilities persuaded them to run. Samīra Al-Bemani, for example, ran twice in 2011 and 2019 seeking a seat in Majlis A'Shura representing Bahla³². She explained her experience in making the running decision by saying:

“in 2011, when I ran for the first time, it was not my decision, I did not have a reason for running. I was the head of Oman Women’s Association in Bahla and a school principal in the same district, which is my home town, at that time people were happy of my performance in the school and the association, they pushed me to run because they assumed I would be a good representative and they thought that I have good chance to win. People promised me they will stand beside me and provide their support. I ran, I was the first and the only female candidate in the district. In the end of the election, I got the fifth place among 24 candidates. I thought that was encouraging and I thought I should run again.”³³

The first experience of running in the election gave Samīra special insight about her society. She said:

“although I did not win, which was expected because I understood the conservative nature of my district in the Interior of Oman and it was the first time of the history of the district a woman ran for the elections to represent men, Sheikhs, and tribes. I felt people were hesitant because of this; however, getting the fifth place was an indicator that despite the conservatism, people were confident about me and my capability of representing them.”

³² Bahla is a district in the Interior governate, it is about 175 kms west to Muscat.

³³ Sameera was interviewed on Jan 30, 2020.

Driven by women's rights advocacy, Aziza Al-Habsi followed the same path. Her motivation towards advocating for women's representation in the political arena started long before her decision to run for A'Shura for the first time in 2007 and then for the second in 2011.³⁴ She was a well-known journalist working for Oman Newspaper, who defended women's issues and followed women's development in the society and political participation. Aziza explained that she ran because "I wrote about women's issues for 20 years, I recorded all details about women running in the elections, most of them lost but few who won gave us hope. I felt I need to transform my 20 years of professional support of women to political engagement."³⁵ Aziza emphasized that she always looked for a society where women have larger participation in the parliament. She wanted to continue her dedication to women's rights by running twice for Majlis A'Shura; however, winning was not the result waiting for her in both attempts.

Tayba Alma'wali is the very first example of a female running in the elections according to a friend's advice and people's trust that she would be a good representative³⁶. She was one of the first two females elected in 1994. Tayba mentioned that Majlis A'Shura was performing as a municipal council rather than a parliament³⁷. She said: "we did not have to prepare agenda or elections program to present to the people instead we had to go and meet sheikhs of tribes and leaders of areas and towns to know what kind of public services is needed."³⁸ She mentioned that before the official

³⁴ Aziza published in 2020 a book includes her articles on women titled: Women's economic and social empowerment in Oman: journalistic seminars

³⁵ Aziza was interviewed on Dec 17, 2019.

³⁶ In 1994, women were allowed to run for the first time in Oman. Tayba mentioned that at that time, when women allowed for the first time to participate as candidates in the election, candidates had to gather signatures of number of people from their district to get approval for nomination.

³⁷ Although several participants mentioned the word parliament to describe A'Shura council, it is officially do not have the name nor the functions of a parliament.

³⁸ Tayba was interviewed in Muscat on March 8, 2020.

announcement of women's political participation in Oman in 1994, a well-informed friend told her that a statement regarding women's participation is going to be announced soon and he suggested she run. She added: "although I did not have an agenda or any program, like most candidates that time, people believed that I would fight hard for them and for the service the need from the government. Gaining people's trust was my goal."³⁹

As the latest example from 2019 elections, Tahera Al-lawati ran because people in her district insisted. She was one of the two female winners in A'Shura 2019.⁴⁰ Tahera was asked to run for elections before 2019, but she refused. However, when people kept approaching her, she gave it a second thought.⁴¹ Nevertheless, with the support she got from her people she won, marking a scarce and valuable push for Omani women.

The quality and quantity of women's representation in the elected councils was a debatable issue among participants. Although most of the participants did not mention it as a reason behind their candidacy, the aspiration of winning and increasing women's representation was a motivation expressed by mentioning the role of women in politics and leadership. Some said they "believe" in such roles and others said it is "women's right" as citizens to run and represent their communities and serve their country. Nevertheless, few participants thought that women's fair representation matters, instead they favored quality of representation.

Considering that there are only two female representatives in Majlis A'Shura and 7 in the municipal councils, Nasra Alghafri thought that these councils lack larger

³⁹ Tayab was reelected in the following elections in 1997. She served two terms in Majlis A'Shura.

⁴⁰ She won one of two seats reserved for Matrah, a district in Muscat governate.

⁴¹ Tahera was interviewed on Feb 8, 2020.

representation for women. She ran hoping to increase the number of women representatives in A’Shura. Nasra said: “I decided to run because Majlis A’Shura in dire need for several more female representatives.”⁴² Nevertheless, she could not achieve that goal.⁴³ Other female candidates expressed that they ran because they believed that running is a duty of a qualified citizen. Rahma Za’al who ran twice in 2011 and 2019 for Alseeb⁴⁴ said that she ran because it was “ my duty to my country,”⁴⁵ and she think that all Omanis, males and females, should run when they are ready to represent people of their district because running is an obligation and a commitment to the country, arguing that a qualified representative is most important regardless of sex/gender. Service to people and country needs good representatives rather than many representatives.

This issue of performance by representatives was the main reason made S.H decide to run:

“I saw the failure of representatives to talk on behalf of the people and to represent them. After being elected they forgot their promises and distanced themselves from people. They were remote and even changed their phone numbers. I also noticed that they did not serve or provide their districts with any significant achievements.”

She added that: “representative role is to convey people’s suffering to authorities, that why I decide to run, to change perspectives and society perception regarding representative negative attitude towards people.”

Driven by the idea of designing a perfect election’s campaign, Basma was the only participant who ran, initially, only to show people a different and effective election campaign. Campaigning was a major issue among female respondents, yet Basma was

⁴² Nasra was interviewed on Nov 25, 2019.

⁴³ Nasra ran in 2015 for the eighth term of A’Shura elections, in attempt to win a seat for her district Ibri. The district in aldhahira governate, around 3 hours far from Muscat.

⁴⁴ A district in Muscat Governate

⁴⁵ Rahma was interviewed on Feb 9, 2020

the only one who mentioned this goal. For a candidate, winning is the goal and a good campaign is the way to victory. Although Basma set her “perfect campaign” as a goal, she later changed this goal and set winning as the new one.

Basma decided to run in 2019 for the purpose of designing a unique election campaign and laying the base for new structure for candidates’ elections campaigns. Basma Mubark said: “when I decided to run I was not ready to win, I did not think about winning, it was important for me to present a significant election campaign that educate citizens about their rights, what they deserve and what they should expect from their government.”⁴⁶ Basma is a well-known lawyer and activist who played a role in the protests of 2011 during the Arab Spring era.⁴⁷ She started her campaign on the social media platforms, raising awareness about rights and duties according to Oman laws. It was not only the unique campaign approach Basma chose but also her decision to run in the district where she resides rather than the district she comes from, which most candidates would not do because of strategic reasons.

Most candidates prefer to run to represent their original district where they come from, instead of running in one of the capital city’s districts for two reasons: first, family and tribe and second, social status and history. Al-Farsi (2009) mentioned that female candidates in Oman had better chances to win when they ran in their home districts. For Basma the message was most important. However, she was already known in the country for her previous activities as a lawyer and human rights defender. Basma explained: “I work and live in Bowshar, if I had run in my hometown I will have my tribe support but nothing more, people could has asked: why you are running to

⁴⁶ Basma was interviewed on March 7 ,2020.

⁴⁷ Oman must charge or release detained protesters : <https://www.amnesty.ca/news/news-item/oman-must-charge-or-release-detained-protesters>

represent us you don't live here you do not know much about us?" Nevertheless, some people in Bowshar asked her: "why you are running to represent us? You are stranger, you are not from here." However she decided to run to represent people in Bowshar in the Muscat governate district because Basma thought that she should spread a national message related to the constitution (The Basic law of the country) and other laws related to people's rights and obligations towards their country.⁴⁸ Basma achieved her initial goal of such campaign and message; however, she could not win the elections.

Comparison: Candidates' Reasons for Involvement and Voters' Views

Half of the women interviewed ran twice or three times, and some of them ran for both municipal and A'Shura councils, which indicates that female candidates believed that they have a goal to reach and a message to deliver. Most of them are still motivated to run again, despite undesirable results in the past elections. All the participants ran because they thought that they, as women, have a role to play differently in the society because they possess skills and expertise would benefit their communities and country. They believed if they had been elected, they can change policies in the fields they are interested in because they would have more authority and power as a representative, especially in Majlis A'Shura and also in the municipal councils. However, some of them ignored the fact that these councils have limited powers and they have incomplete monitory and legislative authorities.⁴⁹

Despite the passionate enthusiasm among female candidates regarding candidacy, there are two main assumptions in voters' minds, as was discussed in chapter 2, about female candidates' motivation for running. The first is that voter's perceive

⁴⁸ The following chapter is dedicated to the female candidates' elections campaigns. I will discuss further the electoral limitations and challenges

⁴⁹ Intensive discussion about the powers of the elected councils in the next chapter as well.

that they do not have a clear message or election agenda or program to present to people, whereas female candidates answers and their announced thoughts about their motivations tell different stories and present a new perspective. All female candidate participants said that they were running mainly because they believed in the role of women in political participation and serving their people and country, and to change matters such as laws and regulations or practices and social views about women. Most of female candidates specified that they are running to advocate for women's issues. It is worth highlighting that while talking with female candidates, it was notable that those who mentioned changing society and bringing new ideas, also wanted to change negative perspectives about women. However, it was also notable that the few female candidates who answered that their primary goal was to serve the country, did not have in fact a specific goal or agenda that they wanted to emphasize in front of voters or when they are elected. Nevertheless, in the face of that, they felt that they wanted to change society and reality and had ideas about a better place where a woman can play a significant role in her community and country at large. Another remark is that all female candidates, while discussing representation in the elected councils, said that they seek to change the way elected representatives perform. Tayba said that A'Shura council, currently, should perform better than it used to because the Majlis has: "more powers and tools in proposing laws and monitoring the government." Female candidates who agreed and disagreed with this statement thought they could do better if elected than most of current representatives.

The second assumption, mentioned by female voters, is that female candidates did not work with people and communities before running for elections, while half of female candidates interviewed for this research said that they had engaged in women's associations, and /or charity groups and volunteer teams, or some were known for being

activists in human rights and women's rights field. In the group, 13 female candidates were head of association or volunteer groups and forums. I assume this assumption was more of a comparison between those who are known at national level through media and other forms of communication, and those who are known locally by residents of their districts. Furthermore, female voters tended to give more general and broad analysis for women's failure to win more seats in the elected councils. However, female voters could have also compared females to males' presence in the society and being in the public sphere more often regardless of males' involvement in community activities or voluntary work.

The Family Position: Rejection and Support

The size of family support that the female candidates received during the elections' campaigns ranged between total rejection and complete support. Among the candidates, 17 females were married, and the husbands of these candidates showed complete support. Other strong supporters for female candidates were their brothers and mothers. Most female candidates, who faced family's rejection or refusal of candidacy, received it from extended family members like uncles, nephews and nieces, and cousins in addition to siblings from another mother. In some cases, from other relatives who come from the same tribe. However, there are few female candidates who encountered serious rejection from their families.

S. H is the only female candidate, among the participants, whose family did not accept her candidacy or any aspect of her election campaign. She is a 42 year-old widow who ran in three elections; in 2015 for A'Shura, 2016 for the municipal council, and in 2019 for A'Shura.⁵⁰ It was remarkable to note that despite her family rejection, even

⁵⁰ S.H was interviewed on November 27, 2019.

her marital family, no one could stop her from running three times. S. H represents the extreme example in this section because of the extent of her family actions to push her to withdraw by making her campaign difficult and limited. S. H said that her family forced her to follow rules and conditions at all times if she wished to continue running for the elections: “I have to be home no later than Dinner prayer calling (athan al’Isha), and no pictures in public place, no interviews in the media, no voters allowed at home.” By imposing these rules in a highly competitive district like hers, it meant that her family did not want her to win: “my family mentioned my age as a reason that I should feel ashamed of myself by running at this age.” Her family justified their actions by social values: “you are going to commit a scandal by losing the elections and you know you don’t have chances.” It wasn’t only her direct family members or her late-husband’s family who rejected her candidacy, it was the entire tribe and all remote relatives who refused to vote for her, and they announced in front of her that they wished for her failure.

S.H is a case which illustrates all kinds of challenges a female candidate might face during her campaign because of her gender, age, and social status. Although S. H had a high diploma and worked in the banking sector for over 20 years, her family treated her as a minor because she is a woman and a widow. The challenges she confronted were multiple and showed how a traditional society views and treats women. Her family considered displaying her pictures and being seen by people, and her talking in public as humiliation to them and it thought her candidacy was a scandal (fadiha) by meeting male voters and coming back home late. Although S.H situation was unique among the participants, it is however, expected in traditional Arab society because “patriarchy is still a major force hindering Arab women’s advancement” (Sabagh, 2005, p. 55). She explained that Arab women often face a combination of patriarchy, conservative

religious interpretations, and cultural stereotyping which has formed a very strong inner barrier among Arab populations concerning women's participation in the public sphere.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are positive examples such as Maryam Balhaf who ran in 2011 for A'Shura and Samīra Al-Bemani who ran for A'Shura in 2011 and 2019. Both received significant support, not only from their families but also from their tribes and communities. Family support was provided for most female candidates, even for those who confronted some difficulties from family or tribe members, and they described it as insignificant or having the least amount of impact on their campaigns. Tribe's support for female candidate's participation was not rare, despite most candidates mentioning tribalism as one of the main factors impacted their campaign negatively. However, in other Arab countries such as Jordan, tribes have shown, support for female candidates. In 2003 six female candidates won seats reserved for women in the parliament, five had the support of their tribes and were fielded as "tribal candidates" (Sabagh, 2005). Oman tribalism remains a major force in both politics and society. Olimat (2009) argued the Jordanian tribes' support for female candidates has shown immense level of flexibility in adapting to modernity, and consequently, provided the safest political framework for their female members to participate keenly in modern politics. For this reason, it is wrong, from his point of view, to consider tribes as "inherently" anti-women" (Olimat, 2009, p. 210).

Maryam Balhaf was inspired to run for A'Shura elections by women representatives and previous candidates she met in 2009.⁵¹ She was driven by the significant support of her husband and family. Maryam's example represents how effective family support

⁵¹ She was attending (Oman's women Symposium) in Sohar where she met women from different regions who practice various professions and businesses, among them A'Shura female representatives and former candidates. Maryam was the head of the businesswomen forum in the southern governate of Dhofar when she decided to run.

was in motivating a female candidate and how far family can go to provide all kinds of support. Her husband had decided to run in the Dhofar Governorate, a major reason why she wasn't going to run.⁵² In the last day of candidates' registration, a friend called Maryam asking her to register as a candidate in Salalah the biggest city in Dhofar.⁵³ Although Maryam refused the idea, she told her husband and family about it, and to her surprise they all supported the idea and encouraged her to register on that same last day, so she did.

Nevertheless, Maryam was disappointed on the day of the official announcement of the candidates, because she discovered that there were 4 other females running in Salalah, including the friend who called to convince her to run. Maryam wanted to withdraw, as she thought the chance of a female winning was diminishing. However, her husband insisted that she should continue because he thought that she had better chances than the rest of female candidates in Salalah. Maryam and her entire family were registered as voters in the other district where her husband was running, and where their votes were needed the most to support him. Nevertheless, her husband insisted on changing the voters' registration of all family members to Salalah instead of Rakhiut to support his wife.⁵⁴ He was the only one who remained in Rakhiut as a voter and a candidate.

Also, Samīra Al-Bemani had significant family support that persuaded her to run in 2011 and 2019 for Majlis A'Shura in the district of Bahla. She had one brother only and: "he and my sisters provided me with unquestionable supportive, they attended voters' meetings and helped in the details of the elections campaign." Samīra said that

⁵² Dhofar governorate is about 1000 Kms south of Muscat.

⁵³ As mentioned previously candidates in Oman are allowed to run in either; the districts they come from originally or in the districts where they live at the time of the elections.

⁵⁴ A district in Oman's southern governate of Dhofar.

no one in her family refused her candidacy: “I am the oldest among my sibling, I have strong personality they respect me and supported me in both elections in 2015 and 2019. However, my mother was a little hesitant in the second election I ran because she thought it will be hard on me, if I do not win this time.” Samīra also mentioned that in her second time running for the elections in 2019 her entire tribe supported her, which was not the case in 2015: “my male and female cousins supported me also much more than the first time, not only youth but also my uncles who provided me with significant backing.” Samīra’s tribe’s position proves that “tribes in the region do show pride in their male and female candidates,” as Olimat (2009) argued.

Aziza Al-Habsi is another example of considerable family and husband’s support and how that motivated her and drove her to continue in running her campaign. The importance of family support is particularly effective and recognized when male relatives support a female candidacy and demonstrate that publicly. She said her husband provided her with unexpected support despite his warning that it would not be easy for a woman to run for elections in Oman. However, her husband took the role of the campaign promotion committee, he provided financial and emotional support. Also, she garnered the support of her brother, who was a well-known sport journalist with a large network among sport clubs and leagues and he was familiar with the procedures of sports clubs’ elections which helped in designing the campaign. Aziza said: “no one in my family refused my candidacy, maybe because they know that I have strong personality and my decisions are mine. I only cared about my husband’s opinion.” The person who advised Aziza not to run was a male friend who was a former minister in Oman government: “he told me, I see you as a writer and a journalist writing about social issues, I do not see your role in Majlis A’Shura, because you cannot understand the consequence of this step.” In one word he described engagement in Majlis A’Shura

as a “headache.” Aziza commented that she did not realize what he meant until years later. This was the contrasting example of a male’s position from female candidacy. It revealed the expectations of society and, possibly the state, since he was a former minister, of females and female candidates. Aziza’s former minister friend did not tell her directly that elections and politics were complicated and difficult field for a female, whom he thought it was easier to write and report as a journalist than involving herself in the “headache” of the elections.

However, the family support continued to be a major force that kept females running several times. From Sur,⁵⁵ Salema Al-Farsi, who ran three times for A’Shura, said most of her family supported her, but she did not pay attention to her detractors because the most important people were beside her. Besides Salema and Aziza, most female candidates highlighted the vital roles that their husbands and brothers played in the elections’ campaigns.

Some female candidates who faced family opposition, could change their family attitude after they showed unexpected performances. These examples also indicated that some family members, especially males, were open and changed their perception not only of their female relatives, but also females’ skills and capability to lead and win. Fatima Alsinani is an example of success despite opposition in the family.⁵⁶ She was the first woman in her district who ran for the municipal council: “there were two other women who ran before me for Majlis A’Shura, but they failed. I thought most important was the experience itself not the winning.” The main difficulty Fatima faced within her family was from her maternal uncles: “they believe that women should not participate

⁵⁵ A district in alsharqiya governate, about 300 kms south to Muscat.

⁵⁶ She ran in 2012 and won a seat in the municipal council in Qurayat, a district in Muscat governate, from the first time. She decided to run while listening to the radio and the issues discussed in was about women’s participation in the elections in Oman. She liked the idea and made her mind.

in the election because it is disgrace (ayib). I told them I am running because I want to serve my community and participate in making public policies. My uncles insisted on their positions and told me that they will not vote for me because I am a woman, and no one else will.” Fatima, who is a 43 years old divorced woman, confronted two uncles and a paternal cousin: “they were the main challenge I faced during my campaign. However, I chose not to pay them much of my attention and energy, I focused on people who supported me. When I won, my uncles and cousin were amazed.” Fatima explained that all members of her family, including the uncles and the cousin who opposed her were happy for her and proud. Those who were against her, changed their mind about women’s participation in the elections. The next time when she decided to run for Majlis A’Shura in 2015, they stood by her side and supported her campaign.

Sana Alma’ashari also won the municipal election from the first time in 2012 and again in 2016. Her mother and husband supported her with all means. They talked to society and financed her campaign. On the other side, however, there were her paternal uncle and her half brothers and sisters who “spread rumors about me and mobilize people against me.” Nonetheless, Sana considered their position insignificant and it was a “jealousy issue.” She said it did not affect her, nor impacted her campaign because people knew her well and appreciated her and her father’s role in the community and they supported and helped her, winning twice, one of the 4 seats reserved for her district Al’amerat.

The division within the smaller family unit, however, could be more difficult for a female candidate to ignore; nevertheless, female candidates depended on other family members to persuade and provide the support needed. However, when the division is larger and in the bigger family circle, it could become a major difficulty for the female candidates, such as the case with Shakera. She explained: “in the beginning my father

was not sure that I am serious about running for Majlis A’Shura elections, he did not know much about the responsibilities of the representatives. My brothers accepted the idea, they are university graduate and they understood the importance of women’s political participation.”⁵⁷ Shakera Al-Busaidi ran in 2015 hoping to represent her district alrustaq⁵⁸, and emphasized her older brother’s role: “the biggest support I got, was from my brother who is a professional legal researcher, I learnt from him all the laws and regulations related to politics, elections and majlis A’Shura responsibilities and power.” However, Shakera’s aunties did not vote for her on the election day because, as they told her, she “came late to ask them for their vote. They already promised other candidate.” Shakera did not blame them because she was late, starting her campaign only a month before the election.

The conclusion that Shakera arrived at is evidence that female candidates understand that their family opinions matter because it also resembles the society’s opinion. It is also notable that most of the female candidate respect their close family relatives’ opinion and they think that they would give them a real and true assessment of their candidacy and the society’s views about candidates’ qualifications.

Mahfūza Al-Siyabi another female candidate, from Sama’el,⁵⁹ found support from her husband and children, but her paternal uncle and his sons told her: “we are known family and we belong to a big tribe you should have consulted us.” They did not accept her candidacy and discouraged their family members from supporting her.” Mahfūza chose to ignore them and did not try to convince them, instead she focused on talking to people who seemed more likely to support her.

⁵⁷ Shakera was interviewed on Feb 8, 2020.

⁵⁸ A district in the South Batinah governate, about 130 kms northwest to Muscat.

⁵⁹ A district in the Interior governate, about 150 kms west to Muscat.

The rejecting positions of the male relatives were mainly for two reasons. The first is related to the social values which they think do not approve female's involvement in the public sphere and politics. The second is, as mentioned, because the female relative did not consult with them before she decided to run. Both reasons showed that the male relatives believed that their opinion should be considered otherwise they place pressure on other relatives, or they also did not vote for the female candidate. This belief displayed the kind of relations formed by a patriarchal system where male domination shapes women's relationship in society and politics, and it "transforms male and females into men and women and construct the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged" (Bari, 2005, p. 3). These interactions between female candidates and their male relatives also demonstrated the societal status and role of females. The status and roles in traditional societies distinguish between the visible aspects of gender relations between women and men, such as the different activities they participate in, and the invisible power relations which define these activities (March, Smyt, & Mukhopadhy, 1999, p. 19). Hence according to females' status and role, society and males, specifically, see females in the private sphere or domestic activities.

While other female candidates did not have the support of their males relative for personal reasons, Asma Al-Shaansi's father and brother refused her candidacy for mere political reasons. They rejected the "whole concept of Majlis A'Shura and elections, they did not believe in the elections process at all." Asma explained: "both my father and brother thought that our traditions and values do not support women's political engagement." Asma is a 40-year-old single woman who decided to run for the elections despite her father and brother's position and opinion about women's political participation; however, regardless of their opposition they did not try to stop her or force her to limit her campaign or dismiss voters from meeting. Also, they did not halt

other family members from supporting her. Shakera said that the rest of the family supported her and helped in her campaign and advocated for her candidacy in the community.

Asma's father and brother were not the only relatives who refused the concept of running and Majlis A'Shura performance and given powers. Other female candidates' relatives also refused the whole idea of Majlis A'Shura. Tahera, the winner in Matrah in 2019, said that: "one of my relative refused my participation in the elections due to the limited powers of Majlis A'Shura representatives. He told her: "whether you win or not, it would not make any difference, this is also the standpoint of many people." These two examples indicated that in some cases, family refusal was not because their lack of confidence about their female relative's candidacy, it was more about the possibility of making change under the limited powers of Majlis A'Shura, which does not have the powers to hold government officials accountable or to pass and reject laws.⁶⁰

It is important to note that seeking family approval is not only to secure the support, but it is equally important for assessing the societal acceptance and approval. As a candidate, a female needs to measure her electability through her family eyes because family is the smaller unit of the society. Once the female candidate gets the feedback from her family, she should expect that society would react to her candidacy similarly, especially since they can provide the negative views and the lack of qualification from people's points of view. For instance, Basma's brother refuse her candidacy because she did not wear hijab.⁶¹ Basma said that her brother was the first person who told her

⁶⁰ Chapter 4 is discussing this issue comprehensively adding information about the powers and privileges that A'Shura holds and how that impacted not only women's participation, but also stopped males from getting involved and made voters boycott the election.

⁶¹ Basma Mubarak ran in 2019 in Bowshar in Muscat governate, her aim was to present a prefect model for elections' campaign and messaging. More about her campaign in the following chapter.

that he is “not going to vote for her” when she was consulting him about whether she should run or not. Basma was the only female candidate in the history of Oman elections who did not wear a headscarf. Although Basma is a famous lawyer and activist in Oman, who was seen always without hijab, the issue became a major controversy during her elections campaign.⁶² Nevertheless, Basma’s brother did not insist on his position when he witnessed her remarkable campaign and the support she gained among people, not only from her district but also from other regions in Oman.

To sum up the family position from a female relative’s candidacy, it is concluded that most female candidates had their family’s support and assistance; only one candidate was abandoned entirely by her family. Ironically, she was from a district in Muscat governate, where it was expected, by most female candidates, that traditional social values are less conservative and impactful than other areas in the country. A female candidate mentioned that her society in the south of Oman as a tribal and male dominated mentality controlled the communities, comparing it to Muscat society which is “more open”, as Maryam Balhaf thought. S.H was an example of a female candidate from Muscat whose family and tribe stood against her entirely. This example showed contradictory expectations about people and society in the capital city, which was seen as more liberal than other areas in Oman. In comparison, these interviews showed that most female candidates from districts in Interior, South Batinah, Dhofar and other governate in Oman have enjoyed more open -minded families and society.

It is noteworthy that most female candidates were supported by their families, with the exception of one. Even in the cases of some relatives’ refusal to support, the rest of the relatives continued to back up the candidate. Husbands and brothers were the main

⁶² This issue mentioned in chapter 2 and will be discussed extensively in the following section in this chapter.

family member supporters for female candidates. In a few cases, male relatives such as a father or a brother, who had powerful moral authority upon the family and the female candidate, refused the female candidacy. However, they did not seek to stop her candidacy or ban her from running. Nevertheless, this is an observation of only 25 participants in this research, it is not possible to generalize this result on all females who tried to run, nor is it possible to predict how many women could not run because of the authority held by a father, a brother, or a husband.

Males Challenges Versus Females Hardship

According to the participants, male candidates face the harsh and severe competition among them due to the big numbers of male candidates in the same district and the same tribe. They also face the challenge of tribal approval and the use of money in exchange of votes. Lack of qualifications and shortage of resources, also, were among the challenges. This section will discuss the female candidates' perspectives regarding the challenges that male counterparts confront compared with females' challenges during the elections' campaigns period. The goal of this section is to investigate whether the social values, and traditions impact males' candidacy, and how female candidates see and understand the male candidates' challenges compared with their own. From 25 participants, 21 female candidates think that male candidates face challenges related to financial resource, tribe, and severe competitions among male candidates. Only 2 female candidates said that female and male candidates face the same kinds of competition and challenges, while 2 female candidates said that male candidates do not confront any kind of challenges when compared with female candidates.

Most participants agreed that the furious males' competition is the major factor affecting male candidates more than females during the elections period, while they

mentioned other factors that increased the negative impact of the competition. They also highlighted that this could affect female candidates as well. Participants also indicated that certain qualifications might play a positive role on women's side.

Tahera, A'Shura winner in Matrah in 2019, compared the challenges faced by female and male candidates, and said while men face more severe competition, they have larger social networks. Therefore, men are known more in the communities and seen often in public events. However, Tahera said that in "all cases female and male candidates need to work hard to compete." She mentioned that higher education degrees help female candidates because people appreciate a candidate with high degree. Tahera explained that the higher degree the female candidate has the better chance she has to convince people, because higher education gives a positive impression about the candidate and that she is well educated, well informed, and scientific. Therefore, she can speak adequately about public issues if elected to represent her district in Majlis A'Shura. Tahera believes that "people look at technocrats with admiration and respect." Tahera and Fadila were the only female winners in A'Suhra 2019 elections and they both have a PhD degree.

Tahera highlighted a main difference between female and male candidates' performances regarding social networking, which she described as an advantage working for the sake of male candidates; however, and despite considering this as a disadvantage to female candidates, she justified the situation as it is not a female's job to "mingle among men". Tahera as a female was assessing the comparison as a benefit for a male candidate, nonetheless she did not demand that a female candidate should have the same access allowed to males. Also, Tahera thought that a woman "cannot be outside their home for long periods of time and mingle among men." She was navigating under a "code of modesty" which outlines that the family honor and dignity

lay on the reputation of the woman. This code, as Sabagh (2005, p. 56) stated “imposes restrictions on interaction between men and women” and therefore, limits women’s opportunity to compete freely and adequately.

The social expectations concerning men and women are different. There is an interdependence of time a woman spends outside her house, and her family life which is a problematic issues especially for women (Aslam, 2011) because traditionally women have the primary responsibility for housekeeping and childcare. This role stays as an obligation regardless of the time women spent working outside her house. Among other factors mentioned by (Bari, 2005) is the lack of social capital and political capacities; she indicated that women regularly lack social capital because they are often not head of communities, tribes or kinship groups, which results in the absence of community or electorate base for them and means of political participation such as political skills, training and access to information. This issue is a common challenge among female candidate participants which was highlighted on several occasions.

Fadila, the other winner in 2019 in Sohar, confirmed that male candidates confront highly competitive powerful candidates or relatives of powerful people who support other candidate in the districts. In addition, they face the challenge of funding and resources to finance their campaigns, which, she thinks, is an issue that plays huge role in the elections. While Ameera Al’isma’eli⁶³ added another element to the males’ competition, saying that male candidates face harsh competition because of the large number of male candidates who decide to run from the same district. Nasra Al-Ghafri,⁶⁴ supported this comment. Also, Muna Al’azri⁶⁵ said that most male candidates lack

⁶³ Ran for A’Shura in 2019 in Ibra in al-Sharqiya governate eastern Oman.

⁶⁴ Ran in 2015 in Ibri, a district in al-Dahira governate northern Oman.

⁶⁵ Ran in 2019 in Izki A district in the Interior governate, it is about 150 kms west to Muscat.

powerful and influential social relations, effective election campaign, and a clear message which tells people about candidates' qualifications and goals. However, Muna did not explain why this concerned male candidates only, while it seems that the female candidate required to do and have the same qualifications in order to run a successful campaign. Nevertheless, she mentioned that many male candidates run without a clear message or goal and that could be the challenge they face; particularly comparing to female candidates who, as she thought, run usually with clear messages and goals.

Talking about male candidates; severe competition in numbers and practice seemed a matter of fact for female candidates, rather than seeing it as another form of male domination. The expansion of which diminishes females' opportunity and access to political competition. Because women's inability to largely access political participation bridges divisions among men "by uniting them to protect their "strategic gender interests" the interests they all share as men who gain, individually and collectively, "from female subordination" (Tetreault & al-Mughni, 1995, p. 76).

The gender politics among men involve, as Kandiyoti (1994) described the struggles to define socially dominant masculinity. She explained that the form of masculinity that is hegemonic at a given time and place encompasses "a particular institutionalization of patriarchy and a particular strategy for the subordination of women" (Kandiyoti, The paradoxes of masculinity: some thoughts on segregated societies, 1994, p. 198). The large number of male candidates makes female candidates unseen and the severe competition among males indicates the male candidates excluding female candidates from the competition as if they do not exist or as if they in their private safe sphere, wherein dominant masculinity recognizes it as the natural space for women.

An extremely significant challenge faced by male candidates is the tribe

domination and the power of money. The participants considered this factor the most impactful factor which affects male and female candidates. Most participants think this factor is threatening the election and democratization processes in the country. Aziza Al-Habsi said that tribe domination and “money power” are the main difficulties facing male candidates, stressing that these factors impact female candidates as well. Aziza said that: “Male and female candidate suffer from both; however, in the end the citizens will pay the price for choosing the wrong people to represent us in Majlis A’Shura. People who are elected by buying votes and using tribes’ power instead of qualifications, will negatively impact the decisions to be made in the parliament.”

Rahma Za’al confirmed the idea that male candidates face the “money power” in buying voters support and votes. S. H gives more insight regarding the money power and tribe dominance: “The challenges facing male and female candidates are the same: tribalism is the major challenge along with money used to buy votes. There are candidates who do not have the money to finance their elections’ campaign at a time when other candidates use the money inappropriately to spread rumors about other competitors and insure people will remain loyal to him. Money was also used to steal other candidates’ supporters.” Tribalism is a force that influences politics in the country as it influences society. Although tribalism is often accused of excluding women from public sphere and political field, it is also, as participants illustrated, accused of contributing to the failure of male candidates. The conflict here occurred between small tribes and bigger tribes and sometimes, as will be discussed,⁶⁶ among one tribe due to division inside the tribe regarding the selection of the tribal candidate.

Tayba Alma’wali, the winner in 1994 and 1997, stated that in the last three

⁶⁶ Chapter 4 is discussing this issue in great details.

elections, in 2011, 2015, and 2019, the competition became harder and dishonest. She said that there was harsh competition among male candidates: “Education, qualifications, and experience has nothing to do with it, it is tribe, money and powerful persons using their current or former official positions.” Alma’wali observed also that the individual interest became more important than the public interests. She said that voters would make a deal with a candidate offering to gather votes for him, and in return, the candidate pays them money or buy them a car or other things. Tayba concluded: “that impact female candidates because they would not use money as they are morally conscience and their reputations matter to them.”

Badriya Al-Hattali,⁶⁷ believes that male and female candidates confront the same challenges, although male candidate have the advantage of moving easily within community and among people, while Sana Al-Ma’ashari⁶⁸ and H.A⁶⁹ said that male candidates do not face any challenges compared to female candidates. Additionally, H.A mentioned that male candidates do not face challenges because they are willing to pay for votes, something a female candidate would refuse to do.

Gender Bias: Numbers and Qualifications

Although men run in larger numbers than women do, participants think that most male candidates run without education qualification, or other important skills for representatives. They mentioned that most male candidates face the problem of a lack of qualification because they run hoping to win and seeking prestigious social place. Participants also mentioned that unqualified male candidates were encouraged by others who ran without qualification and won. They won whereas a female would not

⁶⁷ Badriya ran for A’Shura in 2019 in alseeb/Muscat.

⁶⁸ Sana ran for the municipal council in 2012 and 2016 and won.

⁶⁹ H.A ran for A’Shura in 2019.

dare to run if she had been not sure that she had qualifications that would make people consider her as serious candidate. Zahra presented her perspective concerning male candidates' challenges and said that the main factor that most male candidates encounter is that they run without having high education degree. She explained that they are also not knowledgeable about the role of Majlis A'Shura. Nevertheless, she mentioned other challenges that confront male candidates such as the absence of a program or agenda: "most male candidate run without ideas about why they are running, no goals and no messages to talk about with people. Other issue, she highlighted is the limited resources to fund election's campaign, and that many male candidates did not have working teams in their campaign." Zahra said that men should help each other instead of running in big numbers and scattering the votes.

Noora Salmeen⁷⁰ agreed with Zahra's idea that running in large numbers is a challenge because this creates confusion and randomicity: "people vote according to the family and tribe not for the best candidate". She said that personal relations play a massive role in voting for male candidates. She also mentioned another challenge confronting male candidates which is the lack of seriousness among some male candidates regarding meeting people and discussing their agenda or delivering a substantial message to the voters which results in losing chances and the respect of the voters.

Discussing and comparing female candidates' qualifications compared with males uncovered the double standard of societal views regarding male and female candidates. While agreeing that female candidates are generally more qualified when running, the participants realized that society is asking women for more qualification

⁷⁰ Noora ran for A'Shura in 2003 in Salalah.

than they ask for male candidates. Moreover, people are asking women to have special skills that make them distinguished among all candidate, while is not required for male candidates.

Female candidates' opinions varied regarding whether female candidates' need more qualifications than male candidates in order to win people's votes. 10 of the participants said that female candidates do not need more qualifications because when they ran for elections, they know that they have the required qualifications. In addition to that they saw many male candidates ran without significant qualifications. 6 participants said that female candidates need more skills than male candidates. 5 participants said that qualifications are not important for both male and female candidates because the most important things are other factors such as money and tribe affiliation, while 2 said that same qualifications are required for both male and female candidates because they are going to do the same job. One participant said that high qualifications, especially high education degrees, would help both, but particularly female candidates.

Mahfūza Al-Siyabi,⁷¹ said that education degrees or qualifications have no role in the competition of Majlis A'Shura. Some people have a PhD degree, she mentioned, however, "they are remote for the community, people do not know them, they are not social and do not know how to talk to people. I think a candidate should have at least a BA degree, being educated and well informed is good". Mahfūza emphasized that, "most important is that a candidate has a status among people and have helped and worked in the community."

Sana Alma'shari has a different perspective; she thinks that a better female

⁷¹ Ran for A'Shura in 2019 in Sama'el in the western Interior governate around 200km to Muscat.

candidate has high and effective qualifications to feel confident about herself. This point of view is proved in this research by few examples of female candidates who did not have a university degree, they have only a higher diploma or a high school diploma. After the elections they decided to continue studying so in the following election they would have obtained the degree they sought. This issue will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 while uncovering how female candidate's perspective have changed about themselves and the world around them.⁷²

Aziza Al-Habsi refused using qualification as a reason for not electing women because this measure is not applied to male candidates. She thinks that females' qualifications became "a weak reason to justify women's failure in winning parliamentary seats in larger numbers." This appeared and remained in the heart of all answers of the participants, who thought talking about female candidates' qualifications is a problematic and debatable issue because on the one hand they think good qualifications are important to impress the voters, and on the other hand they witnessed male candidates who won with poor qualifications, and at the same time female candidates lost with their high impressive degrees and expertise.

Khalsa Al-Tobi⁷³ said that she does not agree that education degrees are the most important. Khalsa, who had a high school diploma at the time of the interview, said: "unfortunately people would look at a candidate and ask what degree do you have? I understand why voters care about the education degree that their representative obtains. However, I think that the experience a candidate accumulated over the years in living and working within the society gives her/him the insight regarding his/her

⁷² This issue will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 while uncovering how female candidate perspective change about themselves and the world around them.

⁷³ Khalsa was interviewed on 8 February 2020. She ran for A'Shura in 2015 and 2019 and is from Manah district in the Interior governate.

community aspiration.” Khalsa explained that she has 20 years of community service and social work; “my experience gave me more qualifications than a university degree could have.” Zahra Al-Hinai⁷⁴ said that she noticed that many male candidates ran without a university degree, most of them with high school diploma, and some have college degree. However, she thinks that if voting for candidates continues to depend on buying votes, giving favors, and interventions of powerful people, “we will never reach the right choice and as a result the performance in Majlis A’Shura would not evolve.” She gave an example of the winner of her district who was a farmer with high school diploma and did not know anything about laws and legislations.

Confirming that society has a double standard view regarding males and females’ qualifications, Noora Salmeen⁷⁵ said that “female candidates need more qualifications,”⁷⁶ however, she illustrated, “all female candidates when running for elections have high education degree in addition to work experience and knowledge of society demands, equally like male candidates. “Anyway, having education degree is eligibility requirement for candidacy.”⁷⁷ From her point of view, Rahma⁷⁸ said that female candidates do not need to have extra qualifications because “women are qualified more than men.” For this reason, they multitask and play several roles in the community. Rahma thinks that women are partners with men in building society, and she keeps herself optimistic; although she ran twice and did not win, she believes that there is a broad opportunity for women in Oman to succeed in politics and elections.

After experiencing the elections, Fatima. H came to this conclusion: “women need education and qualifications because as women we need this to persuade people”.

⁷⁴ Zahra ran in 2019 in alseeb/Muscat.

⁷⁵ Noora ran for A’Shura in 2003 in Salalah.

⁷⁶ Noora was interviewed on Feb 8, 2020.

⁷⁷ Oman elections law requires that a candidate must have at least high school diploma.

⁷⁸ Rahma ran for A’Shura in 2011 in alseeb/Muscat.

She thinks that a higher degree is an asset; however, the most important issue is that women can help people and seek public interests. Having said that, Fatima does not think that female candidates lose the elections because of lack of qualifications, the problem as she specified is that female candidate do not get enough support from people. This is a point of view that is supported by other participants earlier, such as Aziza, who had firm opinion about the real qualifications most effective in the elections. This opinion is shared also by Salema who stressed the qualifications voters looking for in a candidate. Salema Al-Farsi⁷⁹ affirmed that education degree and other qualifications do not impact female candidates at all, “money and social status impact them.” She said that “even when we compared male candidates to each other we found that society do not look for candidates’ education and intellectuality rather than looking for tribal and social status. If one of the candidates is a son of a well know sheikh that would limit the chances of other male candidate.”

Most female candidates, except for one, considered education generally, and higher education in particular, as what is meant by qualifications; however, they mentioned other skills in addition to high education, such as work experience and serving community. Although the question did not mention the word education itself, all female candidates understood that education is the most important qualification. From the experience of 25 female candidates and their understanding of the elections it seems that people/voters were looking for what is missing in a female candidates’ qualifications and indicated it as a reason for not supporting or voting for her. Several female candidates worked in the community for 15-26 years, or more importantly, they are known and have the tribe’s support, such as Khalsa, Mahfūza and Samīra. However,

⁷⁹ Ran for A’Shura in 2011, 2015, and 2019 in Sur. Did not win all three elections.

they could not win, which made them wonder about what went wrong in their campaign. They concluded that it could be their lack of university degree. Shakera said that some teachers in her district commented that she does not have a degree: “my education qualification was the reason behind people’s hesitation to back me and vote for me, especially those who have higher degrees and high positions.” Nevertheless, Shakera believes, as all other female candidates, that “although it is important to have education higher degree, it is not everything.” She predicted that she would not win after she opened a Twitter account to connect with voters and noticed that people did not pay her attention and those who interacted with her mentioned that she does not have a high education degree: “they had very strong feeling about that. That time I knew I would not win, but I continued till the end.”

Participants realized that society was looking for additional qualifications for female candidates. Society does not look nor treat female candidates equal to males. A female candidates’ situation, like Asma Alshaqsi’s⁸⁰ situation, is complicated. She explained her view: “usually people would look for the same qualifications at female and male candidates, but it looks like people ask female candidates to be superwomen. They ask for miraculous things from us without, in fact, expecting us to achieve them.” It is common during the election period, as participants mentioned, that voters compare between candidates; however, they do not look at male and female candidates with the same eye. They consider female candidates as inferior despite their qualifications and skills, and that is because society does not think that females equal to males. As (Norris & Inglehart, 2011) stated, while advancements in women’s educational and professional level serve as facilitating conditions for women’s empowerment, structural

⁸⁰ Ran for A’Shura in 2019 in alseeb/Muscat.

changes by themselves may be inadequate for women to achieve greater success in winning elected positions.

Gender as a Factor in the Elections

Although most participants said that female candidates face more challenges than male candidates from society, in general they do not think that being a female is a factor that influences voters' decision in voting for female candidates. 14 out of 25 female candidates said being a female is not a factor in the elections, while 9 said that they think being a female is a factor, and 2 female candidates were not sure that being a female is a decisive factor. However, discussing gender and gender roles showed significant confusion among several participants. There was a noticeable refusal among them to admit that society could be discriminatory in their treatment of female candidates because they think that social traditions and values are tolerant of women and open to their participation. Nevertheless, the confusion remained among most of them about the real reason that holds women from advancement in politics, representation, and leadership positions. This does not dismiss the fact that a few candidates have no confusion. They either believe it is because of money or because of gender.

Fadila said that gender could be a factor but not a decisive one. She emphasized that it is vital for a female candidate to have tangible community achievements through volunteer associations, or through their work experience in the education and civic institutions. Maryam Balhaf shares the same idea about the gender impact; although she admitted that her society in the south of Oman is male dominated, “without mercy” for women. She thinks that if tribal alliances would choose a woman as a candidate she will win. She was certain that gender is not the main factor in the elections she witnessed.

Maryam's view showed a contradiction between her belief that gender is not a main factor impacting female candidates' chances in winning and her statement about the male mentality which dominated society, and which she described as "without mercy" for women. She believed that a female candidate would win if tribal alliances would select a woman as their candidate, without realizing that tribes or tribal alliances would not choose a woman because of her sex or gender. Although it is not a direct candidate-voter relationship, it reflects the male and male mentality which is dominant in the society. Moghadam V. (2013) cited Walby's (2009) definition of gender as "a relationship that reproduces itself, whether or not the individuals involved are aware of it." She also highlighted the tendency for the "gender regime" to transform from a domestic, private, and familiar one to a public form, which could cause the confusion and the contradictions as happened in Maryam's case and also with other female candidates when they tried to explain that gender and gender roles have no relationship with the result of the elections nor with the small numbers of women's participating in politics. They are not aware of the different and many forms of the gender biases and male/tribal strategies to exclude women from the public sphere.

A good example for the confusion and fail to link the dots between people's awareness and the society traditions is S.H who said that reason is not gender, and being a female candidate is not a reason that made people not vote for her; she said it was the traditions and lack of people's awareness.

S. H said that women do not win the election because of their gender nor because of lack of qualifications or work experience, it is because female candidates fail in managing their election's campaigns successfully like male candidates. S. H explained that the reason makes female candidates unable to manage their campaigns like male candidates is: "social traditions and values and conservative customs," and she

explained that the freedom of movement that male candidates enjoy allows them to meet their supporters without any restrictions. In contrast, female candidates have limitations that control managing campaigns. A female candidate has to meet people in specific places at certain times, whereas “male candidates are absolutely free”.

It did occur to S.H’s mind that all these restrictions on women and all this freedom of movement that men enjoy, are created socially to specify differences between genders and are assigning different roles to each of them.

Although she said being a female is not a factor in the elections, Badriya,⁸¹ when discussing whether women are less likely to win because of their gender, focused on the society. She said: “it is the society’s culture and the people’s awareness are what control the elections results.” It was not clear for Badriya, when talking about social culture, that it could be understood that the culture does not prefer females and that is the reason they do not win. However, it could be understood as that the social culture and people’s awareness is just being traditional by choosing males over females without gender judgment. Nevertheless, Badriya said that society does not know yet women’s capabilities in this field and once they see that people will vote for female candidates regardless of gender.

It was noticeable that female candidates separated between their identity as females and voters, society, and tribes’ behavior towards them as candidates. Talking about tribes and society’s tendency toward male candidates was attributed to the lack of awareness rather of an over awareness about the sex of the candidate or the roles assigned to males and females according to the tradition of the society’s culture. Moghadam V. , (2013) cited Lorber’s (1994), definition of gender as a process of social

⁸¹ Ran for A’Shura in 2019 in alseeb/Muscat.

construction, a system of social stratification, and an institution that structures every aspect of our lives because of its embeddedness in the family, the workplace, and the state, as well as in the language, and culture. That explains the disguising nature of the gender regime and how individuals are influenced without realization or awareness.

Also, political competition sparks conflict between candidates at various levels. Sometimes it is about control; controlling women, for example, as men told a participant: “we are who control, not women.” The interaction between male and female candidates displayed forms of gender relations and showed how power is distributed between them based on their sex or gender. While gender relations could be relations of cooperation, connection, and mutual support, they could be relations of conflict, separation, and competition, of difference and inequality as well (Bari, 2005).

This group of participants understood that society decided that there would be no votes for women because leadership and representation is not one of her roles as female. Nasra thinks that female candidates do not win the elections for three reasons: first because they are females, second due to ineffective elections campaigns, and third, because of the females’ limited social presence. Nasra said that female candidates need to be known in the community long before the election time. Asma, from Alseeb, has no doubt that the reason is: “because they are women.” Muna, also, thinks that gender is the reason behind females’ limited wins in the elections. She justified her view by giving an example of female candidates who had high qualifications and did not win people’s vote. Ameera supported this idea, as well, with another evidence, saying “winners are appointed in advance by the tribes’ sheikhs, after I experienced the elections in 2019 I came to conclusion that women will not have the opportunity of sheikh’s selection and hence people vote.” Ameera thinks that agreements and alliances are male dominated. Although Aisha Al’alawi, thinks that traditional images of

women's role in the society affect female candidates' chances of winning, she considers the effectiveness of the election's campaign as having the major impact in winning larger numbers of votes. Her experience in the 2019 election taught Samīra that female candidates do not lack qualifications nor the ability to manage their elections campaign. Most female candidates she knew have substantial qualifications and could compete with male candidates to be among the front runners. Samīra thinks that female candidates need a little more "support from society" so they can reach Majlis A'Shura.

Aziza Al-Habsi had a different point of view regarding gender as a factor in the elections. She presented her point by illustrating that Oman society does not look at women as incapable of practicing politics because through the history of Oman, men would travel and leave women managing life and business at home. Elections create a competitive environment; "when men see the opportunity, they will seize it." Zahra highlighted that people in her district are backing women and they appreciate women's work in the community. It is noteworthy that Alseeb district is the only district in Oman that elected two female candidates for two terms each.⁸² However, Zahra did not win the election in 2019 and she had her explanation regarding the reasons led to that result, excluding being a female as one of them.⁸³ Zahra said that the first reason that makes females lose is the limited presence in the community, she said that female candidates should be close to people and play social roles.⁸⁴ Placing community service and closeness to people as the first factor that impacts female candidates' chance in the election, although important and a possible factor, it did not play the expected role on Zahra's experience herself. On the contrary, this same factor was a reason for painful

⁸² Tayba Alma'awali won in the first election women could run for A'Shurain alseeb in 1994 and in 1997, and in 2011 and 2015 alseeb also, elected Ne'ama Albusaidi.

⁸³ Chapter 4 discusses the elections campaigns and the results from the female candidates' perspective.

⁸⁴ Zahra mentioned that she served her community for 15 years, taught Quran, volunteered for 10 years, and worked with people with disabilities for 8 years, which made her known among voters.

encounters in Zahra's experience.⁸⁵ Several female candidate participants had long time community service and volunteer work, in addition to their jobs as educators in the same communities, and they were close enough to establish such relationship; nevertheless, none of them won.

Controlling women's Votes and Winning Tribal Approval

Tayba, also from Alseeb, focused on competition, and mentioned that some female voters are not free in selecting a candidate, they are controlled by the tribe and by family choice. Those women think they should respect the decision of the male who holds the authority in the family or the sheikh of the tribe, and these males think they understand politics and public matters better than women. In this way patriarchy reproduces itself, primarily in the relations between, rather than within, genders. Institutions such as kinship and the family are most distinguished (Kandiyoti, The paradoxes of masculinity: some thoughts on segregated societies, 1994).

Salema confirmed that the competition is "very hard", and the challenges are difficult to escape, and the result is a small number of women in the elected councils. She gave herself as an example: "I ran three times, despite the big number of votes I got each time I still get the same result, this situation leads to disappointment among women who seek candidacy, our failure to get enough votes to take us to Majlis A'Shura made other women stop thinking about running in the future."

Tahera believes that Omani society is not against women, and gender is not a factor in the elections. She said that people would not refuse to vote for female candidates because of their gender. She explains that male competitors would use gender to spread rumors and mobilize voters against a female candidate. Tahera is

⁸⁵ Zahra will talk extensively about this issue in the following chapters.

convinced that Omani society is open towards women in general and accepting her participation in politics. Most important, as she says, is that a female candidate can manage to stand in front of anti-propaganda and the cacophony voices that started rumors and ideas that hurt the society's positive image.” Tahera clarifies that some members, in the work teams related to the elections campaigns, do not know what is morally wrong and what is right, and most important for them is to hurt and compete with the other candidate regardless of this competitor’s gender. Tahera added: “during my election’s campaign I was talking to people, clarifying issues and I did not get involved with accusing any competitor of anything. People appreciated me as a female and as a candidate with qualifications I won their minds and votes.”

Noora Salmeen took the discussion into a different direction. She is confident that the problem is not in the gender, but the problem in the performance of Majlis A’Shura and the municipal councils.⁸⁶ She indicated that if the elected representatives have powerful performances, voters will seek electing the right candidates regardless of gender.

Ameera, said that women do not have a chance to win the sheikhs’ selection to represent the tribe and the district: “from what I saw I do not think that if women run in larger numbers would help them to win, because winners are pre-selected by the tribe’s sheikh.” Muna thinks that women already ran in large numbers, she said: “in some districts they are more than others, despite that none of them won.” However, she compared between the larger districts in Muscat and other smaller districts where few women ran or in some of them where there were no women running. On the other side, Aziza thinks that the small number of female candidates is the reason behind female

⁸⁶ The powers of elected councils and voting is another issue will be discussed in chapter 4.

candidates' failure to win seats in the elected councils. She said that female candidates' number are always less the male candidates: "if women run in larger numbers there will be balance between them and male candidates and it might favor female candidates over males." Aisha Al'alawi said she has "no doubt" that if women run in greater numbers, winning would be reachable.

Society and Religion

Several studies such as Al-Hayes (2010) and Alyahyai (2009, 2011) specified that traditional gender roles impact immensely how voters view female candidates. Stressing that voters would not support a female candidate because they believe that the primary role of a female is inside her house and public affairs is left for men. As participants explained, traditional gender roles and social expectations could have an impact on women's political participation in three dimensions: 1) it could affect female candidates' image as a socially accepted female, 2) it could stop a woman from participation, whether she decides not to run or a member in the family tells her to do so, and 3) it could cause a female candidate difficulties in running her election's campaign while she navigates how to balance her responsibilities as female member of a family, specifically as a mother and a wife. Traditional gender roles could impact the effectiveness of the election's campaign of a female candidate especially when facing competitors and meeting voters.

Studies on the females and males' life cycles and participation in the public domain found that marriage and parenthood have a stronger negative effect among women than among men. Once married, women's free time declines to a greater extent than men's, and women tend to increase the amount of time spent on housework, whereas men's contribution to house responsibilities decreases. Consequently, marriage is expected to lower political participation among women and boost it among men (Rotolo, 2000).

However, most female candidate participants think that traditional roles do not impact female candidacy. Only 5 said it could, while 17 female candidates said there is no impact for the gender roles, and on the contrary, they think, traditional roles they play as females should be considered as an extra qualifications that male candidates do not possess. 2 participants said it could impact female candidacy, while 1 candidate said: “I do not know” whether it has any impact.

Gender roles ideology works in two directions concerning female political participation. First, is the direction of the female candidate and how she looks at gender roles assigned to her, whether or not she considers them as positive roles that qualify her for political participation. The second is the direction the voters look at the gender roles assigned to women and whether they think that these roles qualify a female for an extended role in the public sphere. In a traditional society, like Oman’s, patriarchy as a system of male domination outlines women’s relationship in politics. It transforms male and females into men and women and construct the hierarchy of gender relations where men are privileged (Bari, 2005, p. 3). As a result, females are excluded from political participation, if not by direct forceful authority of male relatives, then it would happen by her making that decision of not participating because she “respects” her father, brother, or husband’s opinion. The moral authority protects the construction of the patriarchal system and maintains the hierarchy of gender relations.

Gender roles are social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are commonly considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. These roles frequently determine differences in the responsibilities and tasks assigned to women and men within and outside the private sphere of their household.⁸⁷ Due to their

⁸⁷ See the European Institute for gender equality: <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1209>

acceptance to the roles assigned to them traditionally, female candidates walked a very thin line to accommodate the election's campaign and fulfill household responsibilities. This situation requires from women an additional effort and time compared to men when engaging in politics. Often women find it hard to participate in politics due to limited time available to them because of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres (Bari, 2005, p. 5). With their primary roles as mothers and wives, and battling domestic responsibilities and care work, they are left with little time to participate in politics; therefore, few women left to participate in politics. Those who continue to participate continue the struggle in competing the dual roles because the social contract obliged them to first fulfill their domestic obligations because that is their main mission in life as females.

For example, Aziza said that traditional gender roles affect female candidates' performance when they face difficulties within their families. Aziza tells her story concerning her role as a mother: "I did not have time for my kids and following up their school assignments. "I felt guilty," my kids were young, and I was pregnant when I ran in 2007. I was consumed health wise and physically exhausted." Besides Aziza, Sana felt the same way regarding being busy with the election's campaign and leaving her kids for long hours. She said that a female candidate should first fulfill her duties towards her children and her house, and a female candidate cannot ignore her main obligations. Aziza stressed that when deciding to run, the best time for a female candidate is when she does not have major responsibilities inside her family. The right time, as Aziza specified, is when her children are old enough to depend on themselves and her role is mere supervision. From her side, Sana advises female candidates who are considering running for elections to wait until their children are older, otherwise, they cannot focus fully in the campaign and it will cause them additional difficulties

unless they have strong support system in place.

This element of the centrality of the family, rather than the individual, as the main unit of society, is a social factor that among others shapes the gender paradigm, where the “emphasis on the family is seen as justification for equivalent, rather than equal, rights” (Sabagh, 2005, p. 56). Also, it is a harmful gender stereotype because it limits women’s gaining of personal abilities, pursuing their professional careers, and making choices about their lives and life plans.⁸⁸ A female could abandon an idea because of her thinking that her role in the family is irreplaceable or no one but her can fulfill it, or a candidate could leave an election race because of the guilt she feels towards her family which she does not spend enough time with. Women would think they unable to pursue political career because that is not the main job they were born to do.

Noora had a different standpoint from gender traditional roles and whether they impact female’s candidacy; however she is not alone in this stance, other female candidates believe, like Noora, that traditional roles expected from a female could be an asset instead of disadvantage. Noora said that traditional gender roles are strength points for female candidates when comparing to male candidates. Taking care of family and children is an important and challenging task that could prepare women for politics. Noora is confident that these roles are significant advantages rather than weak points. However, the question remains whether males and other society members understand the issue in the same way.

Samīra says that the traditional roles females play inside their households are not compelling reasons to either stop females from running or decreases their chances in

⁸⁸ From the glossary of European institute for gender equality:
<https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1234>

Also from Cusack, S. 2013. Gender Stereotyping as a Human Rights Violation: Research Report. Prepared for the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

running successful campaigns. She stressed that women in Oman have proven their skills and capabilities in various field such in oil and gas, defense, and private sector industries, all while they have been doing their traditional roles and continuing to give and participate. Samīra is confident that an organized woman can put her priorities in order and manage her private life and public participation. She mentioned that it is, after all, only a four-year term in Majlis A'Shura, not a lifetime job. However, she said, that most important is a woman's belief in political participation, and confidence that she is ready to start new experience in her life, saying "traditional role does not stop women from candidacy." Fatima. H is an example herself; she is a mother of 5, has a job, and is taking care of her house and running for elections. People's attitude, Fatima mentioned, is not only about education, because patriarchal structures are entrenched within the social fabric. In such structures, there is unequal balance of power in the private sphere that affects women's access to the public sphere. This power difference, regardless of women's skills and ability, is enforced by social, religious, and legal institutions that work to keep the males privileged over females.

Despite the argument above that gender roles should be an asset for female candidates, other participants realized that traditional roles impact and decrease women's chances to win election and obtain leadership positions. Asma and Muna are among the few female candidates who think traditional roles impact female candidacy. Muna said that this might be true in the rural areas because traditional communities do not assign leadership roles to women, while Tahera sees traditional roles are appreciated in Omani society. Being a mother for example is a helpful factor in conservative communities that respect the role of mothers. Traditional roles, on the contrary, are an added value for female candidates. Fadila confirmed the same idea by saying that women are already working in different leadership levels and fields while they are

assuming their traditional roles. Rahma values females' traditional roles and considers that as a proof of women's ability to master time management and real desire to serve her society and country.

Although Ameera says that traditional roles might have impact on women's political participation, she thinks that "our generation is open minded towards women, specially that they are working in all fields." S.H also thinks that traditional roles are going to disappear eventually, nonetheless, traditional roles might hinder women's march to elected councils. The comment Ameera and S.H made regarding the diminishing role of traditional gender roles, is supported by a study that noted that "one important dimension of social change in the region has been the weakening of the patriarchal family and traditional kinship systems." (Moghadam V. , 2013, p. 29) because of younger generation who are not attached to social traditions and values due to education, new technology and work opportunities far from hometowns.

It was noticeable that none of the participants criticized the continuation of the traditional roles as they are inherited. All participants believe that children and family care is their duties, and they are convinced that they should deliver it, and they considered this role appropriate for them. Nevertheless, they stressed that they are capable of doing other things, including participation in politics and running in elections. Harding S. (2004, p. 5) stated that "politics and culture often function as "prison-houses" of knowledge" because they shape and form perspectives and standpoints from issues and situations, and they influence our understanding even about ourselves and our lived experiences. In different cultures women are socialized in the direction of a gender role that is more passive, private, rule-abiding, and compassionate, while men are oriented toward leadership, public roles, independence, and self-reliance." Norris & Inglehart (2011, p. 320) indicated that "this socialization may

contribute to women's lower levels of political engagement."

Tribal Ranking and Tribal coalitions

Although all participants talked significantly about the considerable impact of tribalism on the elections, most of the participants did not want to discuss deeply the tribal ranking system and the deep-rooted social hierarchy in Oman. Using a broad understanding that people would vote for candidates from their tribes regardless of qualification, only a few mentioned that also people would vote for candidates from certain tribes in their communities even if they are not member of that tribe. People, in some cases, would not vote for a candidate from their own tribes because their votes should go for another candidate who is sheikh or a son of a sheikh. Three participants talked about the social hierarchy and how it affected their candidacy. One participant accepted it as a reality, one described it as racism, and the third thought it was injustice.

Noora told her story as a candidate representing her community and how she confronted the big tribes. The two elements that shaped Noora's election experience are: first, that she comes from a social class or category that she called "alsumur" who are looked upon as followers to bigger tribes. The second element is the support of women who took her campaign to a further place than Noora herself expected. The role of women and women's support for her as female candidate disapproved claims that "women are the woman's enemy" and "women jealousy" push them to vote for men, as several female candidates mentioned. In Noora's case it was necessary for her and her group, especially women, to work together because as Collins (2004, p. 252) writes "within hierarchical power relations, it seems reasonable that groups disadvantaged by system of power might see their strength in solidarity and collective responses to their common location and subjugation." However, within this hierarchical system the first element, the power of the tribe, played the negative role that deprived Noora from

winning. Noora and her women supporters built an incredible database, which led in the following elections in 2007, to a winner from “alsumr” category, the only thing changed was that the candidate was a male.⁸⁹

Another example is a female candidate who ran in a district in the eastern region of Oman. H.A⁹⁰ did not mention her tribe’s status or the skin color as factors impacted her candidacy, it was her family reaction to her candidacy, who felt she cannot compete against bigger tribes. H.A comes from what society in Oman considers as a low-class family, that does not come from a prestigious tribe. Her social status, name, and dark color tell that she comes from slaves’ descendants. She had limited resources and no job. She knew that her family and friends compared her to other candidates who either well known businesspeople or/and they hold powerful social status in her community. She concluded that tribe’s ranking and money are the only two factors that matter in the elections. Despite that, H.A focused her explanation on discrimination against her as a female; she also said Omani society is racist.

Describing the experience of black women oppression Collins (1983, 2004) underlined two factors that shape the experience: self-definition and self-valuation. The first involves challenging the political knowledge validation process that has resulted in externally defined stereotypical images of womanhood, while self-valuation stresses the content of women’s self -definition, replacing externally derived images with authentic ones. Noora and H.A had different reactions concerning their social status/class that showed how they define themselves within their societies, and how they value who they are with accordance to culture values and traditions. Noora saw

⁸⁹ Rasheed Alsafi Al Hurabi was elected in 2007 representing Salalah:
http://www.muscateeasy.com/2007/10/blog-post_28.html

⁹⁰ H.A interviewed on November 23, 2019.

herself within the category that the society placed her, her self-definition was very much the definition society gave “alsumr” (dark skin) and she did not have a problem with that. However, she saw in herself and her people potential that society did not see, thus her self-valuation motivated her to run in the election and out of the experience, although she did not win the seat, she won the appreciation and the respect not only of her people but also of other tribes who thought that she could not run that far in the election and form a threat to candidates who came from bigger tribes. Noora could change her image to an authentic one instead of externally derived image. On the other hand, H.A could not form a self-definition, and did not accept the society placement, in addition to the election experience and the encounters with voters, especially of her family who did not provide her with reasons to self-value. She could not change the externally derived image, nor she could come with an authentic one.

The third example is Salema All-Farsi, who comes from a known tribe. However, that did not help her because there were other candidates who come from bigger and more powerful tribes. Although Salema mentioned tribe and political money as the only and most effective tools in the elections, she listed tribe class as the number 1 priority. Salema concluded that even when female candidates feel discriminated against, by society and tribes, a female candidate would win easily if she was a daughter of a sheikh and was supported by her tribe. The voters/society look at the candidates as a person who seeks to influence first the voter and later, if elected, the government and other institutions. In order to achieve the goal of influence, the candidate should obtain strong effective tools such as a prestigious tribe name first, or/and wealth. If these two tools are presented with a female candidate, people would vote for her, because “within the reality of hierarchical power relations, the standpoints of some groups are most certainly privileged over others” (Collins, Learning from the Outsider within: The

Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thoughts, 2004, p. 252).

Salema ran three times with expectations that she would make it each time because of her qualifications and dedication. Many people supported her; however, money and powerful tribes defeated her each time. For the sake of this argument it could be mentioned that in 2000 and 2004 A'Shura elections Lujiyana Mohsen Darwish, the daughter of a well-known businessman ran both elections and won both elections and represented the city of Muscat twice. Although she does not come from big Omani tribe, her wealth and her father's status as powerful businessman helped her in winning the elections because voters thought that the powerful can help more because they are respected among decision makers and can make things happen.

Most female candidates who come from known prestigious tribes did not mention racism, although they mentioned discrimination against women. In some cases, there were several known powerful tribes in one district where competition grew harder and harsher. In these cases, people mostly would vote for a male candidate or for who pays more.

In the Name of Islam

All female candidates were confronted by female voters who told them they cannot vote for them because of their husbands' disapproval. As good practicing Muslim wives, they should obey their husbands. Female candidates also heard female voters saying that they cannot vote for a female candidate, and if they do that, they will commit a sin because they encouraged and enabled other women to mingle with men. However, these kind of comments and excuses were not new; female candidates have been listening to female voters raising the same arguments to justify why they do not vote for female candidates.

The new issue in 2019 A'Shura elections was that, for the first time, a female

candidate who did not wear hijab, ran for the elections. Chapter 2 displayed the voters' reaction towards a female candidate wearing no hijab and discussed the issue from various points of views. In this section, Basma's side of the story is investigated as well as her understanding regarding people's reactions and behavior. The first person who told her "I will not vote for you," was her brother. Basma met people and talked to them face to face, she formed her own perspective about religion and society, religion and politics, and religion as a tool used against female candidates.

Basma identified the issue as a social matter, saying people did not want liberal thinking to affect their own families, and also mentioned tribal loyalty since she is not from Bowshar originally. Finally, Basma was disrupting the status quo by talking about constitution, rights and duties, and laws. Basma specified that rejection came from middle aged people, and with women there were questions to identify how much she was like them.

It was the mixture of social values and religious teachings that Basma had to confront and to respond to questions and comments; "a women told me I will not vote for you because I do not want to commit a sin by helping you to mix with men in Majlis A'Shura. I told I am a lawyer I have been mixing with men all my life, I even gave them examples from Islamic history of women who worked with men and I talked about women's roles in the Islamic history. Then another woman would say: women voice is flaw (awra'h), another would say you are not from here."

The hijab was used frequently to hurt Basma's image by using social media and short videos from meeting with voters, where she was asked about the hijab. Basma is convinced that all these questions were asked because some women had promised another candidate to collect women's vote for him. Male candidates depend on women who can talk to other women and enter their houses to gather support and collect votes.

According to Basma, average Omanis would not ask questions like these, even in small towns and very conservative communities. She said “I was invited to visit religious people with long beards and old sheikhs’ houses, no one asked that question. The hijab issue is fake and fabricated.” Only competitors were looking for flaws, from their point view, that would damage my image. They did that while having the perfect example of a female candidate or the perfect woman from social perspective, anything different is wrong.

Nevertheless, Basma has a belief that in Oman, people do not really care about “the other”. She said: “I toured the entire country as a lawyer and a tourist, and no one cared whether she wore hijab or not.” She said that an Omani father might not accept his daughter not wearing hijab, although they would not care if “the other woman” does not. Omanis, from Basma’s point view, do not think that they are the guardians of all Omani women, “I believe the hijab was used, I know some women felt I am different, but that’s all about it.”

Regarding society’s guardianship towards preserving social values, although Basma is convinced that Omanis would play this role, the discussion in chapter 2 about the hijab controversy showed a different conclusion; most participants said that hijab is the main reason Basma lost the elections. While Basma mentioned that average people never asked her about the hijab because, as she believes, they do not actually care about it, it could be that they did not ask for a different reason because Omanis are polite and have high morals. Thus, perhaps they did not ask that question out of politeness, and that could be the reason for competitors to use hijab as a tool against her because they knew that even when people did not ask, that did not mean they did not have the questions in their minds.

Although there is not organized religious or Islamist organized movement in Oman, there are conservative religious people who believe that women should not run and represent people because they think that women should not lead. This is an idea which suits the hierarchical system that placed men on the top, and this idea is presented as a religious obligation a devoted Muslim should obey. A woman should not run or vote for a woman, and a man should not support and vote because that would be a sin. Fassi (2016, p. 189) explained that “religious scripture was the tool by which the religious establishment governed society and claimed its legitimacy.” Religion is another cultural institution that is entrenched in the social structure, and it is holy and sacred, and it helps in sustaining the same values.

These values include women's modesty, family values, and women's dependency on men to represent support for the integrity of the patriarchal family (Doumato, 1992), and these values represent the ideal image of a Muslim woman. This image is widely emphasized in the media and the textbooks, where boys and girls are raised within gendered spheres to protect a specific set of values that produce traditional attitudes towards women's political participation. These attitudes became a major obstacle to the election of women to parliament and other elected institutions; therefore, “culture continues to be a significant influence on the proportion of women parliamentarians” (Norris & Inglehart, 2011, p. 132).

Summary

Strong objectivity provides a new and authentic perspective concerning women's lives and experiences through making women's' lives the starting point of the research project. Strong objectivity is a “call for acknowledgement that all human beliefs including our best scientific beliefs - are socially situated, but they also require a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most

objective knowledge claims" (Harding S. , 1991, p. 142).

Through critical discussion, this chapter sought to generate objective knowledge and understanding regarding the social factors and issues surrounding the election's experiences of female candidates. The chapter investigated the motivations and the goals that had driven female candidates to engage and decide to run. Also, it investigated the families and tribes' behavior regarding female candidacy, explored the female candidate participants' perspectives on controversial issues such as female votes, number of female candidates and representatives, and tribal support among other related matters to the elections' experience, including the challenges facing female candidates compared to males' challenges, and community support and the power of influences.

Most female candidate participants identified belief of women's political participation and advocating women's issues and women rights as their running goal; however, only one among them specified that she aimed to fight all kinds of inequalities and discrimination against women and advocate for women rights. Several participants stated that their goal was to put women's issues on the discussion sessions of the elected councils. Changing society was one female candidate's goal, and it was in the core of her discussion about stereotypes about women's qualifications and skills. Several participants did not specify one goal, rather they mentioned a broad goal which is serving the country and the community, which could mean also that they do not have a clear agenda or purpose if elected. Nevertheless, it also could be that they were ready to become involved in issues that concerns public interest. Although few participants announced that they ran according to friends' advice, they showed dedication and some of them won the elections. Overall, all participants ran because they believed strongly that there is a role for women in political arena and they were willing to participate.

One of the points discussed by female voters was that female candidates' lack of community, and volunteering is a main factor in limiting females' winning chances. However, most of the participants said they spent long years working with communities whether as heads of women' associations or heads for volunteer teams. Only a few of them did not have an impressive history in community service. Regarding family support, all participants, except one, said that they had their family support. The major supporters were male relatives, fathers, brothers, and husbands. Although some of the female candidates said that few male relatives, including a father, a brother, uncles, and cousins did not agree with their candidacy, this disapproval did not affect their motivation and they continued to run. Some relatives spread rumors and banned other family members from voting for the female relative running in the elections.

Despite most participants saying that being a female was not a factor in the election, it seemed that they were confused in explaining and understanding why qualified women do not win in the elections. The participants mentioned that Omani society is open regarding women and women's participation in various field; however, they emphasized that social values and tradition are an obstacle hindering women's advancement in political career. The participants while discussing gender as a factor said they do not separate between the female as sex and woman as gender, and that society assigned specific roles to her and leadership is not one of them. Nevertheless, few participants agreed that society, tradition, values, and individuals prefer males over females in politics and leadership positions. Furthermore, the participants agreed that the most powerful factor in the election is tribe affiliation and support, and money and other materialistic influences. The gender or the sex of the candidate is not seen when tribal and money support are present.

When comparing the challenges facing male and female candidates, most of the

participants said that male challenges are represented in the severe competition between male candidates and that requires additional resources and energy, especially with the significant numbers of male candidates in the same district. Also, the participants highlighted that the use of political money, and tribal power and support produce the biggest challenge to male candidates. Most female candidate participants designated the critical challenge facing female candidates are associated with the social values that consider political leadership not among the roles a female can play, stressing traditional gender roles in private sphere and household. Several participants mentioned that male and female candidates are in fact facing the same challenges, especially the use of money and voting for the tribe and the tribe ranking in society, adding that female candidates are also affected by the influence of political money, tribal power, and severe competition.

Female candidate participants were equally divided in whether recommending or not recommending a larger number of female candidates would improve their chance in winning the elections. Those who argued in favor said that bigger number would provide more opportunities for women, and they gave example the big numbers of male candidates who usually won drastically in the election. Women in smaller numbers and that limited their probabilities in winning. The other team argued that large numbers of candidates scatter votes. They said although men win more than women, men also lose in bigger numbers. Several participants did not recommend running in large numbers for both male and female candidates because it divides families, tribes, communities, and votes, and it takes chances from qualified candidates.

Another controversial topic was women's votes; all participants agreed that women's votes matter and would make significant impact on deciding the winner in a given district, nonetheless, they disagree regarding the extent of the commitment a

female voter should provide for female candidates. While some of them said that a female voter should not be obliged to vote for a female candidate only because of gender, as the female candidate seeks the support of male and female voters in the election, and a female voter should be free in choosing the right candidates from her point of view regardless of the gender of the candidate. The other team of the participants argued that female voters should be committed to women's advancement and support female candidates; they argued that female candidates are mostly qualified and deserve to have their sisters' support in the elections. Participants also, mentioned a significant element regarding female's vote. They said that female's votes are controlled either by male guardian or a powerful male relative or by the sheikh of the tribe, who insist and forced other tribe/family members to vote for a specific male candidate. Thus, even when a woman support a female candidate cannot vote for her because either she respect the choice of the family/tribe or she fears the reaction if she did not follow the will of her tribe or male relative.

Most female participants think that society is open to women political participation. However, they stated that society favors males for leadership and representation positions. They also, highlighted some voters' behavior against female's candidacy in the name of Islam's teaching and Shari'a, they believe that religion does not prohibit women from political and public engagement, on the contrary, some participants considered running for qualified people; men and women, as a religious obligation that should be fulfilled.

The next chapter disuses and analyzes female candidates' performance during the election campaigns and the hardship they encountered as females and candidates. The focus of the chapter is on women as a marginalized / oppressed group, and it discusses the impact of hierarchy, power relations, and gender relations on women's

candidacy and how these factors affect, from the female candidates' points of view, their performance during the campaigns and the elections period. It also discusses how gender relations determine voters' decisions and concludes with their preference in the election.

CHAPTER 4: FEMALE CANDIDATES AND ELECTIONS'

COMPETITION

This chapter discusses and analyzes the challenges and the hardships that female candidates faced during the elections using their useful location as a female candidate/pressed group and as members of the community/dominant group. In this discussion, each participant provided additional insights about the election experiences. This chapter is also dedicated to discussing the experiences of the female candidates' management of elections campaigns and dealing with specific challenges related to their status as female. This will occur in addition to analyzing their understanding of competition, voters' behavior, and state's measures concerning elections. While analyzing, I will examine to what extent power relations and hierarchical society impacted women as candidates and minimized their chances, as a group, to achieve larger representation in the elected councils in Oman. Furthermore, this chapter will uncover how the voice of one became the voice of all and how the group's voice expresses the individual voice.

This chapter seeks to discover how female candidates understand their worlds from the inside out, and how far the "outsider within" can provide new knowledge that presents a fresh understanding of their society and its values in politics. It will also find out what place is designated for women in the hierarchy of the society and how the female candidate participants see themselves in male-female relations and tribe-individual relations. Furthermore, the chapter will investigate suggestions of the participants, as a group of female candidates, regarding the establishment of an enabling environment that could cultivate a better competitive circumstance for women seeking political involvement. The standpoint theory presented "a way of empowering

oppressed groups, of valuing their experience and pointing towards a way to develop an oppositional consciousness” (Harding, 2004). In this regard, the participants discussed the importance of powerful elected councils to gain the trust of the voters and to grant the success of the elections process.

Elections’ Campaigns: Teams and Tools

All female candidates depended on door-to-door visits as the primary tool in their campaign, then on public meetings with voters and social media. However, using social media varied between those who used it as the major tool like Basma, and who just used it as an announcement tool like Badriya. The election campaigns’ sizes and designs varied as well. There were well-organized campaigns with resources, campaign managers, teams, and committees with different assigned roles such as Tahera’s campaign, who won in Matrah (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). There were those campaigns that depended on the personal efforts of the female candidate alone with one or two people helping with talking to people on her behalf like S.H., Eman, Aisha, Fatima S., and H. A., and other participants depended on one or two family members, like Aziza (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020; Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019; Eman, personal communication, December 3, 2019; 20. Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019; H. A. personal communication, February 8, 2020; S.H. personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Understanding the nature of the society and the social structure, participants knew that they must talk to the Sheikhs of tribes and influential people in their communities along with consulting trusted relatives. Gaining the support was an essential move for female candidates if they wanted the rest of the family and tribe’s members to follow. It is also important because it shows the competitors that she does

not stand alone and is a serious candidate. Therefore, all female candidates started talking to close family members, friends, and powerful members of their tribes, asking for support and advice on how to run the campaign and ways to endorse them. The second step was talking to sheikhs and other powerful members of other tribes. Female candidates who had worked with volunteer groups and NGOs talked to their network to spread the word and gather voters' support. Most female candidate participants also used flyers, leaflets, and brochures to introduce themselves to people, in addition to publishing videos on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. However, using social media was intended to target primarily youth and educated employees, while most voters, especially in remote villages and towns, were older people who were not part of the social media community. Basma's campaign, for example, depended chiefly on social media and could reach a broad audience, virtually in the entire country (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). However, she could not reach her voters in the Bowshar district despite it being located in the heart of the capital city governorate. Basma started her campaign late; she had doubts that she might not be approved as a candidate because of her history in the 2011 protests and being a political prisoner afterwards, saying "many of my friends thought that might happen; nevertheless, , my name was among the final approved candidates and I started my campaign" (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020).

All of Basma's campaign team members were "young, technology-oriented and enthusiastic about my candidacy" and volunteered to help in promoting her agenda and organize her meetings and design advertisement (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). The challenge Basma faced was that she did not have the experience in public speaking and did not know the people of her district. She was known as a lawyer, while at the social level people did not interact with her. Nevertheless, she

visited the district villages and towns and there she discovered the harsh reality about competition. Other candidates mobilized people against her because of the hijab issue and some because of her imprisonment.

Basma and her team initiated a social media driven campaign, a campaign she described as the “most successful campaign in Oman” (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). For Basma, it was the electoral program that was the most important issue; “I wanted to have a realistic and honest program that is respecting people’s expectations and aspirations and at the same time precise and simple.”⁹¹ As she explained, the difficulty was identifying the right content of her message. She said, “I was aware that A’Shura representatives are not powerful enough to promise certain changes because of regulations limiting their performance.” People know this; therefore, it was not possible to deceive them. It was equally important for Basma to create a more national message than district oriented one, which, as seen in chapter 2, was not received well by her district’s voters. However, Basma sought to put out a professional message in terms of the language and pictures, a message that expresses Omani citizens’ ambitions and aspirations.⁹² As a lawyer, she put in place a code of ethics for her team to follow when posting any campaign messages among those, information accuracy, lawful and avoiding mentioning other candidates.

Competition grew harder and harder, especially after Basma’s campaign became popular and gained followers and support in social media, where young people from around the country interacted with her videos and tweets (Basma, personal

⁹¹ This is the message Basma convey to voters in October 2, 2019:
<https://twitter.com/BasmaMubarak/status/1180168651665752064?s=20>

⁹² Basma issued on October 19, 2019 a message explaining how she would balance the national interest and the district interests:
<https://twitter.com/BasmaMubarak/status/1185618685920194560?s=20>

communication, March 7, 2020). Basma said, “I thought we were late compared to other candidates, but people's reaction to the first video posted was huge and positive. I noticed people were thirsty for change.” However, when she did not win, her supporters told her that people should have voted in bigger numbers as they did on social media. Basma thinks she founded a model of a successful campaign and she would have won if other parties, such as the social bot, would have not interfered. Basma faced, like other female candidates, the use of money to influence voters and community leaders, and furthermore, she sometimes was denied the opportunity to speak in a public place in the district because people in charge were instructed to prevent her from talking to people.⁹³

A set of difficulties faced by female candidates during elections' campaign are included in Rahma's story⁹⁴ (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She thought she did what she could in order for her to win; however, she faced unexpected challenges. Rahma formed committees to assist her campaign, visited houses, and called powerful people in the community to inform them about her candidacy and ask for their support-- “I was fortunate because I worked in my community for 35 years. People knew me and welcomed my candidacy. I have a wide social network that helped. However, winning was not in my hand.” Rahma went through two different experiences in her campaigns:

“In 2011, I thought I could win because of my social network and my long time serving the community as a volunteer. However, I discovered that educated eligible voters boycotted the elections; they do not vote⁹⁵. They leave voting for older people, who were usually controlled by family member or tribe's decision, these voters did not know anything about candidates, they were told to vote for

⁹³ She issued an apology on October 7th, 2019 for voters because her meeting venue was unavailable: <https://twitter.com/BasmaMubarak/status/1181145483051503617?s=20>

⁹⁴ Rahma ran twice for Majlis A'Shura in 2011 and 2019 and the result was, in both, not what she expected.

⁹⁵ More discussion in following section regarding boycotting the elections

a specific candidate. This was the main reason I did not win in 2011. In the elections of 2019, I think the major reason was the ‘useless electronic voting devices.’ It was the government’s responsibility to solve this problem by assigning qualified people to operate them.”

In addition to this major issue, which many other female candidates agreed was a reason in the disappointing results⁹⁶, Rahma highlighted three other reasons for her failure to win people’s minds and votes: “I was honest with people, I did not promise things I cannot fulfil, and I did not have enough resources to run my campaign properly.” Rahma’s statement implies other candidates were dishonest, promised things they cannot fulfil, and had enough money not only to run the campaign but also to buy votes. This was a major challenge confirmed by all participants.⁹⁷

Aisha started her campaign talking to powerful figures in her tribe, and visiting close people from her tribe, especially women, to persuade them of her candidacy and to gain their support (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Aisha also designed posters⁹⁸ and booklets introducing her electoral program and issues she intended to discuss in the Majlis. She organized electoral meetings with voters in the remote villages and towns. Aisha confronted hardships at multiple levels, such as candidates’ agents who acquired voters’ identity cards so that they cannot vote for other candidates. Aisha said, “it was very difficult to convince people to take back their IDs so that they can vote freely for any candidate they choose because they already gave promises in return for money.⁹⁹” Aisha, like Rahma, faced the educated voters’ refusal to practice their right to vote. Aisha described this category as “elite,” or people who were content with observation. Aisha was working at the Ministry of Housing at the

⁹⁶ More discussion in following section dedicated for voting mechanism

⁹⁷ Heavily discussed in following section in this chapter

⁹⁸ In August 14, 2015, she posted her poster prior of A’Shura elections in October 2015:
<https://twitter.com/aishaalalwi9/status/632304108335054848?s=20>

⁹⁹ More discussion about this issue in following section in this chapter

time of her candidacy; therefore, people asked her in return for their votes to intervene to complete their unfinished requests on land grants. Other difficulties Aisha confronted were typical of what other female candidates confronted; for example, tribal support of a male candidate who is not a member of that tribe, however, who is supported by powerful members of the tribe. Women voters impacted Aisha as well by their refusal to vote for her. In addition, Aisha described a “paradoxical group”, those who might persuade other people to vote, yet would not vote. Despite all of these difficulties, Aisha thinks that she did not win the election because of: “the weak organization, I depended on myself and personal effort and visits, I did not have working teams and committees nor any other supporting groups. I also was late in starting my campaign. Furthermore, I did not use political money and my tribe did not support me.”

Unlike Aisha, Zahra and Tahera had more organized and complicated networks of groups and teams (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020; Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). However, while it did not result in favor of Zahra, it did for Tahera. In Alseeb district, Zahra organized her campaign by distributing roles and missions among teams and volunteers whom she worked with in helping people of different needs and disabilities. She visited people whom she had met and known over the years she spent serving her community. Zahra explained that her family helped her, but not actively, because her father died a short time before elections and there was dispute over the inheritance. Zahra also mentioned that her brother ran for the previous A’Shura elections in 2015. She played a significant role in gathering support for him and even provided transportation for voters who needed to be transferred to the polling centers, while “he showed his support by telling me that he and his wife voted for me.” However, her mother was active in calling women asking for their support. Zahra said, “I did not have real hard challenges; however, my family

knew that there was an obvious real challenge, they believed that any candidate who wants to win should have enough money, not only to finance the campaign but to buy people's loyalty." Reflecting on the result, Zahra evaluated her performance in the campaign and said, "my mistake was my team. The advice I give to any candidate is that to form an organized team which all its members should be from the candidate's family; brothers and sisters who should have specific roles and responsibilities. This team should be extremely organized." This advice was the plan Tahera followed in Matrah.

Although Tahera's argument, and other participants as well, regarding organized election campaign and its effects on voters is compelling, there was another factor that helped Tahera significantly -- the primary elections tradition in her district (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Tahera said that the most important element of a successful campaign is organization. Tahera emphasized that the campaign team could be a reason for success or failure. She stated that this team should be competent, capable of distributing roles and achieving missions. It is difficult for a candidate to be the campaign's manager. Tahera also had several members of her family as part of the team, and she mentioned that she had family members from her side and her husband's family. Tahera ran two elections: the first was an unofficial internal primary, and the second was the general elections of 2019.

Matrah has its own tradition prior to the general elections to eliminate votes scattering and limit the number of candidates at the general elections: "Matrah witnesses extremely severe competition. That is why we conduct internal elections. We were 6 candidates, 4 men and 2 women, who all have impressive resumes and are known in the society. Competition was tough; however, I won in the first place with 33 votes between me and the second, who was a male candidate" (Tahera, personal

communication, February 8, 2020). The numbers of candidates Tahera mentioned were only her tribe's candidates. The total number of candidates in Matrah in the 2019 A'Shura elections was 17. Al'lawati tribe in Matrah holds its own internal elections to focus the votes on the winning candidates, a tradition other female candidate described as a model to be followed in other Omani districts. Some female candidates believe that they could have won if there was a limited number of candidates.

Matrah is represented by two seats in majlis A'Shura, with Tahera as one of them. In the general elections Tahera entered as the front runner for "Al'lawati" tribe; "I came in second place. Competition was still tough; there were 400 votes between me and the third" (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Tahera concluded that this result was the outcome of organized work in the campaign and proves that when a female candidate is organized and has a good team, she can win. In contrast to Tahera's organized campaign, Aziza's experience in the elections led her to a conclusion that confirms Tahera's perspective. Aziza did not have a team managing her campaign; she depended totally on her personal effort along with her husband and brother's help when they had time after work (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Aziza said that managing an election campaign requires at least three months of dedicated hard work before the election day and election campaigns require solid financial resources and that the candidate should be fit physically and mentally to follow up meetings and interviews and focus on the goal of the campaign. Aziza stressed that a female candidate could not perform well when she is pregnant. That happened to her in the second election and she realized that she should have postponed running. Such a challenge could only hinder a female runner.

The Dominance of the Tribe

Besides the organizational and the procedural issues of the campaigns, the

participants highlighted several issues as permanent challenges. One was the small numbers of female candidates in comparison to male candidates. While one team of the participants said it is better for women not to repeat the male candidates' problem with bigger numbers, the other team thinks bigger numbers represent more chances to win. Another challenge is the controversy of women's votes; whether it supports female candidates, or it is for the tribe. Participants argued that although a female voter has the right to vote for a candidate of her choice, her voice is not completely free because it is controlled by male social authority in the family and the tribe.

The small number of females running for the elections every term is one of the topics mentioned by female voters as a limiting factor¹⁰⁰. Al-Farsi, (2009) recommended encouraging women to run in greater numbers. Some of the female voters and candidate participants said that the small numbers discourage other potential female candidates from running. Nevertheless, female candidate participants are divided equally regarding the impact of more candidates. Nine female candidates said that if more women run in the elections, they would increase their chances of winning, while nine said that would not have any impact, and to the contrary, more female candidates will diminish their chance of winning because female supporters' votes would be scattered. Seven female candidates could not determine whether a larger number of female candidates would work with or against them.

The last two categories, the participants who do not recommend more women running, and those who are not sure, compared this hypothetical situation with male candidates' current situation. Since 1991, when the first elections were held in Oman, until 2019, when the ninth election took place, men were running in large numbers in

¹⁰⁰ It was a major topic of workshops' papers and events, such as the major Oman women symposium held in Sohar in 2009, that recommended encouraging women to run in bigger numbers.

each district. In 2019, for example, 637 male candidates ran for Majlis A’Shura elections, whereas there were only 40 female candidates running. Female candidates argued that there were only 84 male candidates who won, and 2 female winners. This was the reason some are against the idea and some are not sure about its result.

Rahma Za’al from Alseeb does not think a bigger number of female candidates would change results (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She believes that society needs time to accept women’s participation and be aware about women’s political role. She said, “we need time to persuade society that women can take public responsibilities.” Similarly, Fadīla the winner in Sohar, thinks it is not about numbers (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, she does not recommend that women run in larger numbers because bigger numbers will weaken females’ chances of winning. Sana, from Al’amerat, backed this idea because she thinks it depends on how serious female candidates are about elections, and to what extent they are willing to work for winning (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). The number is not a critical factor in winning the elections. Sana said, “I noticed some female candidates fall under the pressure of the election’s campaign and could not continue with the same spirits and determination.” Sana gave an example of the big number of female candidates in Alseeb district in A’Shura 2019 elections and explained that this resulted in votes being scattered. In the 2019 A’Shura elections, nine female candidates ran among 35 candidates in Alseeb district. The same situation occurred in Bowshar district where seven female candidates ran among 19 candidates to win two seats to represent their district¹⁰¹. In both Alseeb and Bowshar, two male candidates won the seats. Bowshar and Alseeb provided 16 female candidates out of all 40 females

¹⁰¹ See the final list of candidates for A’Shura elections in 2019:
<https://alroya.om/uploads/documents/a12a151cbd876292989c3b7c5af67e49.pdf>

who ran in all of Oman’s districts.

The participants who argued that larger numbers scatter votes stated this could be controlled by holding a primary election in each district. Khalsa, who ran three times in Manah, explained the disadvantages of bigger numbers of female candidates by comparing Alseeb and Matrah¹⁰² and said that bigger numbers do not work in favor of female candidates (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Khalsa mentioned that in a workshop designed for female candidates by the Ministry of Social Development, female candidates advised their counterparts in Alseeb to choose one of them and gather all supporters around her, although it is obvious that they did not take that advice. Khalsa, like other female candidates, believes that larger numbers of female candidates in one district is harmful. In addition, Khalsa noted that larger numbers of female candidates distract attention from excellent qualified female candidates, who become unseen and looked at as a number.

Zahra is one of nine female candidates who ran in Alseeb in 2019 (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She also recommended smaller numbers of female candidates. Zahra said that the “best thing for each district is to agree upon its candidate, in addition to Matrah, tribes in Salalah who have similar practice.” Maryam Balhaf, from Salalah, says that the tribal alliances and coalitions are the worst; “tribes could choose the candidates suits their agendas, at all times tribes chose male candidates, because they think leadership should stay in the sons of the tribe” (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020). Nevertheless, Maryam also thinks having many female candidates could be an obstacle because people would vote within the tribes’ alliances, and if there is more than a female candidate in a district, the votes

¹⁰² Both districts in Muscat governate

would not be enough to win.

However, the other participants see that larger numbers provide more possibilities of winning and better chances to increase women's representation in the elected councils. Although Basma ran in alseeb in 2019, like Zahra, she thinks that bigger numbers of women running in the elections presents more chances to win (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Noora, who ran in Salalah like Maryam, had a different view from her. She supported the notion of bigger numbers, claiming that if women run in bigger numbers the number of female winners might increase, it even might be bigger than male winners (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Nonetheless, she thinks that women do not have interests in politics, and they run in a small number because they are not interested in politics. She said, "women 'by nature, don't care about politics,' women interests are not political." Noora added that when she meets her friends maybe one out of ten would talk and discuss politics. Another comparison between Muscat districts and other districts in Oman, especially the South, was raised. Noora says that women in Muscat run in large numbers compared to her region: "things there are better than here in Salalah. The situation here is different; men are in the lead. We in Dhofar governorate are controlled by tribal alliances that we belong to. These alliances define the tribes and women's place. In Muscat, there are no such limitations and restrictions that stop or ban women from running for elections" (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Looking at women's status in the Gulf, Arab countries, and the world, Noora concluded: "we see that women representation around the world is less than men. The same situation in the gulf and other Arab countries; "these are the boundaries of females in the political arena." Several studies, such as March, Smyt, & Mukhopadhy (1999), Krause (2009), and Norris & Inglehart (2011) mentioned that limited women's political participation

is a problematic issue, and the basic facts concerning data and statistics of women in politics are not in dispute or debatable. It is considered as “a fundamental problem facing the worldwide process of democratization is the continued lack of gender equality in political leadership” (Norris & Inglehart, 2011, p. 126).

Another controversial topic that participants disagreed on and thought is one of the permanent challenges was the issues of women’s or females’ vote. There was the perception that if the female voters support female candidates and vote for them, more female candidates would win and therefore, increase the representation of women in elected council. The participants’ positions differed regarding the size and the importance of women’s support for female candidates. Some said they have full support from women, and they owed all the hard work and success to women. On the other side, there were participants who thought they lost because women did not vote for them. Several papers mentioned the women’s vote as decisive; for example, Al-Amrabi & Al-Farsi (2013) and Al-Lamky (2008) said that if women vote in large numbers for female candidates, they will win. This idea was adopted by community leaders and officials in the government as well, who accuse female voters of not supporting female candidates. Women voters in Oman are around 50% of the total voters; however, women representatives’ numbers do not reflect that percentage nor the population of women in the country, which is also around half of the inhabitants. This argument is debatable because women in Oman did not run equally in the same number in all districts; in some there were no female candidates at all. However, 25 female candidates debated this topic, providing fresh perspective about women’s vote in Oman and its impact on women winning the elections.

Among the participants, 17 female candidates agreed that women’s votes impact the result of female candidates, and if women vote enough for female

candidates, this would increase chances of winning. Five did not agree because they think winning elections is not only about women's vote and there are other factors that contribute to women's limited chances of winning. Three female candidates said women's votes might impact results; however, they think that the evidence to support this view is absent because we do not have reliable information or statistics about how women vote and whom they vote for. Most female candidates explained their standpoint and mentioned interesting elements of women's votes. Several female candidates highlighted that women would support and vote for female candidates; nevertheless, most women's votes are controlled. Although some participants mentioned that female candidates and voters in the capital city's districts enjoy less conservative communities than other areas in Oman, other participants in rural and urban districts said that people would not vote for women.

Ameera said that female voters hesitate to vote for female candidates only in the rural areas because society is conservative, and women think it is "better for women to stay away from the parlor of politics and leadership. These matters are men's responsibilities" (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). Ameera is from a rural area, while Aziza is from the Muscat governorate and she thinks, like Ameera, that one of the reasons behind female candidates losing the election is the women's vote. She said that most female voters vote for male candidates, even in large cities like Muscat (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Nasra, also, believes that if women vote for female candidates they will win; nonetheless, women's vote became one of the reasons makes female candidates lose in the elections (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Aisha, a candidate from Sur, totally agrees that women's voting for male candidates is a major cause of female's failure to win (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). From Rahma Za'al's point

of view, women did not change their traditional perspective about women's roles in the society (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Therefore, women voters would not vote for female candidates even if they see them qualified. Rahma said, "women have a tendency of not supporting other women."

Some participants mentioned that women would vote for female candidates only if they are close relatives or according to the Sheikh's Orders; however these participants could not give reasons for female behavior except jealousy and describing women as the enemy of women. S.H. said women brought all kinds of excuses to justify why they do not want to vote for her (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said:

"Many women refused the idea of voting for a woman. I heard many heartbreaking statements while visiting houses. For example, a woman told me 'you (candidates) are all liars. You look for you benefits and after elections you forget about us.' Another woman said you will change your phone number so we cannot reach you, others said 'I swear I will never vote.' Most women voters asked for favors such as looking for a job for their children and getting them land grants in a specific location. I was shocked when a woman asked for things like paying to reconstruct her kitchen, paying the electricity and water bills, providing wheelchairs for her disabled relative, and paying for an outside the country treatment for another sick relative. All these favors were asked in one house. I was disappointed when I talked to men too because they told me to talk to their women (hareem), when I went to the women, they told me, 'our husbands do not approve if we vote.'"¹⁰³

S.H. also has a firm opinion about women votes; "women are the enemy of women, even when they pretend otherwise" (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said that a woman might vote for a female candidate in exceptional circumstances such as if the candidate is the mother, the sister, or the aunt. The other circumstance is when the sheikh of a tribe or the leader of an area is supporting a female candidate and would order everyone to vote for her, or when the campaign manager is paying money in exchange for votes (S.H., personal communication, November 27,

¹⁰³ S.H ran twice for Majlis A'Shura in 2015 and 2019, and once for the municipal council in 2016.

2019). S.H. concluded that in normal circumstances women do not vote for female candidates because “women do not prefer other females to be in charge because of jealousy.” Women also, from S.H.’s point view, “trust men more than women in politics.” She added that people sometimes compare current representatives, who did not fulfil their promises, to candidates, and question how a woman can make change if a man cannot.

For H.A., women’s position from female candidate was a confusing issue (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that “women do not help other women and they do not support them, maybe because they are jealous.” H.A. confronted tough rejection from her female relatives, who refused to support and vote for her. They instead took money from other candidates and voted for them.

As for current representative performance and inability to make change as a reason for women’s refusal to support female candidates, it is possible to argue that this issue could affect both female and male candidates. As a matter of fact, it could affect male candidates more because current representatives are, mostly, males. These views, regarding the tribal vote and the sheikhs’ orders, prove that institutions such as tribes and conservative communities “ensure the production, reinforcement, and reproduction of social relations and thereby create and perpetuate social difference and social inequality” (March, Smyt, & Mukhopadhy, 1999, p. 104). Women voters and tribes’ sheikhs as loyal members of these institutions aim to sustain the status quo of women and keep them away from the public sphere. As Bari (2005, p. 4) explained, the gender role ideology is used as an ideological tool by patriarchy to position women within the private sphere of home as mothers and wives and men in the public sphere. She emphasized that this ideology is one of the critical factors that shape the level of women’s political participation globally.

The issue that S.H. mentioned concerning women's vote according to the sheikh of the tribe or the leader of the family orders was confirmed by several female candidates such as Basma, Mahfūza, and Tayba, who agreed that women would vote under the pressure of the males of the family or the tribe (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020; Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019; Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). However, they believe that female voters are not free and are under the control of male relatives such as husbands, fathers, brothers and sheikhs. They also refused the jealousy issue and the notion of women being the enemy of women. These participants explained that women do not vote for female candidates because of jealousy; it is because women's votes are controlled by the sheikhs, male relatives, such as a father, a brother, or a husband, and by the money and other influences. Mahfūza talked about her experience with female voters; "most women told me, 'my husband does not approve if I vote for you.' One of my close friends wanted to vote for me; she was crying because her husband told her not to vote for me. Other women told me the same. They are well educated, and some school principals said to me: my husband does not agree" (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Mahfūza thinks that "males dominate and control females' minds, movement in society, and votes. Males control even working women who have a role in the community."

Mahfūza comes from a religious background, however, and could not understand why women behave this way (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She said that it is true that "our religion tells us to obey our husbands, but not in all matters, certainly not in the elections." From her point of view, women's vote has no impact on the family issues or negative results on the husband's rights; therefore, women are not obliged to obey husbands on matters like that. Sana

also confronted women who told her that either the father, the brother, or the husband told them not to vote for a specific female candidate (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Sana said that this happens for the sake of another candidate who is supported by the tribe. Male guardians are afraid of raising problems between the tribe members.

Zahra does not blame women for not voting for female candidates (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said she noticed that women do not vote for female candidates because they are under the pressure of the family and the tribe, money and social status, and that there is an additional pressure from husbands and brothers. Zahra mentioned talking to a female candidate from Sama'el who was complaining about women refusing voting for her because of their male relatives. Zahra said that society in the interior of Oman is more male dominated; however, in Muscat there is more acceptance for women to vote freely.

Female voters, as stated by participants, are controlled by male relatives who think they have the right to enforce their will and desire on females' voting choice. Furthermore, they allegedly know better in politics and the election process because women lack the knowledge and the experience in public issues. This situation is typical in patriarchal systems that rely on the superiority of males over females. This system according to Smith (2004, p. 22) "impose the concepts and terms in which the world of men is thought as the concepts and terms in which women must think their world." Therefore, when women vote, they vote in accordance with men's terms and understanding of politics. Although female voters may or may not be conscious of the construction of values that places them in a lower position than men, even in voting, the interaction regarding selecting a candidate, between them and their male relatives indicates the meaning of gender that explains the definitions and understandings given

to "masculine and feminine, asymmetrical power relations between the sexes, and the ways that men and women are differently situated in and affected by social processes" (Moghadam V. , 2013, p. 24).

Nevertheless, several participants believe that female voters should have the right to vote for a candidate they support and believe is a good representative regardless of the gender or sex. They called for vote equality. For instance, Noora believes that women's vote does not impact women's chance in winning, and it should not (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020). In elections' competition, female candidates seek both male and female votes. She said, "there is not any rule that says that women should only vote for female candidates." Noora explains her standpoint by saying that female candidates presented themselves as competitors to male candidates; therefore, people vote according to their will. Fatima H. said that women's vote could be a reason that causes female candidates to lose; however, she thinks that both female and male voters feel arrogant toward female candidates (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). They think that they "control candidates' fate in the elections;" as a result they, males and females, are equally responsible for the failure of female candidates. Tahera, A'Shura winner in 2019, has a closer view to Noora's opinion that voting is a private issue and women have the freedom to cast her vote for whom she is convinced to vote (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Tahera also said that she does not believe that "women are the enemy of women," nor does she believe that women do not support other women, saying: "I don't believe women stand against women." Nevertheless, Tahera mentioned that husbands might sometimes force wives to vote for a candidate he favors, yet this is not a decisive factor. She said that a successful campaign targets both male and female voters without exceptions. Tahera confirmed that in her election experience she "did not face or notice

that women are against women as some would like to say.” To encourage female voters to participate more effectively, Fadīla, the other female winner at A’Shura elections of 2019, said that women in Oman need to be empowered at all levels (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). Women should be empowered as partners in the country development plans at large, but need support in the field of political participation, and female voters and candidates should be prepared to engage effectively in the elections.

Voters Registration is a Candidate’s Mission

Many eligible voters do not register for the elections, instead waiting for the candidate they decide to vote for to do all the work because they think that voting is for his/her personal benefit. The experienced candidates are prepared for such efforts; however, female candidates appear less prepared for it. Non-registered voters caused female candidates time and effort that was not expected for such a mission. Registering voters was also an issue of manipulation and bargaining. Several female candidates mentioned the issues of voters’ identification cards and voters’ registration as challenges during the elections. Female candidates said that they confronted two challenges related to voters’ registration. First was that many voters are either not registered as voters or that they did not activate their registration. Second was that voters handed their identification to a candidate’s agent in order to either register them or activate their IDs; however, giving their cards meant that those votes were going to that particular candidate. People would hand their IDs cards as a promise to vote, and some of these promises were given with a price. The participants highlighted this as a major problem regarding female voters. They said that they discovered that women were not registered as voters only a few days before the election. Not being registered prevented female voters from voting; however, it is worth mentioning that this problem

is not exclusive to female voters only. Male voters are not registered too. This could be explained by two reasons-- first, that voters think that registration is the candidate's job because that is what many candidates do. Second is that many people do not vote in the elections because they think that elected representatives do not have powers.¹⁰⁴

Samīra described not registering voters as lack of seriousness from females' side (Samīra, personal communication, January 30 2020). She said, "the biggest problem confronting us in the elections was our discovery, in the last minutes, that many female voters, who are educated working women, are not registered in the electoral records." Samīra, explained that many female voters would come and show their support and their willingness to vote, and when they were asked if they were registered as voters, they said no. However, Samīra thinks this reflects a bigger issue that stops women from registering in the electoral records. That is the performance and the limited powers of Majlis A'Shura, which has made many people, males and females, have no serious desire to vote and be part of the political process.¹⁰⁵

Fatima S., who won in the first Municipal elections in 2012, told her story with voters' registration and said that she did not have a team and she worked by herself to convince people door to door to vote for her (Fatima S. personal communication, November 23, 2019). She found out that many people did not register as voters, and some did not even have IDs. She did all the work needed to ensure that people who promised to vote for her had their IDs registered and ready before the election day. Fatima S. mentioned that she intends to run for the next municipal elections and already started preparation and checked out the voters' lists in her district. Noora also mentioned that her team helped in registering voters (Noora, personal communication,

¹⁰⁴ More details about this issue in the following sections and chapter 5

¹⁰⁵ Chapter 4 is discussing the powers of elected council and people reactions towards its performance.

February 8, 2020). The team would receive the IDs and take them to the Ministry of Interior office and register new voters; she said, “we gathered 600 ID cards from women only.”

Nasra also said that her campaign faced the problem of people’s IDs activation (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She said that female voters are registered; however, they did not activate their IDs. Voters in Oman are required every four years before the elections to activate their registration in the district they are going to vote. Many voters do not activate their IDs because they expect that candidates and campaign agents will take care of it. Voter registration and ID activation became part of the candidates’ campaigns and a field where competition became harder. Nevertheless, many voters would go to polling centers without having their IDs activated. Muna said that one of the reasons behind her losing votes was that “despite media intensive coverage of the election process, many came to vote and their IDs were not activated or some people were not registered as voters” (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Muna says, ‘I think it is maybe lack of awareness or attention that before voting they need to register. I suggest that authorities find a way to make sure that people understand that registration and activation should be done before the election day.”

Money Buys Votes and Power

The intense competition among candidates and the fight over voters and their IDs registration led to using other tools to persuade voters and to keep them loyal to a specific candidate. The election period became a season for some voters to trade votes for money and other benefits. As seen in S.H.’s story, it was uncovered to what extent people could go to bargain and use the occasion to benefit. Asking a candidate for kitchen reconstruction, buying a wheelchair, and finding jobs became more familiar

than arguing, for example, about the unemployment problem in the country. Personal interest became more commonly discussed than public interest, as Aisha mentioned in her statement, people asked her to help them to finish their request for land grants since she was an employee of the Ministry of Housing (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Aisha said that whom she called the “votes’ agents” bargain with people to set a price for each vote.

Fatima S. compares between her two experiences in the elections for A’Shura and Municipal councils (Fatima S. personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said that competition in A’Shura elections is exceptionally hard compared to the Municipal election. She won the first Municipal elections in 2012; however, she failed to get enough votes for A’Shura council in 2015 despite her previous experience in winning an election. “Bribery and bribers,” as she described them, were widely spread in A’Shura elections, and she said, “I do not like to be involved in such things, I prefer people selecting me for my qualification and intention to serve my community. I think I lost because I was against giving bribes to get votes.”

S.H. mentioned that a week before the election day, 100 voters who promised to vote for her told her they are supporting another candidate (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said, “a candidate agent bought their votes. Money is the most powerful tool, even more than tribal loyalty.” S.H. reported that people asked her “other candidates pay us, can you?” She said that there were some candidates who paid 10-30 Omani Rials weekly to keep people in their favor. S.H. decided from the beginning not to pay and she was “very careful” not to engage in such doings. Using money influence impacted qualified candidates, as Salema said, and it made elections unfair to honest, dedicated candidates who wanted to serve their people and country (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). Salema thinks,

after three attempts to win Majlis A’Shura elections, that “political money was the main reason behind the disappointing results.” She said that all winners in the previous elections in her district were rich males who used their money, and sheikhs who used their tribal influence. Concurring with Salama’s statement

H.A. reiterate that:

“the situation during the elections is like this, if the candidate is a known rich person and has money to give away, he will win-- ‘his shares with voters are high’--and if the candidate is known not rich and have no money, no one would look at him/her. The most important is money, if I had had money, and I was ready to bribe and people knew that I would have won, even my relatives who did not vote for me. if I had given them money, they would have voted for me” (H. A., personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Zahra believes that female candidates could not win because of the “bribes” paid by male candidates: “I noticed that female candidates, not only in my district, but in many other districts, lost because lots of money was paid. Sometimes candidates paid for one vote 70 Omani Rials (\$200), the average price for a single vote was between 15-20 Omani Rials” (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). However, Zahra mentioned that despite candidates targeting poor people, “I have many of them who voted for me without payment.” Zahra’s experience in working with poor families before, during, and after elections qualified her to understand the circumstances of these families; “I learnt that I should not depend on poor families because it is easy to manipulate them, candidates use them because of their needs and deprived economic status.”

Participants think that voters, during the election period, use the candidates and take advantage of the season and bargain votes for who pays more (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Asma expressed her regret that voters do not consider the real goal of the elections. She said, “Unfortunately, voters think that a vote

for any candidate should be bought with money or other favors. When a voter is paid will vote for the candidate who paid, without payment it is exceedingly difficult to win.” Fatima H. also thinks that she lost the elections mainly because of “people refusing to give their votes without exchange for money or private favors, they do not understand that electing the right candidate might benefit them and it is best for them when a qualified person representing them. They all have this ‘classic idea’ that they give their votes for a person who would benefit them personally” (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020).

It is not only voters who would abandon a female candidate to join other male candidates. Some of the campaign managers and candidates’ agents would leave because other candidates offered them money. Zahra said some female candidates found themselves without a manager in the middle of the election campaign (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). S.H. mentioned that a person who had helped her gather votes abandoned her with 100 votes to join a male candidate who paid for each vote (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). An agent is responsible in gathering/buying votes on behalf of a candidate. The agent value is higher depending on the number of votes he can collect. Agents could be men or women; some agents have other agents working for them in small localities. The wealthier the candidate is, the more agents hired the more votes could be bought. S.H. also mentioned last minute betrayals and dishonest competition; “in the night before the election day, some candidates would send their agents to bargain on voters lists with another competitor agent without the other candidate’s knowledge. These lists might be sold, and voters would be voting for a different candidate the next morning” (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019).

H.A. said that the major reason that led to her loss was “bribes and betrayals”

(H. A. personal communication, February 8, 2020). She explained that people follow their own interest, and they see the elections as an opportunity to benefit from candidates who are willing to pay. Voters understand that candidates need their votes to win; therefore, candidates should reward voters for this service they are offering them to win. H.A. said that in exchange of money, even “your family would betray you, and that is what happened to me.” People do not feel that it is wrong or dishonest to ask for money in exchange for their votes. H.A. said, “when I asked some of my relatives why they did not vote for me, they told me that others paid, and you did not. They betrayed me despite their promise to vote for me.”

Seeking personal benefits was an issue that affected all female candidates and was the major reason or one of two main reasons in losing the elections; however, this practice, which was encouraged by male candidates, impacted other male candidates as well. Ameera thinks that people asking for personal benefits was a reason among others that caused her to lose the elections (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). She also mentioned that people were not transparent about their intentions; they might tell a candidate that they would vote for him/her, however, they would not. Ameera said that people sometimes tend to be polite with all candidates while they did not care about the elections, and they would go to the polling centers “just to have the day off work.”

Female candidates believe that competition among male candidates is more intense and fiercer than the competition among female candidates. Although a few female candidates mentioned that women would not vote for other women because of jealousy, they admitted that males are tougher against each other in the elections. Tayba said that male candidates faced tough competition between each other, “this competition has nothing to do with experience, competency or qualifications, it is about

competition between tribes, previous official positions, money, exchanging favors and individual interests” (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Basma said that intensity of competition between male candidates impacted us as female candidates because they pay money and depend on women agents to collect female voters' support for them (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Tahera agreed that the severe competition between male candidates targeted female candidates as well and excluded them from the competitions and took their voters' support (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Tahera said she was ready for this kind of attack and kept herself focused on winning instead of being a target of males competing against each other, because that would have impacted her support among voters.

Another kind of male competition that affects female candidates' chances to win is the large number of male candidates in each district. Numbers are large, not only compared to female candidates' numbers, but also considering the size of the district. In some districts, there were several candidates from the same tribe or from the same town. Samīra said that candidates in some districts were between 20-30 candidates, and in other districts they reached 35 or more (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). They refused to withdraw despite knowing that they would not win. Because of their pride, they would not give the race up easily for the sake of other candidates. However, this negatively impacted the vote counts for female candidates who were running in the same district.

In addition to the indirect impact of male competition, male candidates targeted directly female candidates. Khalsa confirmed that male candidates affected female candidates when they threatened their status in the elections (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that she was targeted because of her social work as the head of a women association in her district, and she was accused of using

her position to collect more votes and support. Khalsa said, “I have been working in this association for 21 years before the elections. I decided to run because I felt as a citizen, I can represent Omani women.” A complaint was sent to the Ministry of Social Development, which supervises NGOs in Oman. Khalsa and other female candidates who have been working in associations and volunteer teams were officially warned as a result of the complaint. Khalsa said that hurt her; however, people in her district defended her and said she has been there for years and did not need to use the association platform to promote herself as a candidate. A similar incident was reported by other female candidates who thought that it was unfair and baseless. Al-Farsi’s (2009) survey showed that strong competition from men and voting for the tribe are among the most impactful factors that prevent female candidates from winning. Al-Farsi (2009) also mentioned that men do not vote for women.

Voters, the Power of the Tribes, and the Social Hierarchy

In a hierarchical society, the traditional order places not only women second to men but also arranges tribes according to power and domination. There are tribes on the top of the list and there are others mentioned as less powerful, and sometimes, it is just a small tribe. Although the issue of hierarchy in Oman is not well-researched, it is widely known that affiliation to a prestigious tribe is a key factor in winning the election regardless of the power of many. People would often, even those who are not affiliated to this tribe, vote for a candidate who belongs to the tribe. The chances of winning are greater if the candidate is a first degree relative to the sheikh of the tribe, for example the son of the sheikh, or even it could be the daughter of the sheikh if she is supported by her father. Nevertheless, female candidates think that it is hard for them to break through the hierarchical system and to get a favorable status more so than for a male candidate.

While campaigning, female candidates confronted several difficulties concerning tribes and tribal loyalty, such as people primarily voting for their tribe's candidate. Powerful tribes would dominate the elections over other tribes with or without the use of political money, and tribes, so far, would not endorse a female as the chief candidate and ask the tribe constituencies to vote for her. Male candidates would face only one of these challenges, which is the power of influential tribes and the use of political money. Despite this, some female candidates obtained their tribes' support as they confronted other tribes' power and influence, in addition to other factors like the large number of candidates in one district like Samīra in Bahla.

Salema thinks that one's tribe is the most important factor in winning the election (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). If the candidate, in addition to having support from the tribe, has the money, then the deal is essentially sealed. H.A. supported this idea and said that tribes and money are the only way to win (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). Salema and H.A. also believe that could happen regardless of the candidate's gender/sex. Aisha also believes that the two male candidates who won in her district used political money and tribal solidarity and tribal coalition (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Male candidates would face similar challenges because voters would insist on voting for a candidate with whom they share the same tribal name, or the sheikh or a male family member, like a husband, father or, brother, would force female relatives to vote for a specific candidate who is affiliated with the tribe, or ban them from voting for a specific candidate. They often ban their female relatives from voting for female candidates. Although Aisha, for example, comes from a known tribe in her district, she did not win because the influential leaders and sheikhs within the tribe did not support her. They preferred to endorse another male candidate from the same tribe. Members affiliated

with the tribe voted for the tribally empowered male instead of a female running by herself.

Sana, who won because of her father's reputation as a sheikh, explained how women are excluded from the tribe leadership (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said, "Tribalism is a challenge. Women are marginalized by society because the sheikhs ignore women." Sana noticed that each election cycle, competition gets harder due to the status that the representatives get after being elected. They become respected and presented as leaders in the community, and in these circumstances, tribalism thrives. Each tribe wants to retain the power and the prestigious social status for people affiliated to it. This "blurs the role of women" as Sana said, and it creates and reproduces systemic differences in men's and women's positions in each society.

The discussion concerning the female position in a tribal hierarchical society showed that female candidates could see their society deeply and understand it insightfully. This was the result from looking at society from a different location and a different position. They could see themselves as a group, rather than individuals and could see how the tribe's power is keen to keep them as women in a lower place than men. They could see that because "the oppressed may have an intimate knowledge of local power" (Wylie, 2004, p. 348). This increased awareness about women's status in the society. This status is beyond the common knowledge that is presented by national media and official statements.

Mahfūza believes that the "society is racist to women" (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Despite the fact that women in Oman work in various fields and are well educated like men, the society still treats men as the leaders. She said, "men are always in the first place on the top. They manage everything, and

women should seek males' approval in all things they do." Men told Mahfūza, during her campaign, their opinion regarding females' candidacy, and they used sexist phrases such as; "we do not let women manage our affairs." They also said things like, "Did men disappear, so we elect a woman?" and "how do we allow women to lead us?" Mahfūza said that people are still "dominated by male mentality, and racism is dominating their minds."

Kandiyoti (1994, pp. 197-198) described masculinity as a social construction which is reached within a gender order that defines masculinity in opposition to femininity and, in so doing, maintains a power relation between men and women as groups. She explained that gender politics among men involve struggles to define hegemonic or socially dominant masculinity, and that "form of masculinity that is hegemonic at a given time and place involves a particular institutionalization of patriarchy and a particular strategy for the subordination of women" (Kandiyoti, 1994, pp. 197-198). Although the female candidate participants found the place of women within hierarchical tribal system normal, after the election experiences, they no longer accept it and think it is unfair to women. The individual experience of the female candidates made each of them think of herself as a member of a group that is not treated equally nor is appreciated with all the skills and the qualifications she holds compared to male candidates.

Muna said that when she first announced her candidacy people found it hard to comprehend that a woman is seeking leadership, especially women who thought that "I was seeking "a role is not mine" (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). On the other hand, men as well could not accept the idea that they would have to approach a woman as a representative, and also men realized that in a conservative society it would be weird to summon a meeting with a female privately. Muna's

insightful observation indicates the complexity of social relation in Oman's conservative society. She highlighted three levels of gender relations: (1) women cannot pursue a leadership position because society placed her in private sphere where she is assigned specific responsibilities that a man usually is not obliged to fulfill due to his responsibility in the public domain where he can and should lead a role (2) Men could not see themselves led by a woman, not only because of her inability or because of skills or qualifications, but because men cannot see themselves under a woman in a social order. (3) Society could not accept that a woman would be approached by other men, many men, or strangers to her, and meet and talk to them because traditional values do not allow such interaction. This situation demonstrates the structural and functional constraints facing women that are shaped by social and political relations in Omani society. The common model of women's political exclusion, as Bari (2005) specifies, stem from three factors: social and political discourses, political structures and institutions,¹⁰⁶ and the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women's individual and collective agency.

Building Tribal Alliances

Gender relations define the way in which responsibilities are distributed and the way in which each is given a value. These relations vary according to time and place, and between different groups of people, and they also differ according to other social relations such as class, race, ethnicity (March, Smyt, & Mukhopadhy, 1999). Gender power relations are considered as one of the most persistent patterns in the distribution of power that contributes to inequalities between women and men because gender shapes the distributions of power at all levels of society. This explains the system of

¹⁰⁶ This issue will be discussed in the next chapter

hierarchy at different places and communities. In the case of Oman's female candidates' experience, gender power relations define a candidate first according to tribe power, then wealth and money influence, and third, according to gender. A female candidate could be the choice of people if she is the choice of the tribe; however, if a male candidate is available to fill the position, the tribe would choose him over a female.

During the election period, in some of Oman's districts, several tribes come together and form an alliance or a coalition to endorse one candidate. Every election cycle, the nominee of the alliance would be chosen from each tribe by turn. This candidate was never a female candidate. Maryam Balhaf, from the southern area of Oman, said that although her tribe supported her, she faced two main obstacles (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020). First, her tribe is scattered in several districts in Dhofar governorate. Only some of them could transfer their voting records to Salalah, where she ran, yet most could not. Second is that despite Maryam leading female candidates, she could not win the tribal alliance endorsement.

Maryam concluded in the end of her election experience that "if the tribal alliances would choose a female candidate when her tribe's turn comes, there is no doubt she will win" (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020). Maryam thinks that women should prove to their tribes that they are qualified and deserve the tribal endorsement. Women should do that by meeting the sheikhs of the tribes and convincing them that they, next time, can choose a female candidate. Noora, who ran in Salalah like Maryam, confirmed that "Dhofar is a tribal area and everyone helps their own tribe" (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She insisted on running as an independent because she knew if she had become part of a coalition, sheikhs and leaders of tribes would have not endorsed her; "they would have excluded me easily. They will never choose a woman." Even when Noora continued running

independently, sheikhs of tribes and other community leaders asked her to leave the race and abandon her campaign or to join a tribal coalition. She refused because she thought she had her people's (alsumr) support, especially women. Maryam and Noora come from two different classes within the same society of the southern area of Oman. Maryam's tribe is large and well known, and if the tribal alliance had introduced her as the tribes' candidate, she could have a chance to win. Her only weak point was that she was a female. On the other side, in Noora's situation there were two major points of weakness: first was that she came from (alsumr) category which was in the bottom of the social hierarchy, and secondly, she was a female. Although, both female candidates enjoyed strong tribe and family support, Noora's supporters were men and women who belong to (alsumr), and they supported her beyond their family and blood relations because they wanted to deliver a message to the society that they deserve a better place regardless of their color or ethnicity background. Collins (2004, p. 252) stated that "within hierarchical power relations, it seems reasonable that groups disadvantaged by system of power might see their strength in solidarity and collective responses to their common location and subjugation." However, it remains, not only for Noora but also for Maryam and other female candidates, "a problem in knowing how that world is organized for us prior to our participation as knowers in that process" (Smith, 2004, p. 31).

Participants argued that despite favoritism to male members of the tribe, there is a space for women in the tribal hierarchical system because tribes would prefer a qualified female candidate from the tribe to win over a male candidate from another tribe. For the tribe, the most important thing is the place and the prestige of the tribe remains preserved in the society. Salema noted "we did not witness, until now, a female candidate who is a daughter of a powerful tribe, so we can compare if it is only the sons

of sheikhs who win” (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). The comparison Salema suggested is between the daughters and the sons of sheikhs, not between the sons of sheikhs and ordinary candidates. So far it is possible to compare chances of winning between sons of sheiks and all other “ordinary candidates,” and in this case, the sons of sheiks win over all other ordinary male and female candidates. However, Salema said, we did not witness an election where a daughter of a sheik ran as a candidate. Salema thinks if that happens, the female candidate, will win over all other “ordinary female and male candidates.” Salema concluded that people or voters seek powerful candidates who have prestigious social and financial status because they want to benefit from the privileges that the powerful candidates hold.

Tayba Alma’awali and Sana Alma’ashari are the remarkably close examples of Salema’s idea. They are both daughters of known sheikhs in their tribes. Despite both fathers being dead a long time before elections, they both won two elections. Tayba served in A’Shura council for the first two terms, and Sana is serving, till now,¹⁰⁷ her second term in the Municipal council (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Sana said that her father’s reputation in the district helped her in the elections; “when I first appeared to talk to people they supported me and the reason was my father, he was well known, popular, and helped many people, they appreciated my father and wanted to show their gratitude in backing me” (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Tayba’s father had a similar role in his daughter’s life, years after his death, because people appreciated his courage and honesty in serving and helping his people. Tayba recognized the role her father's social status played; “my father was close to

¹⁰⁷ The third municipal elections delayed due to Covid-19 pandemic to unannounced date: <https://www.omanobserver.om/upon-hms-approval-3rd-term-of-municipal-council-elections-postponed/>

people and cared about their problems. His history in helping them was alive when I asked for their support” (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

Despite the positive election results for Tayba and Sana, people's attitude proved that male support and male power is needed for a female to succeed in the elections. The society appreciated males' history and status in the social order, in which female candidates could strategize and benefit from the margin provided for them. That also proves that “patriarchal bargains” do not just inform women's rational choices but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their “gendered subjectivity,” since they enter the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural atmosphere (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Samīra presented a rare example among female candidates when she stated that “my tribe stood with me.” Samīra comes from the Interior governorate, which is considered the most conservative area in Oman (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Nonetheless, she presented a unique case where a tribe supported a female candidate. Samīra ran twice for Majlis A ’Shura in 2011 and 2019 and compared the two campaigns:

“I did not have the knowledge to manage the election campaign. It was new for a woman like me, who was the first woman running in my district. I did not have the experience, and there was no other woman who ran before I could have learnt from her experience. I attended a workshop organized by the Ministry of Social Development to teach female candidates how to manage election campaigns. In the second election I ran in, in 2019, I started preparing a long time ahead. I had a better vision for my campaign than the first time.”

The major hardship Samīra faced was being a female in a tribal male dominated society; “that was harder in the first elections, it was unfamiliar for people to see a woman running for A ’Shura, people were very conservative. They did not believe that a role was possible for a woman in Majlis A ’Shura.” However, Samīra was fifth among 23 male candidates, and that was an indicator for her that despite conservatism, people

believed that she could be a good representative. She attributed this to her career and service.

During the second time Samīra ran, she said, "all my uncles and cousins and tribe supported me" (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). She said that youth and educated people were persuaded; "I felt people had a strong desire to change, and they wanted to try a woman this time. They thought they gave enough chances for men." However, Samīra, again, got the fifth place in the election results in 2019. She understood this result, despite high expectations of her winning, because she saw the hidden division in the district between the center of the district and the peripheries. Samīra explained that in the 2019 elections, no candidates from the center of the district won, despite the fact that the district is represented with two seats. Two candidates from small towns won because they had strong support from several small towns that wanted to prove that they can win and shift the power from the center to the peripheries. Samīra thinks that her result was not "bad" because she got many votes and she remained among the first five places (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Whether the conflict is between the center and the peripheries or between tribes, it seems the results are the same for female candidates. Shakera said that the tribal system in her district is extraordinarily strong, when a man runs for election all of his tribe's members will vote for him, whereas, a woman runs alone (Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). In her district, she said, a woman cannot represent the people in Majlis A'Shura.

Boycott and Elected Councils' Powers

One noteworthy issue that was mentioned by all female candidates in various contexts is voters' boycotting the elections and the controversial powers the elected councils, especially A'Shura, hold. The female candidate participants mentioned many

people refused to support or vote for them because they did not want to be part of a process that does not lead to a real and significant change in the society. Female candidates believe that this issue is one of the reasons that female candidates do not win. Most people they met, who told them they were boycotting the elections, were educated, employed and intellectuals, categories that would vote for women usually. The female candidates also mentioned that most people who were boycotting the election were male voters.

Since 1991, the year Majlis A'Shura was founded, the powers granted to the council changed once. In 2011, after the Arab Spring protests, the powers were modified to give representatives the right to use parliamentary tools. A'Shura council was formed as a consultative body that could provide advice and consult the government when needed. However, this situation did not change substantially after the amendments in 2011. A'Shura council remains consultative. The parliamentary tools granted were questioning specific branches in the government, while on the other hand, they were not granted any powers to question others. Also, the council does not have the authority to approve or disapprove laws or legislations; however, it is among its mission to suggest and advise the government without any enforcement.¹⁰⁸ People in Oman think that A'Shura should move forwards and practice more powers and rise to citizen aspirations.¹⁰⁹ The role of the Municipal councils is to present opinions and recommendation in various areas of municipal issues.¹¹⁰ Members are elected for four

¹⁰⁸ The Article 58 of the royal decree # 99/2011 specifies the duties of Majlis A'Shura, see particularly articles (58)(bis 35)- (58) (bis 44): <http://www.mola.gov.om/eng/basicstatute.aspx> <https://qanoon.om/p/2011/rd2011099>

¹⁰⁹ An article by known Omani writer assessing the new powers granted in 2011 for A'Shura council, the article says that the parliamentary tools are short and incomplete, and not powerful enough to pursue the goal it supposed to achieve: <https://www.alfalq.com/?p=6113>

¹¹⁰ The goals of Municipal councils in Oman: <https://www.moi.gov.om/ar-om/laws/municipal-councils>

years similar to the members of Majlis A’Shura.¹¹¹ Until 2012, the year that the first municipal election was held, Majlis A’Shura was performing as municipal council. Now with limited parliamentary authority, Omani citizens are questioning the importance of having two different bodies of councils. The citizens who boycott the election argue that A’Shura remain as a municipal council because it does not perform as parliament and is not granted authorities and powers that allow its representative to act as law makers and government watchdogs.

Although Tayba did not face this problem of boycotting the elections, in the second A’Shura election held in Oman in 1994, other female candidates who were seeking her support and endorsement, complained to her about citizens who would not vote because they are not satisfied with previous and current representatives (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Tayba said that when she accompanied younger female candidates to voters meeting, she would tell people “before you accuse women or men of misrepresentation and lack of achievements, you should ask the government first: what kind of powers were granted for representatives so they can meet your expectations.”

The powers and the performance of the councils’ members impacted female candidates in two different ways; first some voters do not know enough about the responsibilities and the duties of the representatives, and they think it is a male job and a woman does not have the stamina. Second is that people evaluate the councils through the representatives’ performance, which is not satisfactory. Therefore, they think that electing new representatives will not change things in their lives or in the country. In

¹¹¹ The Article 16 of royal decree # 116/2011 specified 30 areas of focus:
<https://data.qanoon.om/ar/rd/2011/2011-116.pdf>

addition, citizens who decide not to vote because they believe firmly that no representative can change the performance or the results of the councils' discussions due to the limited powers and tools also impact the number of votes women get in the elections.

The other category of boycotters includes those who know the official powers granted to the councils and know that these powers do not help representatives do their best in discussing laws and changing policies. According to the royal decree number 99/2011 issued in 2011, Majlis A'Shura is still an advisory council. People understand that even when they elect qualified candidates, they will not be able to practice as powerful parliamentarians. Some female candidates argued that in order to acquire more powers and privileges, elected representatives should be informed and qualified, so they prove to the authorities that they deserve to be approved for a full parliamentarian role.

Tayba gives an example of one of the female candidates who ran in Bowshar district, Basma (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Tayba said that not electing Basma as a representative was a loss for the people of the district and the authorities also lost a qualified young lawyer who cared about her country and the rights of its citizens. The fight against the energetic youth, Tayba says, is a fight against the country and its future. Tayba highlighted that "there is an authoritarian mentality which works to exclude young people from the political scene." This mentality, as Tayba said, discourages youth and women from political participation. She mentioned that most of the current candidates are not qualified, especially men. Tayba also mentioned that most men who win the elections, although they are not qualified, are supported by the authoritarian mentality in the country.

Her father and brother refused her candidacy, Asma said, because they did not

believe at all in the election nor the role of Majlis A’Shura in Oman (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Their position was a major challenge during her campaign. She stated that they know she is a good and qualified candidate; however, they were certain that she cannot display her skills and capacity due to the absence of the enabling political environment. Additionally, Samīra gave an insightful understanding of how people in her district assess Majlis A’Shura and performance in the elections (Samīra, personal communication, January 30 2020). She said that one of significant problems faced her during her campaign is that there are different categories of people who say that Majlis A’Shura is not useful and inactive or has no positive impact on people’s lives, or did not serve the society

This negative point of view, Samīra said, made many women refrain from registering in the electoral records, and as a result, in some districts the number of female voters is significantly less than the male voters (Samīra, personal communication, January 30 2020). She mentioned that some tribes registered around 4,000 voters in the electoral record, while other tribes registered between 60-100 voters, which reflects the extent of refusal among some tribes’ members to participate in the election process. The limited powers of Majlis A’Shura, as Samīra said, made people boycott voting. Noora also said that limited powers of elected councils are the major factor impacts peoples’ decision on voting for female candidates (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Zahra said that during the election period in 2019, some people demanded dissolving A’Shura council and the Municipal councils because they thought elections were a waste of resources (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). They asked, “why does the state not allow powerful councils to exist?” Zahra wondered, “why is Majlis A’Shura without real powers? Now when a minister has a hearing in

A’Shura, representatives cannot hold him/her accountable for misconduct. As parliamentarian, any representative in A’Shura should be able according to the law and under the law protection to question ministers regarding issues such as budgets, misconduct, and other public issues.” Zahra thinks that the current hearing sessions lead to a dead end because the government holds all the powers and people hold none. Zahra argued that changing this situation and improving the Majlis practice requires skilled and seasoned representatives who can suggest ways for developments and improvement. She concluded that “unfortunately in this country the unqualified is desirable and skilled is ignored.”

Well-educated men are the biggest category that met Mahfūza with rejection and refusal to vote. She said that A’Shura’s limited powers are a challenge facing both male and female candidates. However, Mahfūza thinks that people should be more educated about the role of the council and aware of its duties, and consequently, change will happen because people would choose the right candidates to represent them (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Good performance leads to more powers. From her location, Rahma noticed that educated voters left the election in the hands of older voters, who went to polling centers to cast their votes for people they do not know, while these educated voters think that their participation would not change anything whether in the quality of the representatives nor the councils’ powers (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Badriya presented another point of argument; she argued that social values and lack of awareness, regarding the criteria of qualified representatives, led to electing the wrong candidates (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). People cannot demand change if they do not change their choices. Making change is possible when people elect representatives who know and understand the responsibilities of the council.

Nasra suffered, like other female candidates, from people who boycotted voting. She said among three major challenges she faced was dealing with educated and intellectual people (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). They reject the whole concept of current electoral practice because of the limited power of A 'Shura. The other two challenges were voters' inactive voting cards, and her district's large area and many remote villages and towns. Aisha thinks that educated people who refused to participate in the election were contradicting themselves because they demand change from other people and from the state; however, they do not want to do a simple thing like vote to push towards the change they demand (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Aisha called them the "paradoxical group," they helped her in persuading other people to vote for her, yet they did not vote.

She worked over 20 years in the community, and as a social researcher in the Ministry of Social Development, she learnt how to study people social environments, and their needs. Zahra understood major issues that are threatening the stability of the society such as unemployment among youth (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She tells her story with Oman labor law:

"I decided to run because I wanted to help people and change Oman Labor law. We are in a crisis in Oman. We have over 70,000 unemployed. I studied the labor law, and I worked on restructuring the law. I had a goal and aspiration to change the law if I was elected. I utilized my relationships with the private sector and media outlets and had arrangement to conduct a study aimed to solve the problem of job seekers in Oman. I planned when I am elected, I will propose it to the council. Unfortunately, I did not win."

Zahra compared herself to candidates and representatives who did not have a goal or a plan when they are in the Majlis, and this is what she thinks leads to people distrusting the performance of the elected representatives.

After three experiences in running in the elections, S.H. stated that electing the right representative is the responsibility of the voter. If voters choose the wrong

candidate, they should blame themselves (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). However, she believes that there are issues that voters and candidates cannot control, such as people's mistrusting the council and the representatives who failed in fulfilling their promises. S.H. stressed that candidates made these promises to make people vote for them despite knowing they cannot fulfill them. Inability to pursue goals and promises is due to limited powers of A'Shura council. She thinks that around 50% of voters do not vote in Oman's elections (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019).

According to the Ministry of Interior's statement in September 2019, just a month before the elections, the number of registered voters in Oman was 713,334, with male voters representing 375,801 and female voters 337,534.¹¹² After the elections' result was announced, the ministry released the numbers of people who voted; only 49% of the registered voters participated. From over 713,000 voters only 350,581 voted. In the previous A'Shura elections, in 2015, the number of voters was 20% less than 2019.¹¹³ In 2015 over 525,000 voters registered for A'Shura election, and only around 56% of them voted -- 128, 000 male voters and 125,000 female voters¹¹⁴. In the first Municipal elections held in Oman in 2012, there were 546,248 voters and only 50% of them voted (273,000 voters¹¹⁵). In the second Municipal elections in 2016, the registered voters were 632,000 voters, while only around 40% of them voted. Of this,

¹¹² Oman Newspaper published the statement: <https://www.omandaily.om/?p=729105>

¹¹³ On October 28 Oman Newspaper published MOI statement: <https://www.omandaily.om/?p=739857>

¹¹⁴ Alwatan Newspaper announcing the result of 2015 elections: <http://alwatan.com/details/82848>

¹¹⁵ More details about voters number in the Municipal elections:

<https://www.atheer.om/archives/289088/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%91%D9%81-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84->

[%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84](#)

male voters made up 63% and female voters 36%.¹¹⁶

Nearly half of the expected voters did not vote in both elections for the A'Shura and the Municipal councils. These numbers also showed that male voters are more than female voters. Female candidates' arguments about boycotting the elections appeared true and impacted their results. The three main elements, mentioned by female candidates, as challenges concerning voters were first, voting boycott in the elections; second, inactive voting cards; and third, voters not registered in the electoral records, which meant losing 50% of potential voters. However, these categories' behavior pointed to two indicators; first is a category which thinks, firmly, that the election process is useless and needs to change substantially. Second, there are categories that do not show seriousness about the elections; therefore, they do not register at all or do not activate their cards. Additionally, it is not clear if the boycotting voters are in fact, registered. If the boycott category is not registered in the electoral records, that means that the percentage of missing voters is higher than the 50% of total possible voters in Oman. Adding to the difficulties female candidates face in their campaigns is that people were not honest about their registration status or they do not tell if they intend to vote or not. However, this situation points to an issue that is serious and important to the elections process in the country, especially considering that the major reason pushing people to a similar behavior is related to the powers and privileges the elected councils are granted. People ask the state to empower the elected bodies so that they can perform strongly and equally to the government.

¹¹⁶ Announcing municipal elections results: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20161226-%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%B7%D9%86%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AB%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A>

State, Society, and the Elections Results

Six female candidate participants mentioned that using electronic voting machines was one of the factors that led to losing votes, and for some of them, affected dramatically their results.¹¹⁷ Rahma said, “the useless electronic voting system was the major factor that led to my losing the elections” (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She pointed to “unqualified official and government bodies” that failed in managing the voting process and organization committees. Also, Ameera said using these machines was the main reason behind her losing the election (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). In addition, she mentioned that voting for personal gains instead of public interests impacted her because she did not have anything to offer for individual voters. Although Salema did not consider electronic voting the main reason for losing the election, she described it as “disappointing” (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). However, she mentioned “bad electronic process” as the first reason, then came political money, culture, sheikhs, and dominate male mentality.

In 2007, Aziza ran for the first time for Majlis A’Shura, and she said, “on the election night, the electronic count was predicting me winning because my name was on the top of the screen. My name was one of two names competing for the first place; however, suddenly the power (electricity) was off. When the power was back my name was on the bottom of the screen with no hope to win” (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). In 2019, Khalsa ran for A’Shura elections, and she was not convinced about the final votes she got (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8,

¹¹⁷ In the election day of A’Shura in 2019 the MOI announced that devices encountered problems in several districts. Several Omani citizen responded describing confusion among voters and candidates: <https://muwatin.net/archives/7209> <https://www.omanobserver.om/electronic-voting-machines-for-shura-polls/>

2020). She said, “I expected to get more votes. I think that the electronic voting machines are not sufficient. Many votes were not counted; I felt using the machines was not successful. I wanted to complain, but I did not have proof. I also thought it was complicated filing such a complaint.” Khalsa ran before in two other elections in 2011 and 2015; nevertheless, she did not mention that there was a problem regarding the electronic voting. Asma mentioned that the crashed voting machines led, among other reasons, to her losing the elections. However, she did not provide details about the extent to which they affected her result, unlike Zahra (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020; Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Having a high expectation regarding winning, Zahra ran in 2019 for A’Shura elections (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She, from her point of view, had several strength points: her social network, her service to society for around 25 years, and her role in various fields of the community, in addition to her personal skills and qualifications. She was disappointed when the results were announced. She said, “in some districts in Oman the voting machines stopped working, so voting time was extended for voters. However, in my district nothing happened to the machines; however, the time was extended there as well, and there was no reason for extension. I heard from a reliable source that supervisors changed the results. I knew that I got 2000 votes, and I was in the first place.” Results showed that Zahra got only 400 votes. She had her own calculation; “it is impossible. I worked in the field of disability all these years, there were 6000 disabled people in my district, and there were the low income families, retired people, and poor whom I helped and they promised to vote for me. Where did all these votes go? Is it possible that all these people would not have voted for me? This is not logical for me.” Zahra insisted that there was interference from “bodies we cannot mention” who played a role in changing the results. Zahra also could

not understand how a “simple farmer” won the election, while she was the most popular in her district and was among the closest candidates to winning. Although there was no evidence to prove her claims, Khalsa and Zahra talked about this experience, and although they experienced it in different ways, depending upon their standpoint, they shared this experience.

Honesty and truthfulness were a major discussion issue among the participants. They emphasized the importance of honesty of the candidates and the truthfulness of the voters. Participants think that using money in exchange for votes is a harmful act that jeopardizes the integrity of the elections. The issues of integrity and morality during the election period were raised specifically when talking about money and favors in exchange for votes. Only two female winners did not mention the issue. All female candidates who mentioned that candidates use money, or as some described it, “political money,” to win and said that they refused the idea as a principle. Female candidates described this act as immoral and dishonest.

Some female candidate participants were sarcastic regarding not using money to win. Rahma said that she failed because she did not have enough money to manage her campaign (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Aisha had a similar thought when she said: “I lost because I was late, my tribe did not support me, and I did not use political money.” Aisha tried to persuade people who were selling their votes and told them that was not integral nor honest, and people instead asked her for other favors as land grants from the Ministry of Housing where she worked (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). While other participants thought using money was wrong, they questioned the society values and the enforcement of the rules and laws.

For example, H.A. had a confused perspective about using money (H. A.

personal communication, February 8, 2020). She thinks that it is wrong people are asking for money in exchange for their votes, and giving bribes, but she also thinks that the only way to win is to have “a lot of money” so candidates can persuade people to vote for them. In her arguments with her family members, H.A.’s response to her relatives who asked for money was that she did not have the money to give, otherwise she would have. Nevertheless, her confusion could be understood because she has seen this as practice evolved and accepted by people and candidates without any opposite reaction against it, whether from the government/state or from other identities. Some disadvantaged candidates have been talking and complaining about the issue without reaching a conclusion. Some female candidates said it is hard to prove and so it is not possible to complain officially.

Fatima S.’s position about using money was clear from the beginning (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). She refused to use money or bribes to buy votes. However, she said it could be her refusal to pay was the reason behind her losing A’Shura elections. S.H. said: “I was, from the beginning, very careful regarding paying money” (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She explained her position; “I did not pay one Rial that is why people were not encouraged to vote for me. I donated to help build a sports yard, a mosque and cemetery for the community. Donations can be done by anyone. It is better for me not to disobey the law, and I cannot go under investigations. Losing an election is better than bribing and losing respect.”

After she observed the election dynamics for three terms, Salema bitterly said: “it is disappointing. Winning is always for sheikhs and political money. It is unfair because these people are also backed by the traditional authorities” (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). The effectiveness of using money in the elections was obvious even for those who are not involved directly, and Zahra said that her family

warned her that if she wants to win, she should have great capital (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Her family knew that without paying voters, the chances of winning are low despite the large social network, service to the community, help to people, and skills and qualifications. Zahra discovered that several thousands of people she thought would vote for her, voted for candidates who paid them. By the end of the elections and after the results were announced, Zahra confessed that it “was true, many people accepted money in exchange for their votes, I wanted to prove to my family and people such things are not true and I can win without paying money. After my experience in the elections, I discovered that money and materialistic things are most important in winning the elections.” She established a new belief that “A’Shura election is not for the country and public interest; it is not for citizens. Unfortunately, elections work with the drive and the energy of money. That is the reason Majlis A’Shura have weak status among people and that is the reason that they elected representatives do not do their job properly.”

The female candidate participants highlighted that male candidates used money and provided favors in exchange of votes. Severe competition among male candidates forced them into bargains and trades at various fronts; price per vote, prices per family, and sometimes there are prices for the entire tribe or area, and there were agents who were paid to collect votes. From female candidates’ standpoints, they see that the system is built and structured within the society, where many people do not think it is wrong or dishonest.

All female candidate participants can be described as middle-class working women, except one who mentioned that she does not work. Looking at their economic status and financial resources, even if they decided to use money it would be hard unless they get loans in order to give it away for voters. The question arises here is, would

female candidates be tempted, like male candidates, to pay to reach the representation seats in Majlis A’Shura or the Municipal councils? It is difficult assumption to say that all male winners paid money or provided service and favors in exchange for votes. It is hard to assume as well, that all female candidates and winners did not pay nor present other favors. Male candidates outnumber female candidates, and most lost; “not using money” could be the reason.

The only female winners in A’Shura elections of 2019 were Tahera and Fadila. won in her third attempt, while Tahera won the first election she experienced. However, Tahera provided more insights about her experience and point of views regarding factors that impacted her and other female candidates during the election period (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Fadila specified reasons that led her to win after three campaigns; first is determination, second is solidarity, and third is the media. She said that the media played a significant role in changing perspectives about women. Tahera said that women face additional challenges because of their gender, and they should expect that and be prepared to manage them. However, there are three other female winners among the participants. Tayba, the first female elected for Majlis A’Shura in 1994, and Fatima S. and Sana both won the first Municipal elections in 2012. Sana is serving her second term in the Municipal council in Al’amerat after she won in the second elections in 2016. With these winners and other female candidates, it is possible to explore participants’ views regarding winning opportunities for female candidates, putting in mind that each candidate lives her own reality, circumstances, and different dynamic in her district. Nevertheless, this section is looking for shared views and thoughts that female candidates concluded from their individual unique experience and finds out if the voice of the individual became the voice of the group. This section will examine whether the voice of this group could

become the voice of each female candidate and if they express shared experiences and common goals.

Tahera said that the worst thing that could happen to a female candidate is anti-propaganda that is twisting the teaching of religion and social values to undermine women's skills and qualifications, and squeezing her in a narrow space where she becomes not seen by the public (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). A female candidate, said Tahera, should prepare her team to make this factor (being a female) a neutral element; therefore, people might look at the female candidate as a candidate only like the rest of the candidates. Other reasons for winning, as she explains, include the candidate personality and being patient, tolerant, flexible, insightful, and balanced. Female candidates are vulnerable to rumors and harsh attacks. Therefore, they should be prepared to talk to people, and they should learn how to absorb and not to engage in useless reactions because that is the competitors' aim -- to make the female candidate lose focus on the primary goal. Tahera's final advice is "do not engage in unnecessary battles. Competition is extremely tough."

Fatima S.'s plan is to prepare early enough for the next elections. She thinks that being independent and not bribing is a key factor to gain people's trust. She believes that a small honest team is another significant element of a successful campaign (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). It is noteworthy that Fatima S. won in 2012 Municipal elections, while she failed in 2015 A'Shura elections. Sana said that each female candidate should evaluate her performance and her personality and start to work on issues that require improvement (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Female candidates should listen carefully to people's criticism and assess what she needs to change and what to enhance. Sana mentioned that having a high education certificate is a necessary matter for a female

candidate to compete. Most female candidates said that education qualifications are important, and two highlighted that people mentioned that they do not have a university degree, or higher than a high school diploma. Khalsa and Shakera said that people were emphasizing during elections' campaigns that they prefer their representative to be well educated, and they wanted a representative that was better and can compete with other qualified candidates (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020; Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The conclusion Shakera reached supports Sana's idea that credentials help empower women (Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). People often raised this issue with her, and they compared her to other candidates who have master's and PhD degrees. She ran in 2015 for Majlis A'Shura, and after the elections she decided to continue studying. Shakera said, "I did not feel confident arguing with people about my education, although I believe that a university degree is not the most important element qualifying a candidate, I think at this time we need to be well educated, we learn a few things that are related to our time and future." Shakera finished her B.A. in business administration and now she is studying for her master's degree. In addition, Shakera regrets that she started her campaign late and unprepared, while other candidates started a long time ahead of her. Besides, they were known to the community and had previous experience in the elections.

Nasra also encountered the consequences of starting late and unprepared (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Among several issues Nasra had to deal with, was her district's geography. She said:

"my district is big and has different topographies, such as valleys and mountains where some remote villages were located. I could not reach some of them, and my husband helped drive me to some of these villages. However, the time was running not in my favor. Other candidates started before me and reached out to people and got their support."

Several female candidates, such as Ameera, Aziza, and Aisha, highlighted the importance of having well organized campaign and not to depend on personal effort or only on few volunteers (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020; Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020; Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Most of the female candidates revealed that they either were the only person running and managing their elections' campaigns or they depend on only two or three family members or volunteers. Now, they think that was a mistake and understand that a successful campaign aims winning should depend on a well-organized trusted team. As Tahera and Zahra cited above, a female candidate should have a trusted close relative as the campaign manager and the teams working in the campaign should be strictly managed and mission-oriented individuals (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020; Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020).

Nevertheless, money and tribe are the most significant winning cards, as most female candidates emphasized. They stressed that these two factors were the major challenge they encountered during their campaigns. People put self-interests before public interests, and even if the candidate was not affiliated to a known tribe, voters still can benefit from his/her money. While Salema has an opposite point of view, she thinks if a candidate comes from a well-known prestigious tribe, people will vote for him/her regardless of benefits or favors (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). People think, as Salema understands, that the power and respect is for the tribe traditionally, and the status of the tribe cannot be shaken even when money is paid. However, she witnessed during her three attempts running for Majlis A'Shura that even sheikhs of tribes would not depend totally on the tribe's reputation. She thinks that the perfect combination of winning is a candidate, male or female, who has the name and the support of his/her prestigious tribe, and the ability to use money is an additional

factor that confirms the winning.

The central insight that the female candidate participants provided concerning the dynamics of the elections and elections' campaign is that they produced knowledge and discussed issues that are not seen as active factors in the elections. Issues of tribe and social hierarchy, and gender relations and power relations control not only female candidates but also males. From their different locations and shared experience, the female candidates shed a light on the process of the election and its social, political, and economic implications on the candidates, voters, and society. They could produce this knowledge because of their unique position/location in society as the "outsiders within." This location allowed them to "negotiate social, legal, and economic institutions from a position of marginality," and they could see "a side of society that can be ignored by those who are comparatively privileged and that is systematically obscured by dominant world-views that legitimate entrenched hierarchies of privilege" (Wylie, 2004, p. 347). The female candidate participants grasp delicate indicators of power dynamics and they make connections between the context in which these function that "the privileged have no reason to notice or have good reason not to notice" (Wylie, 2004, p. 347).

The shared perspective among the female candidates is the realization that society placed them all in one category, which is as women/females regardless of their social class, education, and qualifications and skills. They understood that the patriarchal hierarchy operates the same way against them as women, and it unifies them with traditional gender roles that they should not aspire to escape from the public sphere. Furthermore, the system is based on inequality not only between genders but also within genders. Collins (2004, p. 248) explained that race, gender, social class, ethnicity, and age are "not descriptive categories of identity applied to individuals.

Instead these elements of social structure emerge as fundamental devices that foster inequality resulting in groups." The challenges and inequalities that female candidates faced and discovered in the election experience resulted in a group of female/women who had common thoughts, feelings, and perspectives regarding themselves as marginalized or oppressed.

The voice of the individual became the voice of the group, and because of their new understanding of society and politics, they became aware of the necessity of strategize while confronting dominant groups and thoughts. Harding (2004, p. 7) stated "each oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn on oppressive features of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured."

Although female candidates in Oman, mostly, are educated, qualified, and have work and community service experiences, they could not elevate their status to become equal to male candidates. This issue confused most participants because they could not understand, or maybe, could not accept, that gender and gendered spaces could have this decisive effect in the collective society mentality. Those who were not confused were also extreme because they think gender is the only reason that made society reject female participation in politics and seeking leadership. However, Norris & Inglehart (2011, p. 130) acknowledged that while advancements in women's educational and professional status work as enabling conditions for women's empowerment, "structural changes by themselves may be insufficient for women to achieve greater success in winning elected office."

Women's political participation is a complicated issue due to its links to fundamental structures in the society, and the fact that it is also deep in the history of gender relations and power relations of each society and community. The situation of

Oman's female candidates, although it has its own context, is also not significantly different from other women's status around the world who are involved in politics. Moghadam (2013, p.1) said that "in societies everywhere, cultural institutions and practices, economic processes, and political structures are interactive and relatively autonomous," and that this reason makes female candidates unable to understand all dimensions of women's problems. Even when they understand, they will be incapable of solving it because it is not a state driven policy more than it is an individual determination.

Standpoint theories characterize the epistemically privileged standpoint as completed through critical reflection on the power structures representing group identities. Claims of superiority for critical theories are thus fundamentally based on pragmatic virtues, and therefore, the goal of feminist standpoint theory is primarily to empower the oppressed (Harding 1991, Hartsock 1996). To work for this aim, social theories must represent the world in relation to the interests of the oppressed, enable the oppressed to understand their problems, and be usable by the oppressed to improve their condition.

This leads to discussing the issue of empowerment and how to empower women politically, an issue that standpoint theories consider as an important element of a feminist research, where changing perception, perspective, and producing new knowledge concerning women's lives should arrive at women empowerment and advantage. Standpoint theories "map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage" However, empowerment requires a distinctive kind of knowledge that "can emerge only through

political processes" (Harding, 2004, pp. 7-8).¹¹⁸

Summary

This chapter discussed the female candidates' challenges during the election period. The participants talked about tribal and money influence that shaped hindering factors prevented them from winning the elections. They also, discussed the institutional and electoral process and procedures that contributed to the hardship they confronted. Most female candidate participants agree that tribalism, in all its forms, and political money in different shapes and various favors are the most damaging factors to female candidates. They think that more supportive state policies are important to empowering women and establishing a suitable competition environment. Although participants are divided equally regarding gender as a factor, the discussion led to a result that gendered society, patriarchal, and hierarchical systems work in opposition to women's leadership and representation in elected councils. Tribes are led by male sheikhs who prefer to sustain the traditional hierarchy and do not see a female as a sheikh or a leader who has powers and authority that equal to the sheikhs or it might be stronger and higher. However, the rise of money power/influence in the elections could threaten the tribe's position in society and its power among people because money could be used by candidates who are not affiliated to large tribes or to any known tribe. If elected, the power and leadership will shift to a less ranking tribe or to a lower class, which means a change in the traditional and accepted hierarchy. Changing tribes' strategies in recognizing the daughters of the tribe, not only the sons, as potential leaders could be a wise step over watching the power and authority move away to a low ranked tribe or individual.

¹¹⁸ The next chapter is discussing the issue of women's empowerment, inequality, and state policies

Despite participants' hopelessness towards the spread of money influence on critical political processes such as the elections, they demand a firm action from the state authorities to fight and eliminate this trend because exchanging votes for money created a wide network of candidates, agents, campaign managers, and voters who became greedy and self-interest oriented a situation transformed the election process to a bargaining process. Society's acceptance of this phenomenon and the silence of the official authorities jeopardizes not only the female candidates' chances in winning, but also jeopardizes the credibility and the integrity of the election at large.

Regarding the elections' campaigns, participants agreed that a well-organized and strictly managed campaign paves the road to success in the competition. They also agreed that a clear and appealing electoral message and program would help in gaining voters respect and attention. Several participants recommended that the manager of the campaign and key team members should be trusted close relatives because betrayals happen during the election period. The managers and team members are accused of shifting the support of voters from a candidate to another in exchange of money and other benefits. A primary element related to female candidates' failure in the elections was starting the campaign late and unprepared. The participants' advice was that a female candidate should start her campaign ahead of time and start preparing years before by serving the community and building networks.

Another significant controversial issue highlighted in the discussion was the powers and privileges granted to the elected councils, particularly A'Shura, because it is the body that is supposed to function as parliament with legal and monitory powers and effective parliamentary tools. Female candidates argued about the effectiveness of the councils and the representation performance; however, they did not doubt that the limited powers are considered a major problem among voters. On one side, some

thought first people should elect the right candidates to represent them, then, after satisfactory performance, the state would grant more powers. While the other part thinks that the powers should be granted first, then the performance of the representative would be improved, not only because of the new duties and responsibilities, but also because voters would choose the right candidates for the job of representation.

Participants agreed that the status quo would lead only to more complicated relations between the state, voters, and candidates. They also argued that the continuation of limited powers status led, and will sustain, the use of money to gain votes and people's support which makes the selection of candidates dependent upon the amount paid instead of dependency on merit and qualification. Limited powers and lack of parliamentary tools impact female and male candidates and concerned voters who want to see a successful election process in the country. Boycotting of the election by a large number of Omani voters is because of the limited powers granted to the elected councils. Furthermore, these limited powers led to a situation of mistrust between people and the state/government because people think that granting these limited powers indicates that authorities do not trust people and shows its unwillingness to share power.

Regarding women's voice, it was noticeable that participants could as a group of female candidates to form a voice that represent this group because of their understanding of the elections and the society. This understanding came as result of female candidates' social location as outsider within. Being a candidate and a female allowed them to see new and different aspects and sides of the society and people. They realized that there is a need for a common voice for women. A voice that represents women and advocate their rights to compete and be treated equally to male candidates.

The next chapter discusses the impact of the state's laws and policies on women's political participation, and how female candidates evaluate the influence of institutional factors in encouraging or hindering women's involvement in politics. It also, focuses on how policies led to gender inequality and shaped disabling environment for women' political participation.

CHAPTER 5: GENDER AND STATE POLICIES

This chapter discusses female candidates' understanding of state policies concerning women and political leadership. It explores how female candidates evaluate the size of female participation and performance in decision-making positions and to what extent female candidates support gender equality in Omani society. The chapter seeks to assess how the participants compare elected female officials and female appointees in terms of qualifications and efforts to reach a leadership position. Also, in this chapter, the participants discuss issues concerning female underrepresentation in elected councils and the impact of laws and state policies, such as the number of female appointees in government and State Council, in forming an image of women and their roles within traditional society. Part of the discussion's goal is to uncover female candidates' thoughts and views about gender equality and whether they would advocate for greater women's participation not only in the election, but also in the government and other state institutions.

According to standpoint theory, all forms of knowledge reflect the specific conditions in which they are generated, and, at some level, reflect the social identities and social locations of knowledge producers. It also reflects the dominant culture and how these female participants received the social values about themselves as females and their role in the society. Positions/ locations are structured by gender, race, and class. The location helps researchers to understand why knowers see things the way they see it. Smith stressed that "we are located and that what we know of others is conditional upon that location as part of a relation comprehending the other's location also" (2004, p. 30).

Analyzing women's perspectives as a marginal/oppressed group allowed for an

understanding of the position of women from dominant groups in the society and dominant culture and how that made them shape their views and standpoints. Harding highlighted that “oppressed groups’ situation is different from that of other dominant group, its dominated situation enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge” (2004, p. 7). She explained that knowledge is expected to be based on experiences and these different experiences should enable different insights of ourselves and our environment.

Understanding that knowledge is situated and partial, the following discussion and analysis identifies the similarities and differences among the participants concerning their stances regarding society behavior and state policies toward women’s political participation. The participants’ views vary between supporting state policies and criticizing them. Their views also varied concerning gender equality between a strong belief that equality would not happen even if women demand it and the strong position that women should be equal to men in leadership and representation. These views and stances differ depending on the social place of each female candidate and on the knowledge that is constructed in the society’s structure, which could be a catalyst in hiding the nature of the reasons that made gender a major factor in the political process. The unique and difficult experience that all female candidates went through by running in the elections once, twice, or three times did not result in a feeling of deserved equality; however, it resulted in a deep feeling of unity and need for togetherness. Female candidates suggested ways and ideas to increase females’ participation in elected councils and other appointed leadership positions in the country. Most female candidates, for example, proposed a quota to support females’ presence in elected council, despite the fact that some of them are against a quota system in principle.

Female Candidates' Challenges

In this section, the female candidate participants present their views, reflecting on their own experience, on what could be the main problem that keeps women's representation at its lowest rates. To illustrate this point, they gave their opinions on Oman's law and determined whether it supports women or plays a role in deciding a small representation. As discussed in the previous chapter, female candidates encountered several challenges and difficulties such as tribalism, monetary influence, and a male dominated society. In this section, the participants laid out a road map which could lead to larger representation in elected councils and maybe to equal representation in the government. Following the demonstration of the female candidates' views on women's underrepresentation, it will discuss their proposals for a better social and political environment that could enable female candidates to reach the representation's seats.

Although participants' understanding is that the main factor that hinders females' pursuit to leadership/representation is the society's values, they blame women's associations for not advocating for women in politics nor empowering them to succeed in this arena. On the contrary, the associations played a questionable role in keeping women excluded from leadership positions.

Samīra said that Omani society perceives representation in the elected councils as exclusively a man's job, and there is no room for women in them (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Some people think that these councils are political, and women are far from politics or lack knowledge in this field. Samīra also thinks that women in areas and districts outside of the capital city are not empowered politically. She mentioned female candidates offered a one-week workshop training on managing election campaigns, and which was not enough to empower women politically nor to

educate them on the parliamentary level. She blamed Oman Women's Associations for not playing any role to support and empower women. Samīra said that OWAs could provide training workshops on political and parliamentary issues. They have the capacity to train many women, and this would encourage women to participate.

Aisha agrees with Samīra that the lack of empowerment is the major issue that hinders women's representation in larger numbers (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Mahfūza thinks that the society needs more women representatives because women have growing roles in many fields (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She thinks that women will be elected in larger numbers when people's views of women's roles change, and they acknowledge females' fundamental participation in leading and developing the society. Unlike Samīra, who thinks lack of political empowerment is the major issue in low female representation, Mahfūza believes the main reason is the lack of societal awareness of women's capability to practice politics (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019; Samīra, personal communication, January 30 2020). She said that people think that women cannot perform like men. Aziza supported this idea and gave the example of her own sisters and other female relatives who did not know substantial information about candidacy and election at large; therefore Aziza thinks that specifically women's awareness is a significant factor (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Aziza also mentioned that there is a need to form a women's coalition or league that represents women and advocates women's issues and rights. Nevertheless, Aziza thinks that awareness of such need is there, yet she cannot understand why women are not keen to form such an organized gathering. She wondered if it could be a jealousy issue between women as men like to promote. S.H. might have the answer; she also thinks that absence of a strong women's coalition is the major factor that women could not

increase representation (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019).

However, she blames Oman Women's Associations, which is a large establishment which has a branch in all 61 of Oman's districts. S.H. said if the associations supported one female candidate in each election term, women could have better representation in elected councils.

Some of the participants blamed OWAs for not meeting the expectations of Omani women, despite the common knowledge that these associations cannot play this role of empowering women because they are restricted by the law of non-governmental associations, which states that OWAs are not allowed to participate in any kind of political issues.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the associations are under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Social Development, which provided the funding and the instruction regarding the issues and the activity the associations should tackle. Not only are there restrictions imposed on women associations that women in Oman face, there are also restrictions upon forming any other women's associations or organizations.

The goal and the activities of OWAs are driven by the development plans in the country. This drive for development and for control over any activity that may disrupt security and stability, as Krause (2009, p. 22) described in Oman and UAE, is a concern clearly expressed through laws governing the formation of associations and the role of the media. She also mentioned that "most government-supported women's associations direct their activities to areas they regard as apolitical" (Krause, 2009, p. 22). When participants called for a women's coalition or any kind of gathering, they put pressure on establishing such bodies on women themselves. This could be rational, but it was

¹¹⁹ See Articles 4 and 5 of Oman Associations law: Royal decree (14/2000, 2019)
<https://www.mosd.gov.om/images/rules/Law%20of%20National%20Associations.pdf>

more logical to pressure the government to lift the restrictions enforced on current OWAs and on forming new women associations or on forming civil society organizations at large. While describing OWAs, Krause (2009) said that in Oman and the UAE, no other organizations exist that extend in the way that these women's associations do, from urban areas into very rural regions, with their many branches counted under each country's single umbrella.

Another issue is related to the role of women's association in empowering female candidates and women voters during the election. Other than the restrictions, OWAs represent the "state feminism," and they are most effective organizations because they function as the major means through which the government, in practical terms, pursues its state feminism. State feminism is used to refer to "the process by which the state takes on women's interests" (Krause, 2009, p. 21). However, state feminism, as exercised through the state-run women's associations, demonstrates various contradictions in its commitment to women's issues and women rights. They focus on issues that might empower women in certain areas, but would ignore issues that might represent political aspects such as demanding more equal rights and changing discriminatory laws, and as a result, such actions lead to the disempowerment of women.

The role of the tribes has been seen, mostly, as an obstructionist factor on women's advancement in politics because the sheikhs of the tribes are determined to keep power in their hands and transfer it only to their sons in the future. From her location, Sana highlighted the role of tribes and sheikhs in marginalizing female candidates (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said each election term, tribes want to confirm their traditionally inherited role in the society, and in tribes, there are no female sheikhs. Ameera agrees that society does not trust women

in leadership and thus is not confident that a woman can deliver like a man (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). H.A. and Rahma agree with this statement, saying, “men and society at large did not accept women as leaders” (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020; Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Rahma added that society is skeptical regarding females’ skills (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Badriya confirmed that women are under-represented in Oman because society thinks that parliament is a genuine duty for men (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). The trust given to tribes and their sheikhs is not only from the society side. It is also from the state because “tribal elite actors, who dominate key positions in government, are especially interested in harnessing the intermediary spaces between the state and society as a means of control, and have, in fact, become exceptionally successful” (Krause, 2009, p. 28). That explains the stability of hierarchy and the continuous support for male leadership. However, keeping the status of tribes does not require their representation with male figures because, as Olimat (2009) explains, tribes are learning how to reconcile with modern political forces and live in peace with the state.

The number of female candidates remains a significant factor that contributes to the challenges that women seek to overcome in order to increase representation. Participants argued that small numbers keep diminishing women’s chances to win. They think that number is the most important factor that determines increasing women’s representation. For example, Zahra thinks that numbers play a greater role in limiting women’s chances in representation, because men run in larger numbers than women (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said that during the last elections in 2019, there were 32 male candidates in her district, whereas there were only eight female candidates. She said in addition to numbers, society prefers males

over females, who usually suffer from family and relatives' lack of support. Tahera, as well, thinks it is a matter of numbers and explains that in the 2019 A'Shura election, there were 637 male candidates and 40 female candidates in Oman (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that when females' numbers are higher, women's representation will improve. Nonetheless, Tahera mentioned the other issue that impacts women's representation in elected councils is that women refrain from running because they are afraid of losing. Tahera mentioned her winning mate in Sohar in the 2019 elections and said that Fadila ran three times before she won; her determination and persistence led her to represent her district. Tahera said that some women do not try and hesitate, especially after they lose the first time, and some women fear failure, while others lack experience and training. From her side, Fadila confirmed that female candidates lose hope in winning, especially when encountering difficulties in mobilizing female voters (Fadila, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She also mentioned the previous election results that showed significantly smaller numbers of females winning since 1994. In addition, Fadila stated that some female candidates failed in promoting themselves, their agendas, and skills, and they could not persuade people that they were capable and important players in the society just like men.

Tayba, the first female winner, agrees that many women run without knowing basic information about the council they are running to win a seat in, nor about the government structure (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She also mentioned another category of female candidates: those who ran in a community where people do not know them where they never had a role or presence among people. Tayba thinks that a woman, before deciding to run, should prepare herself in advance and be equipped with knowledge and community service.

Although not all participants agree that being a female or that gender or gender

roles is the major factor in determining voters' choice, participants agreed that it is a problematic issue for some as it is clear that being female and the roles assigned to females formed the perception of women's political participation. However, gender and gender roles are still confusing issues for some participants because they believe that Omani society is open towards women and women's political participation, while at the same time they pointed to other issues that concern them such as male dominated tribes, financial resources, and voter boycotts.

Fatima H. is among the participants who consider that social culture stands as an obstacle in females' path (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). She said that a friend of hers wanted to run for the elections, but her brothers refused. Also, she mentioned other married friends whose husbands refused the idea because they did not want their wives to be seen in the public sphere. Asma joined the team who said that society favors males over females and commented that she hoped that this view would change, but it seems that society mentality is "still working according to the old traditions" and that people still vote for a tribe, not for a candidate (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020).

Nasra thinks that the misconception of a woman's place not being in elected council is the major issue to consider in our attempt to understand the low representation of women (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). However, she, like other female candidates, thinks that the number of females running for elections matters. Nasra stressed the significance of being present and seen in the community before the election period and displaying her leadership skills. She understood that female candidates need to change perceptions of male dominated mentality despite the fact that she thought that being female is not the direct reason for not electing women. It is noteworthy that for some participants, despite being affected

by the social values and attitude differently than male candidates, they think that being a female is not a strong reason to believe that they treated differently because of their sex/gender. Also, they think that the traditional roles they play did not and should not affect their status in the society negatively. They describe these roles as natural and as further qualifications.

Moghadam stated that the term gender is used more broadly to indicate “the meanings given to masculine and feminine, asymmetrical power relations between the sexes, and the ways that men and women are differently situated in and affected by social processes” (2013, p. 24). It seems that for some participants, despite being affected by the social process differently than male candidates, they think there is not a strong reason to believe that was because they are females or women or a different sex than males. Also, they think that the traditional roles they play did not or should not affect their status in the society negatively. They describe these roles as natural and additional qualifications. Going back to the OWA’s activities, mission and role reinstates the idea that “the woman is responsible for the functioning of this basic unit or family and then, by extension, the country,” demonstrates that these associations succeeded in establishing women as “mothers of the nation” with responsibility for “maintaining the traditional family structure” (Krause, 2009, p. 26).

It was noteworthy also, that only one participant thought that the social status of women that affects their candidacy and representation is related to the laws and state policies that also led to boycotting the elections. Basma goes to a different aspect of Oman elections. She thinks that males and females suffer from voters boycotting the elections (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Due to the interlocking nature of women’s oppression or complicated situation, several explanations have been offered to account for the continuing lack of women in political leadership, such as

structural factors, including levels of socioeconomic development and the proportion of women in professional and managerial professions, the impact of political institutions such as electoral systems based on proportional representation, and the cultural factors like the predominance of traditional attitudes toward gender roles (Norris & Inglehart, 2011). These issues are discussed further in the following section.

Laws and Women's Empowerment

The relationship between gender and sociopolitical processes is interactive; however, gender relations mostly, and women's legal status in particular, have generally followed broad social change processes as modernization, state building, and economic development (Moghadam, 2013). Sabagh (2005) said that women in the Arab region are treated unequally in laws governing social security, pensions, income tax, inheritance, and criminal matters, and women do not enjoy all the benefits men do. However, the linkage between this kind of discrimination and the low participation of women in legislatures, and therefore in parliaments, has not been researched or recorded entirely. From this point, which emphasized that legal discrimination remains "a major obstacle to women's advancement," a discussion of the impact of Omani woman's legal status on advancing political representation was one of central ideas to illustrate female candidates' understanding of the women's legal status and its dimensions on the elections process and, therefore, on female's representation (Sabagh, 2005, p. 58).

In this section, the female candidate participants discuss whether Oman's laws have an impact on women's selection in the elections, and whether changing or issuing new laws would enhance women's representation in elected councils. The goal of this section is to investigate to what extent Oman's female candidates were aware of laws concerning women in general, as well as laws that might impact the size of support

female candidates might get during the election. Surprisingly, all participants did not mention any laws that impact women negatively or other laws that discriminate against women, such as the citizenship law. The citizenship law grants citizenship for Omani males' children, regardless of if they married a non-Omani national, while Oman's female citizens do not enjoy this right. Furthermore, all female candidate participants think that Oman's laws are supportive to women and make them equal to men, and they only demanded issuance of a new law to increase female representation in elected councils. Several female candidates, among those who suggested a quota system, mentioned that they did not support this idea before running in the elections, a process that led them to realize how hard it is to persuade people to vote for female candidates.

Half of the participants said that laws do affect the size of the support female candidates get in the elections. However, while talking about laws that should be changed to gain more support for females running elections, they stressed that a law that grants women seats in elected councils is needed. This indicates that they see no other laws as significantly impacting women's political participation. Those who said laws have no relationship with voters' support for female candidates believe that laws in Oman granted women full access to participation in politics and other fields. They also strongly think that laws, on the contrary, give women all their rights, and the problem is in the society's views about women's skills and capabilities.

Fadīla said that women in Oman are half of the population, their participation is inevitable, and it should be integrative and a positive addition to human diversity and knowledge having women in the elected councils (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She said, "there is no legislative, or official obstacle preventing women from engaging in public life and politics, the government supports and encourages women to participate." However, Fadīla continues, despite legislation and

encouragement that allows women to hold high leadership positions, women's percentage in these positions is significantly small, and that is "because of traditional views regarding women." Basma agrees that there are no laws that prevent women from participation nor limiting females' chances in winning; however, she said that there are laws that limit all candidates, males and females, from participating fully in politics and expressing freely their views about public affairs and people's rights (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020).

In comparison, Badriya firmly believes that laws in Oman are supportive and give women full rights in political participation (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). Similarly, Rahma thinks that laws related to women allow them to practice their roles and communicate freely with people (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). In addition, she said, laws allow men and women to enhance and propose laws and legislations according to the country's needs in order to provide citizens with respectful living conditions. Ameera and Tayba, also, do not see any problems with the laws (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020; Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

On the other hand, H.A. said that women need laws to support them; however, she did not mention what kind of laws could help women in the elections and public life (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). Although Muna did not mention a specific law, she stated that women need the society's trust and more opportunities to hold leadership positions in institutions that are exclusively led by men (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020).

Restating that "Laws in Oman treat men and women equally," Tahera emphasized "laws support women and give them equal rights at work, salary, and other benefits, in addition to holding high positions in the government" (Tahera, personal

communication, February 8, 2020). She added that laws represent a supporting factor that helped the society to see women in decision making positions. Society knows that women are efficient because society is genuinely open towards women and respects them. She said that men also know that women can make decisions and work hard. Tahera concluded that laws are a positive factor that pushes women to be part of politics (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She gave an example of the royal decrees appointing women as ministers and other positions as proof that state's laws support women. However, Tahera did not mention the small number of women appointees compared to male appointees to prove whether they treated equally.

It was noticeable that most participants either do not have knowledge about laws regarding women in Oman or they do not make the link between the laws, women's social status, and women's political participation. Other participants focused only on laws related directly to the elections system. However, few participants, who were aware of women's legal status, called for law enforcement and issuing new laws that enable women politically.

Participant S.H., for example, said that laws concerning women do not have fundamental role in females' underrepresentation in any way, and the issue is that there are some female candidates who are not supported by their communities and families, and "laws have no negative impact on women's representation" (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She stressed that there is no need to change laws or suggest others because women can highlight their contributions without laws. Thus, according to her, what women really need is a strong civil society identity that can advocate for women's issues and support them in the elections. Unlike S.H., Aisha strongly agreed that laws play a significant role in the size of support female candidates get in the elections (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). She thinks

that amending the election law and implementing a quota and changing the current electoral system, would eventually lead to a larger representation of women.

Fatima. H's opinion is that the most important factor is implementation and enforcement of the laws. Written laws are supportive, the problem is implementation; "maybe the younger generation is more ambitious and determined in enforcing the laws, maybe because we are older and grew with such culture which made us struggle and ignore to fight for law implementation."(Fatima. H, personal communication, January 10, 2020). Samīra said that Oman's law granted women the same rights as men (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). According to her, the law serves men and women equally and there is nothing in the law preventing women from public appearance. On the contrary, there are many positive laws backing women's roles in the society. Although laws, as Samīra said, allow women to run and manage elections' campaigns equally like men, this can help women only in Muscat governorate because the society there is more open with various communities, more educated people, and minorities, while in the rest of the governorates' situation is tribal. Therefore, according to her, we need laws and regulations to reinstate that women have rights in competing, winning seats, and the right to exist (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Khalsa said that she understands that other women in the world encounter similar difficulties in the election; however, because of the extremely small number of elected female in Oman, we are in critical need to change laws or issue new to increase women's representation in the elected councils (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Salema said that Oman's laws should change to empower women because she thinks that the Ministry of Social development does not do its part in this; "till today the role of MOSD is cosmetics, there is no tangible empowerment for women, this is obvious, when looking at middle management levels in the government

we see only males who are close to the decision makers, who are males as well” (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019).

It is not the laws that affect, directly, the electoral support. Some female candidates do not see a strong relationship between laws related to women and family issues, and the impact that affects them during the elections. My assumption was that people/voters would value women as less than male candidates because the law favors males, and perhaps female candidates feel the same about themselves. However, the law was not the factor that affects female’s candidate status in the elections, it is the traditional values that puts women second to men. Fadīla highlighted this as the only reason which explains women’s underrepresentation in the elected councils (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, these traditional views are supported by law, which reinforces that the husband is the head of the family, give him the right to divorce without court decision, and allowing him to have 4 wives. This social and legal status gives the male/man the upper hand on the family issues and therefore, he can control the woman’s life. The gender power relations might not have been seen as such influence in the elections for some female candidate; nevertheless, , it has an indirect impact on how the society sees a woman and how she is compared to a male counterpart.

Advancing women’s status in political participation requires collective efforts. As Shalaby stressed: “It is critical to combine government-led initiatives with grassroots efforts to promote the role of women in politics, both as voters and candidates” (2005, p. 17) and reinstating confidence in the parliament and other political actors. As it was mentioned that women’s political participation is multi-level struggle, whether on the level of social and cultural structures or on the level of political and electoral practices, and therefore, improving women’s representation requires “ a

strong women's movement" and a vibrant civil society as another condition of enabling environment that can influence the direction of politics and development in favor of women (Bari, 2005)

In a traditional society like Oman, separation between the laws and culture is not possible. The culture of the dominant group rules, and laws are made to suit the dominant groups as well as the culture and the values serve their goals and reinforce their status. This explains why the participants did not blame the laws, despite the fact that there are discriminatory laws, for women's underrepresentation because culture dominates and also affected the laws, and even when laws are not biased in favor of men, they are not enforced or have no impact on social and political change. In cultures with traditional attitudes regarding the role of women in the home and family, many women may be unwilling to run and, if they seek office, may fail to attract adequate support to win. Norris & Inglehart (2011, pp. 131-132) noted that culture is an important reason explaining why many nations with strict Islamic traditions have often placed at the bottom of the list in concerning women in parliaments, despite a few prominent women in top leadership positions. They, also, concluded that traditional attitudes are a major obstacle to the election of women to parliament and culture continues to be a substantial influence on the proportion of women representation in parliaments.

A study conducted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that female politicians in many countries mentioned aggressive attitudes toward women's political participation and they considered this attitude as one of the most challenging barriers to running for parliament¹²⁰. Although Oman's female candidate participants did not

¹²⁰IPU study reveals widespread sexism, harassment and violence against women MPs:
<https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>

mention direct hostile attitudes toward them while running, they stated that culture and social values are obstacles, whether at the level of the family or the society. Despite several participant's beliefs that the culture does not harass female candidates, it favors male candidate over them in political representation and leadership positions.

Placing the society in backwards stage, Zahra, sadly, said, "we are still in primitive era" regarding women's representation (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). People think that women are unable to perform like men, despite the fact that we had and have women who proved efficiency and succeeded in elected councils and other positions. However, other participants, such as Salema, disagree that traditional views have a real impact on women's representation; she thinks that Oman society does not pay a lot of attention to the sex/gender of the candidates. According to her, people do pay much attention in sustaining respect for social and tribal status, and appreciating money and other benefits regardless of the sex/gender of the candidate (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). From a different point of evaluation, Aisha, who ran in the same district as Salema, said that the traditional views of women role are the major issue, and it determines the result of the election. Aisha said, "this view is the primary test in the elections" (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Badriya argued that it is not possible to evaluate the impact of traditional values and women's perception on political participation because there are too many women who did not or do not participate in politics. Therefore, it would not be an accurate assumption to say that traditions and culture are the major barrier preventing women from participating in politics (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019).

Concluding her two experiences running in the elections, Aziza said that traditional views concerning women impacted women and their political participation.

This impacted females' possibilities to win. She explained that "unfortunately, not Majlis A'Shura nor the elections are among the main interest of women, and women in Oman do not share a single common issue unites them, that they want to propose to the Majlis" (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Unfortunately, this situation emphasized the traditional views regarding women and politics. In addition, women left themselves under the control of the males, whether a sheikh or a trader, regarding bidding on votes. These males control how women vote according to their interests; personal, tribal, or mere domination. Aziza stressed that female candidates should not blame males acting this way while women accept the abandonment of national issues like the elections. Aziza indicated that even the government uses this situation by emphasizing that traditional views impedes women's path to elected councils (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Government uses this to divert people and women to a direction that provides benefits and interest with tribes.

Rahma simply thinks that traditional views do not impact women's participation in the election, because women are citizens, and each citizen has the right to seek political participation when skills, qualifications and capability are available (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Not accepting this idea, H.A. said that we live in a society that does not accept women in a position higher than men. This society sees men as stronger and having advanced skills in communicating with people compared to women (H.A. personal communication, February 8, 2020). Tayba also thinks that some men believe that "the right place for women is her house;" however, she does not think that could impact women at large in terms of political participation. She said, "Now, people understand that women can play different and various roles, society is used to this because women in Oman work in high rate in the labor market as well in the government institutions" (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

Despite people witnessing women's achievements in jobs and society, Muna commented, traditional social views decreased women's opportunities and shadowed their contributions in society (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). This caused women to lose in the elections considerably. However, there are few female candidates who disagree with this point of view, such as Basma, who thinks that there are no social traditional views that directly affect women's chances in representation (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Also, S.H. believes that there is no traditional social views; instead there are some conservative families who refuse their female members to participate in public life because they think this is men's area and women have no place in it (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). The traditional social views and gender roles distribution are not an exclusive problem in Oman, Aisha stated, women around the globe suffer from this situation, even in the western societies (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020).

Over time traditional social views concerning women's roles will fade. Samīra is confident that will happen because she noticed the difference between her two experiences running in the elections in 2011 and 2019. She said in the first experience people did not accept a woman running, saying, "they had limited thinking about my role and showed reservation toward representing them in A'Shura." In the next election in 2019 this behavior changed to support, encouragement, and advocacy; "I felt this from all society categories, especially youth, educated, and intellectuals, that traditional perception changed." Samīra is optimistic that the next four years will witness a significant shift that supports women's political representation (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020).

Tahera thinks it is not the society that stresses traditional views about women, it is the electoral competition; male candidates using social values, traditions, religion

, and customs to distract voters from women's qualities in order to pull female candidates out of the competition. Female candidates, Tahera advises, should deal with such propaganda smartly. She mentioned that her experience in the elections taught her that traditional views play no significant role as some people think, saying "if I had been asked before the election if traditional social views about women impact female candidacy, I would have said yes, my position changed after the election, I realized that there is no such impact, it is the competition." However, Tahera supports having a quota system in place to increase women's representation in elected councils (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The argument Tahera and other participants presented about the culture and its values proves that women are empowered and begin to participate in representation; however, they still have far less power than men. Culture could drive the success of women in elected council like Samīra indicated and experienced; nevertheless, that requires supporting action from the political institutions in the country because the type of political system and its specific features. In this case, proportional representation in elections and gender quotas would help in supporting women and elevate their status in the society. Also, studies like (Norris & Inglehart, 2011) showed that there more egalitarian attitudes are obvious among younger generations in societies, especially among younger women, which suggests that it could be expected to see continued progress in female representation. An observation that participants mentioned, and they look forward to, is witnessing an improvement in society's acceptance for women's political participation.

The Quota Controversy

Feminist studies affirmed that gender quotas appeared as a global fast tract strategy to redress the long-time exclusion of women from the conventional arena of

politics. Bari (2005) stated that there is an obvious agreement in literature that gender quota is an effective tool in tackling women's exclusion and confirming their presence in formal structure of politics. Nonetheless, the controversy is around the critical question as to what extent women's presence in political structures has led to an effective mainstreaming of gender interests in politics. Bari (2005) says the gender gap in politics cannot be remedied by bringing more women in the system because it is, also, a policy and effect issue, which cannot be treated unless supportive mechanisms are put in place and provided with an enabling environment to work effectively. She suggested that quota model/system must be direct, empowering, and enable women to develop their constituency.

Sabagh (2005) argued that the linkage between patriarchal societies, levels of democratization, and the political status of women is very captivating; however, it has not been well-researched in Arab countries. She said that the electoral systems in Arab countries vary, but apart from the few cases where quota systems have been applied, they are not generally women-friendly because they do not promote more egalitarian policies and society. However, gender quotas are a long tradition of government intervention to boost social equality and that may have made the public more sympathetic to the idea of positive actions designed to achieve equality for women in political life (Norris & Inglehart, 2011).

Oman's female candidate participants, despite their different approaches to the design of the quota, agreed that such system would make the society more perceptive to women's political participation and would increase women's representation in elected councils and may lead to more comprehensive policies that could advance women's opportunities in leadership positions and decision-making in the government. The election experience made participants change previous ideas regarding quota and

its effect in boosting women's engagement in the public life because they encountered challenges and difficulties related to gender, gender roles, and society values and culture.

Khalsa described the shift as, "I was against the quota system, I did not accept it; however, in the last election in 2019 I wished it had been implemented despite my position from quota. I saw this huge women's retreat and their incapacity to show people the skills, qualifications, and aspirations they have for their society. I noticed that our chances as women are truly little, I genuinely wish that quota would be considered as a step to increase women's representation in the elected councils." Nevertheless, Khalsa suggested other measures to encourage larger women's representations, such as appointing more women in the government's decisions-making and high positions, and in the State Council. She said that these appointed women should be selected according to their qualifications and competence, because that would make people realize women's capabilities (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Similarly, Samīra argued: "I suggest implementing a quota in the next two terms which grants one seat for women in the districts represented with two seats, the other seat is left for competition. If we start this way, we guarantee larger women representation." Samīra's proposal was to ensure that women will occupy more seats in the elected councils; however, she said if that is not possible on the districts level, it should be implemented on the governorates level. In this case, all female candidates in the governorate compete in primary elections and the winners run in the general election. This way, Samīra says, there will be one female candidate from each governorate, and this will increase women's representation. Oman is divided into eight governorates and 61 districts. As a result, according to Samīra's proposal, if women

compete at the governorate level, 8 women will be elected. This would increase women's representation from 2 (as it the case most of terms in A'Shura) to 8 (Samīra, personal communication, January 30 2020). To date, no female candidates were registered in two governorates; however, this suggested quota system could make a female representative from each governorate mandatory, which could spark social conflict in these two governorates (alwusta and Musandam) because of their conservative communities who may not let their female members run. Nevertheless, educating people and raising awareness could make a difference.

Participants thought that before implementing the quota, it is necessary to raise societal awareness because such move should not be imposed without the acceptance of the people. They suggested that the civil society organizations should take this role of educating the public.

Fadīla stressed the civil society organization's role on raising awareness in the society regarding women participation in the nation's development process. Also, she suggested creating an electoral culture among women that supports women candidates and enhances women's leadership skills as well as educates women about the country's laws and legislations depending on what society needs and suits it (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). Badriya also suggested raising society, not only women, regarding the elections and parliament, as well as enforcing the quota system to increase women's representation in elected councils (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). Rahma strongly thinks that educating society and voters about women's roles and qualifications would change the perspectives and increase women's chances in winning, while Tayba thinks that imposing quota could be the solution for underrepresentation problem (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019; Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). However, she

suggested regulation that allows a minimum number of female candidates from each governorate to run in primary elections, with the winners running in the general elections (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Ameera agrees that quota would help women reach the parliament (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). The quota system, said Muna, would contribute to increasing women's presence in leadership positions, and quotas help women to get the opportunities they deserve without depending on society's choice (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Muna thinks that women's leadership should not be left totally in the hands of society, especially in the rural areas. Quotas could be implemented because women in Oman have proven achievements and success in various spheres.

Although most participants suggested quota as a step to push women, Basma says that female candidates can win without quota, and thus, they must compete freely (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She believes that there are laws which should be enforced to fight buying votes and the use of political money and other influences.

However, Aisha and S.H. have a different idea to increase women's representation in elected councils. They think that if female candidates run in a larger number than before, they would secure fair representation (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020; S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). Aisha said if female candidates' number is equal to male candidates or a little less or more, female candidates would have better chances (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). S.H. gave a hypothetical example saying, if 1000 female candidates run in an election, there will be more elected candidates representing women (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019).

Although Salema believes that there is not any law preventing women from

competing freely, nor preventing voters from showing more support to women, she thinks that a new law should be issued to give women more possibilities to increase representation (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She proposed implementing a quota system to help women to be seen and acknowledged. When women are elected, people will see their work and support them; therefore, they will become role models and encourage other women to run. Salema said that society currently does not see what women do. She said that those who are seen are very few, yet their work is also not seen. If a quota were to be implemented, there would be a better opportunity present for women.

Because society is still male dominated, Asma thinks that there is a need to have a quota system that could increase women's seats in both A'Shura and Municipal councils (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). However, she thinks that women with a quota system in place need to be educated and fully aware about elections and politics. She also specified that they should identify women's supporters and advocate for women's rights, and they should be inspired and cannot be influenced negatively. Understanding that in order to change women's status and advance their political participation, participants emphasized that a social and political change is required to create an enabling environment for women. For instance, Zahra provided a more comprehensive vision regarding the suitable environment to increase female representation in elected councils (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She supports having a quota system in place and calls for a focused plan executed by Oman Women's Associations. Zahra said that laws to implement these two steps should be issued. She mentioned that some women's associations supported male candidates when they were expected to support women because they thought their interests were with male candidates. She explained that this shows to what extent women, especially

those who are running women's associations, need education about women's solidarity and unity. To provide a suitable environment for larger women's political participation leading to a significant representation, Zahra suggested that a survey should be conducted to answer two questions: first, what does society want from A'Shura council? And second, what do women want from female representatives in the council? Zahra said that women in A'Shura council should be granted more powers so they can display their qualifications and skills, and highlight their roles. Therefore, they would have a good reputation which would encourage other women to run in the future. However, if the status quo remains, Zahra says, women's situation will not change. She stressed that it is the duty of female winners/representatives to work and seek change, and they should work on amending laws and legislations related to women. Doing this would encourage not only women to vote for female candidates but will encourage society at large because people would see female representatives' powerful performance result in their favor.

Linking women's political participation in the appointed State Council to the election displayed a deep understanding, from Zahra, regarding women status in Oman and how they are treated by society and state (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said, "The government tried to make it up for women in 2019 after the result of A'Shura elections, when only two female candidates won, by appointing 15 women in the State Council." Zahra said, "nevertheless, this is not like winning an election and being the people's representative." She stated that any country which supports women's participation in the parliamentary field should implement a quota and designate a number of seats for women. Zahra suggested at least 6 and that these women assigned by quota should focus on women's issues that until this time remain untouched and unresolved. Zahra mentioned that the late Sultan Qaboos was interested

in giving women rights and roles in the government and society; however, we are still backwards concerning women's rights. She thinks that "without Sultan Qaboos' personal interest in supporting women, we would not have the gains we have in Oman." Zahra said that in addition to the men's inferior opinion that women should stay home, taking care of the family and raising children, there is this simplistic view about women's role as well. However, this changed because of the high positions and new roles that Sultan Qaboos assigned to women and his continuous encouragement.¹²¹ Zahra's remarks regarding the late Sultan's support for women are widely accepted in Oman; however, during the 49 years of the late Sultan Qaboos' rule, the support he showed for Omani women did not result into policies and regulations that advanced women representation and increased their share in leadership positions in the government and the State Council. Despite the fact that the number of females appointed in the council increased over the years and is larger than the number of women in the government, there was not a designated number or percentage for women.

Oman female candidate participants are aware that women's status in politics needs to change to a better representation for women, and they are also aware and convinced that election and appointment should be on merit. They understand that women should not be favored just because of their sex/gender; nonetheless, they could not shape a comprehensive vision of how to advocate for the issue and at what platforms. The participants determined that OWAs should have the transforming action toward women's political participation; however, they did not discuss nor mention the legal restrictions that limit the OWAs and the rest of the NGOs from practicing any form or any kind of political activities. Nevertheless, a few participants mentioned that

¹²¹ The interview with Zahra took place before the death of Sultan Qaboos on 11 January 2019

women representatives should advocate for a gender quota and other women's rights in elected councils, especially A'Shura, while the Majlis itself does not have the legislative powers. The issue most participants avoided talking about or did not form clearly in their minds is that the state policies and laws restricting women's advancement in politics, if not directly by not implementing for example quota, happened indirectly by banning and restricting the ways and means by which women can be empowered. Oman's female candidate participants need to, at least, start thinking about or shaping a vision for the political future of Omani women, if not start creating an enabling political environment.

Bari (2005, p. 9) thinks that the creation of an enabling environment for women's participation in politics and in development cannot be viewed only within the borders of a country, "It must be linked with global factors." In some cases, despite the fact that global factors played a significant role in advancing women's status in several Arab countries such as in the Gulf states and Jordan, these factors did not change the structure of the social, economic, and political institutions that immensely impact women's lives and political participation. In these cases, states/government could, with a decision from the top of the ruling class, increase the numbers of women in government and appointed councils. Nevertheless, other decisions could have been made to establish an enabling environment for women political participation. That would require issuing new laws and amending existing laws to equalize women to men and instate new policies that change the perception of women in politics and enhance women's rights.

Another important element in the enabling environment is related to the level of democratization in society and the political will in considering women's political participation and women's status generally is a state priority. Norris & Inglehart (2011)

stated that structural and institutional explanations need to be complemented by accounts underlining the importance of political culture because it is believed that traditional anti-egalitarian attitudes toward gender slow down the political advancement of women.

Furthermore, because the interlocking layers of gender inequalities are rooted in the power structures at the national and international levels, Bari (2005) stressed that without addressing the structural constraints to women's political exclusion, their inclusion by gender quota cannot have an advantage to an efficient representation. Sabagh (2005) emphasized that Arab women will remain restricted from practicing citizenship and full political participation despite the reality that in many Arab countries, women have secured their full political rights as citizens, unless they acquire their full social and economic rights.

Omani Women in Government and State Council

For an enabling environment that can impact the direction of politics and leadership in favor of women, a strong women's movement and an active civil society are crucial conditions because this would grow women's consciousness of their political rights. This is another critical element for women's individual and collective agency (Bari, 2005). It could explain why female candidate participants could not form or shape their own or their collective vision for women's political advancement. Women in Oman run for the election without a backbone that would support them before the election and all the way through to the election day. There is not a women's movement in Oman, nor an effective civil society; therefore, growing women's consciousness regarding their political rights is the only element women can depend on.

However, winning international recognition has been an important factor for

motivating Arab states/governments to create mechanisms that boost women's status, "even if the impact of this process could contradict traditional patriarchal structures" (Sabagh, 2005, p. 57). A factor that Omani women can utilize to pressure the government is to adopt more balanced policies and actions that address the structural and institutional barriers that hinder women's advancement in politics and public affairs. Nevertheless, the main challenge to Omani women remains the platform or the medium that could deliver their message in the absence of women's movement and active civil society.

In August 2020, three females were appointed as ministers out of 21 ministers.¹²² In November 2019, the appointment of ministers and State Council members included four female ministers out of 29 in Oman's government, and 15 females out of 85 appointed members of the State Council.¹²³ This section's goal is to explore the views of Oman female candidates regarding the state policies regarding women appointments in high positions such as ministers in the government and in decision-making positions such in State Council, and how female candidates understand these appointments and whether they think that the state is doing enough to support women's political empowerment. Another measure which will be investigated in this section is female candidates' standpoint regarding equality, and how they understand equalities and women rights' in fair representation. A third aspect which will be discussed in this section is how female candidates perceive the impact of female participation in government decision-making and whether female participation changes or adds to the development policies in the country. These views of female candidates

¹²² This was the first ministerial appointment issued by the new Sultan Haitham Bin Tariq. For more details about the appointments see: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-sultan-of-omans-new-cabinet-combines-continuity-and-change/> and :

<https://www.atheer.om/archives/532482/>

¹²³ The participants discussed the appointments of November 2019.

will be compared to the answers of female appointees in State Council, and female voters who were interviewed in Chapter 2.

Two questions were problematic for several female candidate participants; the first was investigating whether the number of females appointed ministers in the government and members in the State Council is sufficient regarding women representation. The second was exploring whether the female candidate participants believe that the number of female appointees should be equal to males. Some participants did not prefer to criticize the government and decisions made on the highest level of the government, and some thought that the appointment of 15 female members in the State Council was compensation for women's losses in A'Shura elections, Therefore, having 15 female members of State Council is better than 2 females representing women in Majlis A'Shura.

As for the second problematic question, some female candidates did not prefer to engage in the issue of equality because they were opposed to the notion of equality for different reasons. Most thought competence and efficiency are more important than equality in appointing females and males as government's ministers and State Councils' members. However, among these two categories, there were female candidates who felt strongly against equality and others who felt strongly for equality, while all agreed that participation of females in high decision-making positions impacts policy making positively and brings new perspectives to the table.

Only five female candidates said that the number of female appointees in government and State Council is sufficient in representing women in Oman, while 13 said it is not and more women should be appointed. However, seven refused the numeric concept. They preferred to use competency instead. It is noteworthy that most female candidates said that having more women appointees would be decent for

women's representation and for government's policy making. Khalsa, for example, said that having more women in the decision-making position in the government and the State Council will, certainly, constructively impact the state's development plans, and that would be more effective in serving citizens. She noticed some female candidates were nominated by mayors or governors (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). This indicates that people in the government are aware of women's capabilities, and they appreciate their inputs in sustainable development plans.

While Sana said, "I cannot say whether the number is enough to represent women because women are not specialized in some areas, and thus cannot be selected to certain positions" (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). However, Sana continued, when women have the specialization they are appointed--for example, the female minister of telecommunications who was appointed in 2019. She studied this field and understands it, which was the reason she was appointed. Sana stated that having expertise in certain areas is most important in advancing women's status and eventually increasing their numbers in the government and State Council. Having 15 females as appointed members of State Council is good, said Tahera, because the council has legislative powers and it reflects society as well (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). As for female ministers, Tahera believes that quality, not quantity, is most urgent. She said, "it is not acceptable to demand that 50% of the government ministers for women;" however, she thinks that the situation is different for A'Shura council because it represents people and consequently, having more women is better. Tayba has a different perspective. According to her, having more women in the State Council and government encourages women to run for elections and people realize the importance of women's representation in elected councils (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Tayba demands appointing more

women so that the government shows its support for women. For example, she suggested, appointing at least 30 female members of State Council out of its 85 members. Then she wondered: “I do not know why less women are appointed; however, when appointing women, it should not happen to present a favor to a tribe or a person. There are many young women in Oman who are well educated and enthusiastic. We need to give new generations opportunities because they have energy and momentum. Youth should be represented as well in the legislative institutions where plans are constructed; youth has inspiration and vision, and they should be a priority.”

For most participants, gender equal opportunity is a foggy concept or an idea not forthcoming. For them, the reality is that women should accept and be thankful for the existing opportunities. Aspiring for gender equality means looking for trouble, whether from the government side or from the society and culture side. While participants believe that bringing women in the government would benefit the country, they think this is a business of the government and they should not interfere. Also, while participants’ stress on quality and qualification as the most important element of appointing females, they do not apply this condition on males’ appointment. They accept the reality as a matter of fact, and some are convinced that males are more qualified especially in certain areas. Zahra, for example, is calling for appointing highly qualified women (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She explained her opinion and said, “I wish that women were appointed equally in the government and State Council. Nonetheless, selecting women should be carefully done, the decision maker ought to know her and understand her personality, plans, and her management skills and knowledge.” Zahra also suggested that a female appointee should be given the time to study the ministry that she is appointed to in order to present her ideas, remarks, and project to amend laws because this is the only way a female appointee

could serve her people in an efficient manner.

While Nasra admitted that asking whether the number of female appointees in the government and State Council was problematic and thorny for her because the position of a minister should not be offered on the basis of gender (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). However, she thinks that it is important to have more women in the State and A'Shura councils because women know adequately about women's issues given their access to women in the communities and their ability to discuss details of family issues, unlike men.

Basma also refused the quantitative measure regarding women's representation in the government and State Council, saying, "we need to know, first, the mechanism and the characteristics that appointment based on" (Basma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She explained that it is not known how these people are appointed, regardless of their gender. Comparing Oman to other countries, Fadīla believes that the numbers of female ministers and State Council members are not sufficient, and she said if we compare ourselves to other countries, we need to have more women so we can achieve equality (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020).

Forming another argument, participants said that more women and larger numbers is efficient. They think appointed females are mostly qualified or at least they are at the same level of male appointees, and there is no obvious reason for not appointing women especially in ministries related to civil services. Mahfūza said that female ministers' numbers are particularly small compared to males' holding high decision-making positions (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She said, "I think we should have a bigger number of female ministers because they are better in some fields, especially those related to family and women's issues." H.A.

thinks that women's numbers in government needs to be more because four is very little to represent women in Oman; nevertheless, she thinks that State Council is good to have 15 female members comparing to two only in A'Shura council and seven in the Municipal councils (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). Other participants shifted the attention to other areas where women are under-represented and this situation, from their point of view, reflects the imbalance in high positions. For example, Salema thinks that more women are needed at other levels in the government structure (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She said that there are enough women as ministers and State Council members; "we need more women in the mid-management level, such as general director, director, and director assistant, also at advisor and under-secretary levels." Salema says that is what we need because the goal is to make society see women and acknowledge that they exist, work, and have a voice. Society should know and see what women do; however, only men's achievements are seen by society because they are at all levels in larger numbers than women.

Responding to other participants, who said that the state made up for women by appointing women in the State Council, and who mentioned that the number of women in the State Council is good compared to the number of women in the elected councils, Aziza refused the comparison between elected representatives and appointed members in State Council and in the government in terms of compensation (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She said, "women's presence in the government and the State Council does not compensate for their under representation in the elected councils." The elected councils represent citizens' voice, and it should be independent and powerful, while the government can always increase the number of females appointed ministers, it cannot force people to vote for women. However, Aziza thinks

that state/government could improve women's status and provide an environment that politically enables women.

Supporting the last idea Aziza presented, Aisha said that the number of women appointed as ministers in the government and members in the State Council is not enough because the current appointments do not represent the women's population in Oman (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Women are half of the country's society, and women who have obtained a high graduate degree are more than men. Therefore, women deserve better and equal representation, not only in elected councils, but also in government and State Council. Samīra agrees with Aisha, and in addition she says that despite women being in high positions for many years, the number is still significantly small (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Women in leadership positions do not exceed "the number of one hand's fingers." It is "a shy number," and Samīra expressed the need for new blood in the government and leadership positions. Decision makers should think that another kind of thinking is needed in these positions, and according to her, women can provide a new and sufficient perspective. Asma joins the team saying that women appointees' number is not enough to represent women in Oman, and she said that males who are elected and appointed dominate all spheres; they are much more than women (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Society and decision makers preferred them over women. She strongly agrees that female appointees should be equal to males because women can lead equally like men. Although S.H. thinks that the number of female appointees is not adequate nor representative of the women's population, she is optimistic regarding the number of women appointed in 2019 in the government and State Council (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said having four female ministers and more than 10 females in State Council is a good sign.

Nevertheless, S.H. expressed her concern regarding female representatives in A'Shura council, and she said having only two females out of 86 representatives is an extremely worrying situation, especially since some terms, this number dropped to one and zero. These numbers are not a real representation of women.

Muna said that more women appointees are needed because women have the capability and the education that qualifies them to hold political leadership positions in larger numbers (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Muna wondered why society cannot trust women in these positions, while it trusted her in raising children -- males, and females -- and educated them to be successful citizens. Muna emphasized that women, as mothers, trained the male leaders of the country, and why, after that, women are denied leading or decision-making positions.

Leaning toward S.H.'s idea regarding women' representation in the State Council, H.A. thinks that the number of women in the State Council is large, and she predicts that their role will be effective because women are close to society, caring, and hardworking and therefore, can make the right decisions (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). Rahma also thinks that the number is sufficient and commented that, "we do not need to have more women or more men, what we need is effective, active, and have distinguished expertise, and most importantly they must first think about public interests" (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Closer to the same position as H.A., Noora sees no difference between men and women (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She says, "it should not be a problem if men are more than women, or women are more than men in elected councils or in appointed councils and government." She stated that, "we are not in a contest." Noora emphasized that the most competent are the worthiest for the position. This should be applied for women and men equally. Although Rahma sees no difference

between men and women, she could not see that women are treated unequally in the appointments (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Also, she said that we do not need more men or more women; rather, we need qualified people to serve. However, men are appointed without the restriction of qualifications.

Also, Samīra thinks that it is not necessary to seek equal numbers (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). She said that leadership positions should be "distributed proportionally," and these positions should not lean much to males nor to females. In brief, it should look normal, balanced, and representative. Despite that, she stated that when a mentality is always male dominated, some decisions would not represent all society, these decisions might lack the flexibility that the female mentality provides. Females' presence in leadership positions make laws and legislations balanced and consistent with society's nature and structure.

However, Samīra presented another confusion or ambiguity among the participants regarding women's demands and vision (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). She said that leadership positions should be distributed proportionally, and that requires a female opposite each male appointee because the population of women in Oman is almost equal to that of men. Also, when talking about making laws and legislations balanced by increasing women's presence in the leadership position, it requires having half of these positions occupied by women. Nevertheless, it is notable that female candidate participants tend to not demand equality, either because they are afraid of social backlash or because they do not want to criticize the government's policies regarding women and civil society. However, it is not possible to dismiss that some participants genuinely think that the state or government has done its part and it is the time for the women and society to prove that they deserve the rights and the trust given for them.

Muna did not agree with what the participants said about how the number of female appointees is good and sufficient (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). She said that more women appointees are needed because women have the capability and the education that qualify them to hold political leadership positions in larger numbers. Muna wondered why society cannot trust women in these positions while trusting them with raising children, who are males and females, and educating them to be successful citizens. Muna emphasized that women trained, as mothers, the male leaders of the country and questioned why, after that, women are denied leading and holding decision-making positions. She sees underrepresentation of women in the government and in the appointed State Council is equally worrying and concerning matter just like their underrepresentation in the elected councils.

Stressing that women should have equal opportunity and be appointed equally to all high positions, Fadīla believes that women's number in elected councils, appointed government positions and State Council should be equal to men's number (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She said that society still views women as incapable and unable to take serious responsibilities. She mentioned that when women are present in equal numbers to men, there will be strength and unity, and there will be one voice and one word.

Aziza thinks that the number of women appointees should be equal to men's number in government and State Council (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Her reason for that is that Oman's population is divided equally between men and women. Therefore, representing women with a smaller number than men will not underline women's issues nor highlight their qualifications in serving society and their participation in productivity. However, Aziza stressed, it is extremely difficult to achieve equality because it is a global phenomenon to see elected councils with less

women, and they suffer from underrepresentation.

Aisha, like Aziza, thinks that women appointed in government and State Councils should be equal to men in numbers, simply because, as Aisha said, Oman has ratified the UN's Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Tayab supports the idea that males and females should be represented equally in the elected and appointed councils, as well as in the government (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She said that the minister's positions should be divided equally between males and females.

It was evident that some participants did not prefer the idea of equality. They used terms and concepts of efficiency, competence, quality, and qualification rather than equality, because either they do not believe in gender equality or they do not think it possible. For example, H.A. believes strongly that women cannot be equal to men for the reason that in some fields men are more capable and skillful than women (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). She stressed that, "it is impossible to reach equality," because women's nature is different from that of men. Women are caring and compassionate individuals, and "Allah created men different in their mindsets and physical aspects." H.A. does not think that this statement underscores women's qualifications nor their abilities to make decisions. Sana expressed her wishes that women can be equal to men in numbers, yet that depends on the expertise and skills in particular fields; however, Sana highlighted that this is contingent on the availability of women with knowledge needed for a particular job (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Sana doubted that there are women in Oman who are specialized in all areas needed in the government or other state institutions.

Khalsa also believes that appointing more women would encourage women

generally to participate in the elections (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Appointing women gives them the opportunity to demonstrate their skills and capabilities in decision making and political empowerment. However, appointment should be subject to quality standards, because only good examples could influence people and decision makers to engage in supporting women, and on the other hand, it could encourage other women to become involved in larger participation.

Generally, Omani women's current status indicates that the goal that women should begin with is to determine the central issues that they should all agree upon, and then determine how they want to address the issues and what are their expectations. Jaggar (2004) described the responsibility of feminist standpoint researchers, saying that to theorize together is itself a political purpose and to succeed in collective theorizing would be itself a political accomplishment. Jagger explained that the standpoint of women does not refer to a perspective that is instantly available to all and only women. Instead, it suggests "a way of conceptualizing reality that reflects women's interests and values and draws on women's own interpretation of their own experience" (Jaggar, 2004, p. 64). She advised women, since they cannot transform reality alone, to work politically with men to find a way without being dominated by them. She mentioned that men may be able to contribute to women's theoretical work. In reality, Omani women need to find powerful male sympathizers who can advocate women's issues as major family development issues.

Meanwhile, female candidate participants still struggle in defining what works better for their own advancement, not due to lack of awareness, but due to the absence of the public debate about women's rights and issues and the absence of a unifying entity that addresses and studies such issues.

The following statements and perspectives are also examples of the inner

debates that each female candidate has individually. Fatima H. said that “we should not talk about women’s numbers; instead, we should talk about whether they can contribute to the society and how well they contribute” (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). She stressed that it is the quality not the quantity what we should emphasize; “number has no value if women do not have qualification and expertise to present.” Tahera shares the same idea with Fatima H. However, she thinks that a larger number is better in the elected councils because decisions reflect people’s voice” (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Society includes men and women, yet that does not apply to appointees, either males or females, because they should be selected according to their competence. Tahera said that having one or three qualified female ministers could have greater impact than 10 female ministers who are not competent, “We cannot demand equality in government and State Council, women cannot have 50-50 representation this is impossible currently for many reasons such as traditions and men distrusting women.” Also, S.H. said that it is nearly impossible to have equal numbers to men in elected council; however, she thinks that it is possible to have a larger number of women, but not equal, in appointed positions in government and State Council (S.H. personal communication, November 27, 2019). Nasra also thinks that it is not important to have equal numbers for female and male appointees, rather it should be sufficient. Nasra said that it should be an adequate number of females in the government to support males in their missions, and provide views related to women, family, and society issues (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019).

Although Muna supports equality, she emphasized that not any woman should be appointed (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). She said that the country should invest in women who are willing to work hard and have the enthusiasm

that drives them because there are some women who tend to stay home and depend on others and others who stop working in the middle of the road. Muna stressed that female appointments should be done on grounds and measures; however, she said, it is not necessary to have equal numbers in these positions. Yet, for her, a larger women's presence is preferred. Ameera thinks it is not fair to have this small number of females appointed in the government's ministerial level and in the State Council (Ameera, personal communication, January 4, 2020). The number is not sufficient because if the government wants to appoint more females, qualified women are available to serve at all places and areas. Rahma supports equality as well; nonetheless, she thinks that women should prove for society that they can replace men, master work, and achieve goals (Rahma, personal communication, November 25, 2019). The government should look for efficiency when appointing men or women. Generally, Rahma thinks that, "we do not need more women or more men in decision making positions; we need qualified people to propose laws and defend society's political, economic, social, and legislative interests." She justifies this demand by explaining that the proposed legislations serve all citizens in the country, it is a national issue not local, and in these matters, gender is not important, competence is vital. Supporting the government's direction, Badriya said that the number of women appointed in both government and the State Council is adequate and reflects the state's realization of the importance of women's participation (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019).

In general, despite all participant's beliefs that women deserve better recognition and appreciation from the state in the appointment and from the people in the elections, most wanted to escape thinking of gender equality and demanding equal appointment because they thought this is an issue which should be left to the state/government to decide about. Also, some participants had doubts about women's

capabilities in certain areas of specialization and amplified that even if the government wanted to appoint more women, there would be no women available. Other participants stressed that women's nature makes equality impossible. However, other participants mentioned that women are better than men in certain areas; nevertheless, they are not appointed in these positions. Most participants' views reflected a lack of clarity and confusion about gender equality and women's rights in demanding equal treatment and opportunities in political positions.

Will Women's Political Engagement Improve State Policies?

In this section, the participants discuss the impact of women's inclusion in high positions on state's policies and whether they could provide a new positive perspective to policymaking and government. All female candidate participants said that larger women's political participation would impact policy making positively and would present new and different views. Nevertheless, some female candidates think that women's distinguished inputs could only be limited to women and family issues. Furthermore, the participants stressed that qualified women only could deliver that positive impact on the state policies. Also, several participants emphasized that women's nature prevents them from demanding equality in all fields and specializations, such as in the military and defense. The participants discussed a broad range of views and perspectives regarding women in government's high positions that are displayed and discussed in this section.

One team of the participants thinks that women have additional skills that men do not have, and this makes women better candidates for the high position. While part of this team thinks these skills allow women to perform better than men in all fields, the other part limited women's skills in areas related to family and social issues. For example, Mahfūza believes that more women in the government and in the elected

councils will benefit policies enormously, while female representatives can propose studies and research on family and women's issues, and female ministers can execute plans and implement recommendations (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Mahfūza believes that women work and think differently than men. She said that women are skilled at multitasking more than men, and women can focus on solving several problems at the same time. Therefore, appointing more women in the government and State Council will add a new and fresh perspective. However, Mahfūza thinks that women can serve in various disciplines and fields, not only with regard to women and family issues. Also, H.A. said that women have the capability of making their country more developed, and in improving plans, women have the education and the skills that qualify them to make right decisions that serve the society (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Emphasizing the special skills women have, Sana said, "There are some females' characteristics that make women more skillful and knowledgeable than men" (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said, "women created with natural resilience to endure challenges and ability to listen and focus better than men." Sana believes that women are qualified for higher positions because they could manage households successfully. Sana, also, mentioned that there are many women in Oman who proved that being a qualified female is an asset for policy making. Following the same path, Aziza said that appointing more women in decision-making positions would improve policy making in Oman, and also electing specialized females in Majlis A'Shura would support government plans and long-term strategies (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Aziza gave an example that if a female gynecologist is elected to Majlis A'Shura that would impact plans on productive health and child health as well, and also, if an educator was elected, her inputs and expertise

would help in improving and enhancing teaching and education plans. Nasra thinks that appointing more females in the government's decision-making position would improve development policies, especially, because women have better knowledge of women, children, and family issues, and therefore, as Nasra stated, they have better understanding of the society (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019).

"Larger number of women in decision making positions whether in the government or the State Council would have a positive impact on serving citizens and development policies in Oman," S.H. stated (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She also thinks that "a woman before she is appointed as a minister in the government was an internal affairs minister in her house where she made all family decisions." S.H. stressed that larger women's participation in decision making would lead to the right decisions and consequently would actively enhance development policies and plans. She concluded that when trust and opportunity are given, women proved that they are competent.

Another team thinks that women are equal to men in education, skills and qualification; therefore, they can perform in all fields without restrictions. This team believes that women should not be limited to certain issues and positions that are related to women and family issues. Muna sees no limit for women's participation in the government and in leadership positions because there are many female thinkers with initiatives who are hardworking, and have the desire to serve their people and country (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Therefore, their impact on policy making would be tremendously positive. Ameera agreed with Muna, and highlighted that policy making would be more effective because women are advanced in all fields and areas; thus, they can make wise decisions and follow credible methodology in dealing with issues and challenges (Ameera, personal communication, January 4,

2020). Fadīla strongly believes that women are equal to men in rights and duties, and women's participation in making policies and decision-making would be a remarkable addition for the government and the country (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She said that having more women will reflect a positive effect on development policies.

From a different point of view, Aisha stated that marginalizing 50% of the population would impact the country's development plans negatively (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). She said that the absence and neglect of half of the population would create defects in policies and in decision-making. The current positions are male dominated, and they are almost exclusively in charge of making policies, with women out of the scene. In short, Aisha was alarmed.

Samīra agreed that appointing more women would impact development policies in the country (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). She emphasized that women's underrepresentation had negative effect on laws and development plans. She gave the example of Majlis A'Shura with 86 representatives with only one or two female representatives. Samīra said this Majlis A'Shura does not represent women; "we did not see any issues related to women discussed thoroughly; for instance, they did not discuss the "breastfeeding hour" which was provided for nursing working mothers, nor did they discuss the small number of women representatives." That was, she explained, because most of the representatives are men and maybe they are "shy" to discuss issues that related to women. Samīra said, "we need female representatives, so they discuss women's issues thoroughly, openly, and transparently, we need more representatives to support our country's development." Samīra concluded that when representation is balanced, the outputs push development forwards, and having two mindsets and different experiences helps in making better and improved policies.

Zahra said that it is good to have more women in the government; however, leadership skills are essential (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Sometimes expertise is not enough. A good leader can mobilize people and inspire them to participate and engage in public issues. She gave an example of a female minister who could not handle some crises during her term in the government. According to Zahra, people were not satisfied with the former female minister's performance, and thus she did not stay long in the ministry. Zahra stated that appointed females should know society well, should be inspired and have initiatives, and, in addition, they have to learn about studies and research focused on their areas of expertise.

Asma, answering to Zahra concern about women's leadership skills said, "There are studies that showed that women leadership skills resulted in more productivity, women proved that they contribute enormously in income diversification, innovations, and economic elevation" (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). She said that the reason for having women in the elected and appointed positions is that women's participation provides a new aspect for development. Even if the elected and appointed positions are divided equally between males and females, Tahera says, it would not make decisions wiser or more mature, it is the quality of the people who were elected or appointed, and quality is most needed, she said, while numbers have no substantial value (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Tayba expressed worry that women cannot be present at all state institutions as leaders because women are not specialized in all areas and fields. However, Tayba said, there should be a balance and fairness when appointing females and males, and competence is vital for both. She stated that appointing males just because they are males makes competitiveness low, and therefore, the quality of productivity is low (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). In some cases, a female appointee

does a better job than a male because of their experiences and qualifications. Supporting Aisha and Samīra's points of view regarding representation, Tayba mentioned her performance with Shukoor Alghammeri, as they were the only female representatives in A'Shura in 1994 (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She said they presented totally different views from their male counterparts when they were discussing issues in the Majlis committees. Also, she mentioned male appointees failed in solving many cases such as corruption. She said if people want to compare males to females' performances in high positions, the result is in favor of women because males' problems and failures are more significant, and bigger.

The differences in views showed that participants are concerned about female appointees' skills and qualifications because they want them to be good representatives for professional women in a way that encourages the government to appoint more women. This also showed awareness that equal representation is important in terms of placing women's issues and women's rights among the state and society's priorities. Furthermore, the discussion concerning women's nature and skills reflects confidence that being a female is valued and it should be appreciated. Even when some participants considered that women's nature limits their high positions, most participants thought that education would solve the problem of specifications. While the participants all indicated that women's participation in policy making, this issue has not been metalized in the parts of the globe.

Female Appointees, Voters, and Candidates: Reflection on equality

Chapter 2 of this research investigated female appointees and voters' views regarding the major challenges that hinder Omani women advancing politically. They highlighted traditional gender roles and a male-dominated culture produced by social norms and cultural values as the leading factors pulling women backward. However,

they think that female candidates' lack of confidence and campaign management skills play a massive role in female candidates' failures to win seats in the elected councils. In comparison, female candidate participants determined that tribalism and the use of money influence in exchange for vote are the leading factors that challenge females in the elections. Although they believe that social and cultural values concerning women, gender roles and gender relations have significant impact, they do not think that these values have a decisive impact which leads females to losing the elections. Female candidate participants shared the idea that female candidates need preparation, and education on social, political, and legal issues and aspects, in addition to training on campaigning skills. They also share with female appointees and voters' emphasis that female candidates need family support, specifically from male relatives because this would provide social approval as a result of male relatives' approving a new role for women that is not traditional.

Regarding appointing women for high and leadership positions as ministers and State Council members, female appointees and voters said that although the mechanism of nomination is not known for the public, qualifications, and efficiency should be the standards of nomination, and that should be applied equally to female and male nominees. However, they think that women appointed for the State Council and the cabinet are usually qualified, despite the small number of women appointees compared to males. However, they agree that appointing women for the State Council and cabinet does not encounter any challenges when compared to female candidates' challenges in the elections. The female candidate participants agree completely with this point of view; however, the disagreement lays on the concept of equality.

All female participants argued about whether the number of female appointees should be equal to males' number. Most of the participants preferred to shift the

discussion to qualifications and competence rather than equality, as they considered the concept of gender equality problematic and sensitive politically and socially. Nevertheless, several participants from both sides announced with a clear and strong tune that women appointees should be equal to men appointees, simply because they represent half of the population and are also qualified and competent like men. However, all participants believe that women deserve better representation in government and State Council, and even those who thought that the current number is adequate mentioned that more women would be better for policy making and development in the country.

A notable difference is evident in views between female participants who experienced public positions and ran elections and the voters who never experienced running in the elections. Views also varied between females who held high positions in the government and females who did not. For example, Lujaina, the female state member and the two-term representative in A'Shura council, displayed views and perspectives closer to the female candidates' views because she shared the election experience and went through all the challenges and dynamics of the campaigns. She also had a stronger position regarding gender equality in the State Council and government, in addition to fair representation in the elected councils. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that Lujaina could be described as a privileged female candidate because of her wealth and her well known business family, who had the resources to run her campaign successfully. This, however, should not diminish the significance of the experience and a new perspective as an outcome of this experience which led her to develop a standpoint of women that seek equality, and fair and good representation.

While the female voter participants blamed female candidates for lack of community service and presence among people, female candidates blamed female

voters for not supporting them and mentioned the weak women's position from backing women's advancement in politics. This situation showed a lack of dialogue between women in Oman, whether as individuals or groups. It also signals fragmentation among women and failure in forming a unified agenda nationally. However, female candidates nor female voters should be blamed entirely for this confusing status because there are several factors contributing to reinforcing this status. For instance, the absence of women's movements and women's rights organizations stabilizes women's status. Furthermore, the legal framework of NGOs, which bans political associations in Oman, applies many restrictions on civil voice, public liberties, and human rights groups, which make people, especially women, hesitant and afraid to engage in politics.

On the contrary, the existing NGOs, or the 61 Oman Women's Associations, are representing state feminism more than serving women's needs. They are the most effective organizations because they function as the most important means through which the government engages in its state feminism; "State feminism is used in much of the literature to refer to the process by which the state takes on women's interests" (Krause, 2009, p. 21). The main criticism of OWA's programs is that they serve as part of a broader state building/ Ministry of Social development plan. As Sabagh described, the women's organization in the Arab states where women were instruments and their liberation and advancement "was part of a larger project of reinforcing control within a series of states that continued to be dominated by patriarchal structures" (2005, p. 57). She explains that the patriarchal order extends throughout the civil society and is a barrier to civil society becoming a significant force for social change and women's organizations have been criticized for adopting patron-client patterns of leadership, hence matching the patriarchal patterns found in their societies at large. Women's organizations in Oman cannot be credited for benefiting women; however, because they

represent state feminism, they contributed with a shy portion in widening the range of women's participation in public life. Nevertheless, the state would continuously remind women that all rights, modernization, and the liberation they enjoy is credited to the state will. Although what the state claims is a matter of fact, Oman should adapt, for the advancement of women, a national policy that is gender sensitive.

Studies like March, Smyt, & Mukhopadhy (1999) argued that in order to understand how social difference and inequalities, such as in roles, responsibilities, and power, are produced, reinforced, and reproduced through institutions, women must look beyond the official ideology of neutrality, and examine the rules and practices of institutions to expose their values and aims. Kabeer (1994) stated that institutions represent relations of authority and control, and there are few egalitarian institutions; however, who holds the power decides on whose interests are served. She explained that the unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities, in addition to the official and unofficial rules, safeguard the reality that some institutional actors have authority over others. Thus, these individuals would promote practices which embed their privileged position, and they are expected to resist change. Kabeer (1994) specified five different types of policies concerning gender advancement: 1) Gender-blind policies which tend to exclude women, 2) Gender-aware policies which acknowledge that women are development actors like men and that the nature of women's involvement is determined by gender relations which make women's involvement different, and unequal, and that therefore women may have different interests, and priorities which may conflict with men's interests. Oman adopted this kind of policy, which considers women partners in development; however, the state does not recognize this partner as equal because the interests of men are still served more than women's concerns. 3) Gender-neutral policies, the goal of which is to overcome biases in development

interventions to safeguard interventions that benefit men and women effectively and meet their gender needs. 4) Gender-specific policies which respond to the practical gender needs of women or men. 5) Gender-redistributive policies which aim to change the existing distributions of power and resources to establish a more balanced relationship between women and men based on strategic gender interests. This kind of policy should be the strategic goal for Omani women; however, recognizing the political, legal, social, and other institutional factors, they should start building an alliance within the existing institutions and gathering support and understanding to their interests, needs, and priorities. While they have to bear in mind that despite the economic change of Oman since the discovery of oil, cultural change has followed much more slowly, and such change will require time because Omani culture represents “a combination of extremes: authoritarian leadership styles within hierarchical settings and with “out groups,” and democratic group consensus making with the “in-groups of tribe and family” (Common, 2011, p. 221).

In the Omani context, it is noteworthy that the country is a rentier state and rentierism resulted in a collective rentier mentality which has its impact on the politics and economics of Oman society. Ayubi (1999, p. 227) stated that the rentier economy model in the Gulf states has produced a ‘rentier society’. Therefore, a kind of ‘rentier mentality’ may be anticipated to prevail in such a society. Also, Ayubi (1999) mentioned that a rentier-based ‘ruling bargain’ is forged between the elite state actors and the technocrats of the new middle class. Sabagh (2005) said that rentierism among the citizens in the Gulf is a notable factor of state governmentality, and Krause (2009) emphasized that rentierism has had a “considerable influence” on the politics and economics of the Gulf societies. Rentierism also has a significant influence on citizens’ liberties and political rights, because the bargain between the citizens and the states was

benefits, services and incentives without income tax, in exchange for loyalty to the ruling classes and their governments and compromising political and civil rights. This situation made citizens expect changes to happen in a top-bottom fashion, where the state/government decides the next step for its citizens. This situation applies to women's issues and women's advancement in politics. Omani women enjoy the rights they enjoy because the government decided to grant them without demands. Women in Oman are still torn between waiting for more rights at a convenient time for the government or demanding and asking for equal and fair status to men. It is noteworthy that this dynamic of rentierism in the Gulf is changing, and it has been changing since the Arab Spring era and people's realizations are growing in Oman and other Gulf states regarding full citizenship rights and participation in politics and public affairs. However, with the institutional and political limitations in place, the constraints remain a major obstacle to women's larger political participation in Oman.

Noteworthy is that the status of political rights and civil liberties, in addition to democracy trends, in the Gulf countries, represent a major factor which impacts women's political participation regardless of the marginal differences in the freedom's measures and political space. According to Freedom House report issued in 2020¹²⁴, both male and female citizens throughout the Gulf lack the power to change their government democratically and have only limited rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of speech. The report, Freedom in the World, which assesses the global status of political rights and civil liberties annually, states that none of the Gulf countries earn the rating of "Free," and none qualify as electoral democracies. All countries ranked under "not Free" except Kuwait, which ranked as "Partly Free." While All six countries

¹²⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

ranked "Not Free" in the Internet Freedom report of 2020 issued by Freedom house as well¹²⁵.

The Polity IV project¹²⁶, which measured regime trends from 1945 to 2013, described Oman and all other Gulf states as autocracies. The six states scored between -10 and -6 in the period of study. Restricted political environment and limited civil liberties space constrain the region's citizens from practicing their full political rights and demanding more extensive participation. This situation affected women's engagement because the limited and restricted political environment does not enable women to discuss and confront social, institutional factors without fear of government officials or from any other state and non-state actors.

Although the Freedom House report described Kuwait as "Partly Free" while the rest of the Gulf countries "Not Free", this margin of freedom was not reflected in the result of the parliamentarian elections in December 2020. The Kuwait election's result confirmed that women did not win any seats in the parliament (Majlis Al'umma).¹²⁷ In this election, 29 female candidates participated aiming to win some of the 50 seats of Kuwait parliament.

This result brings, again, the question of women's under-representation in Kuwait and the Gulf to the surface of the public discussions. Comparing this result to Oman's election of October 2019, where 2 of the 40 female candidates won seats in Majlis A'Shura, put in question the significance of the freedom margin that Kuwait enjoys and gained on the Freedom Index if women could not benefit from the relative free media and the political experience they expanded while fighting to gain their political rights

¹²⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>

¹²⁶ <https://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>

¹²⁷ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kuwait-election-women-representation-candidates-vote>

before 2005. Omani women did not struggle or fight, like the Kuwaiti, to gain the right to vote and run. However, this long struggle and fight did not end by granting women in Kuwait the right to vote and run. In the term of Oman's A'Shura council (2016-2019), only one female represented women, which was the case of Kuwait Majlis Al'umma, where only one female represented women in the parliament term ended after the elections of December 2020. However, in Majlis A'Shura term started in 2020 Oman looks more promising with two female representatives than the Kuwaiti Majlis Al'umma where women's representation is absent.

According to Kuwaiti and Omani female politicians¹²⁸, Female candidates in both countries need women's association backing and financial support to run their election campaigns successfully. They said that civil society organizations such as women associations could be the right entities to support women candidates financially and logistically. Kuwaiti and Omani female politicians agreed that financing and managing election campaigns are a weakness among women candidates. They also emphasize that women have limited access to the public sphere and the media either because of social or financial issues. Salwa Aljassar, the former Kuwaiti MP (Personal communication, Dec 12, 2017), stressed that establishing a mechanism to finance women's campaigns is vital and should be the responsibility of women associations. She suggested a special fund for women under the supervision of women associations in Kuwait. Those women should be politically fit and committed. From their side, Omani politicians mentioned the same mechanism to support women candidates. Shukur Alghammar, the former

¹²⁸ I interviewed in December 2017 for unpublished paper on the "Economic barriers to female representation in the GCC: The cases of Kuwait and Oman". This part included here highlights some of findings that was not included in the mentioned paper, although it was among the findings of the interviews I conducted.

A'Shura representative (personal communication, Dec 2017), said that providing support and promoting women candidates is the role of women associations. They should provide women with training and necessary education to qualify female candidates for elections and political roles. She also added that this training would prepare female candidates for ideal performance in the parliament.

Although women politicians from both countries agree that financial support is vital, they firmly believe that female candidates' personality, qualifications, and attachments to people's problems and society are more important for the voters.

Safa Al'hashim, the former Kuwaiti MP¹²⁹(Personal communication, Dec2017) highlighted that a female candidate should be noticeably clear about citizens' issues and social problems and challenges facing their daily lives. She stated that the limited financial support would not stop her from running and winning when voters trust a female candidate. Ma'suma Al'mubark, the former Kuwaiti MP (Personal communication, Dec 2017), also said, finance is essential, but the mentality of candidates and voters is equally important, and they make the difference in the elections. Adding new factors that challenge female candidates, Rehab Buresli, a former Kuwaiti candidate (Personal communication, Dec 2017), stated that society's culture and political loyalties to affiliations and groups are the most important. She said that if a female candidate gets the support of these groups, she will have her way paved to the parliament.

The experience of Oman's Rahma Alghuifili , a sitting member of the municipal council, proves what Kuwaiti and Omani politicians said. Rahma (Personal communication, Dec 2017) mentioned that she did not depend on finance to convince

¹²⁹ Safa Al'hashim was a sitting member of the Kuwaiti Parliament when she was interviewed.

people about her candidacy. Although some people expected her to pay for them in return for their support, she could convince them that her qualifications and knowledge of people's problems are more critical and useful for society and political practices.

Although Omani women started practicing their political rights (1994) before Kuwaitis (2005), their political awareness and experience seem less advanced than the Kuwaiti women regarding managing elections campaigns and political loyalties and discourse. Nevertheless, the findings of these interviews showed few differences between Kuwaiti and Omani politicians. For example, Kuwaiti politicians criticized candidates who receive funds from various political and religious groups, and they demanded transparency and an official mechanism to monitor the source of finance that some candidates get.

On the other side, some Omani politicians mentioned the private sector as the primary support source, other than family, providing funds to candidates. Omani candidates do not consider the private sector's interference in the elections a sensitive issue that should be monitored and limited. Besides, it seems that the Omani government knows about such practices and did not react to them. However, the private sector fund is not yet, standard and some of the candidates do not know that other candidates seeking it, which means that the private sector provided such fund only for those who are asking to show social support and to leave a good impression with the customers/voters.

The second difference between Omani and Kuwaiti women politicians is the election campaign's management. Generally, the findings showed that Kuwaitis are more aware of the importance of running a successful campaign and a clear and specific elections agenda, while the Omanis invest more in the candidate's capacity. Omani politicians think that personal qualifications and capacities are the most important factor in winning the elections, despite mentioning the financial support's significance.

These differences between Omani and Kuwaiti politicians can be explained by Kuwaitis' collective political experience, which is more advanced and freer than the Omani experience. Women politicians in Kuwait got involved in public life for a long time before participating in the elections, while most Omanis female politicians started their political activities during elections time or earlier. However, the elections in Oman 2019, and Kuwait 2020, left females politicians and women generally in both countries at the status quo, which represents the main challenging factor on the ground of political struggle¹³⁰.

Summary

Although the aim of this chapter is exploring female candidates' views concerning the impact of laws and the state positions from women's political participation, it also sought generating knowledge that produces stronger objectivity. Standpoint theory emphasizes that "knowledge is supposed to be based on experiences and so different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environment" (Harding, 2004, p. 7). The different experiences of the female candidate participants were challenging and interlocking with several structural and institutional factors, such as the social and cultural factors like gender, gender roles, gender relation, and gender power relations. Furthermore, legal factors deprive women from enjoying full citizenship rights equally to men. Also, there are the political factors that favor men over women such as in the appointments for high government's positions and for the State Council. In addition to legal and political limitation imposed on the freedom of association and assembly, all these factors work together in excluding women from the public life and leadership, and make women's lives complicated, and as feminist

¹³⁰ A comprehensive comparative study on the female's challenges in the gulf states would be of great benefit.

researchers, "our goal is to clarify that world" (Hekman, 2004, p. 271).

Despite the fact that the female candidate participants come from different regions in Oman and from different social backgrounds which allowed different locations to produce knowledge, they also shared several influences that made them understand issues similarly, especially regarding women rights, gender equality and political rights. These influences are related to school and higher education and the media that builds a unified discourse toward women and their role in the society and how they should serve their country. This discourse is supported by religious and social values that stress that the private and domestic sphere is the right place for a woman to protect and serve her family; however, these values also stress the importance of obeying the ruling elite and the family male members. The ideal Muslim woman should understand that her role is determined, and she must follow, otherwise she will face hardship because "social " unequal" relations and arrangements became naturalized in such a way that the experience of the dominant groups became the " common sense" (Selgas, 2004, p. 299).

In this chapter the female candidate participants discussed the major issues that prevent women from achieving significant representation in the elected councils and in the government and the State Council. They divided these obstacles into groups: the first is related to society through culture and social values and gender roles, and the second is related to the state and the states' policies, such as laws and appointments for high positions. Regarding the challenges related to the society, the participants agreed that society follows the dominant groups/tribes' mentality which assigned leadership and representation for men; however, the participant did not agree that social values and culture push to exclude women from political participation. All agreed that loyalty to the tribe and money influence are the factors that might push women out of the

competition. However, despite this, they also understand that these two factors affect male candidates as well and do not target only female candidates. Several female candidates believe that Omani society is open to women's political participation, and they think that gender and gender roles are just electoral cards played by men to exclude women from the competition. Other female candidates mentioned the small number of female candidates is the main problem because men ran extremely large numbers, and the winners represent the percentage of the total number of the candidates. They mentioned that in A'Shura election of 2019 there were 40 female candidates and 637 male candidates, thus having 2 female winners and 84 male winners is expected. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that establishing a quota system would help increase women's participation and therefore their representation in the elected councils. They also mentioned that creating an enabling environment that aims for women's political empowerment would contribute significantly to that direction. However, they stressed the vital role of OWAs in creating such an environment. While civil society in Oman is restricted, this leaves the issue in the hand of the government and the state's policies.

The female candidate disagreement regarding the impact of the social values and culture on the society elites and the rest of the people, reflects "women's perceptions of reality are distorted both by male-dominant ideology and by the male-dominated structure of everyday life" (Jaggar, 2004, p. 57). Despite their unique location as "outsider within" or "outsider insiders," which allows them to see different angles of the society, they are still distorted between what they think are their own values and evaluation of self and others. They unconsciously adapt the dominant culture as of their own even when they can see that this culture does not treat them fairly and

equally.¹³¹ Only when women are liberated from domination they will have access to the resources necessary to construct a systematic and completely comprehensive view of the world from the standpoint of women (Jaggar, 2004).

While describing female candidates' views regarding society and the domination as distorted, it is possible to describe their views regarding laws and state policies as careful. Although several participants voiced that women deserve equal rights in representation and appointment, most preferred to highlight the state/government efforts to boost women's status and advance their political participation. Furthermore, few participants thought that the state did all that is possible to empower women and that women need to work harder to prove that they deserve the trust of the government. Although most of the participants talked about qualifications and competence as the main standard to appoint men and women, they did not discuss that the government did not do all that is possible to achieve equality and fairness for women, whether that be legally or politically. Despite full agreement among participants about the positive impact of women's inclusion in the state making policies, they argued about the percentage of women's representation in the government and the State Council.

Collins writes "developing political theory for women involves confronting a different and more complex set of issues than that facing race theories or class-based theories because women's inequality is structured differently" (2004, p. 251). Additionally, it is a combination of various oppression factors which might be the reason that makes participants' views towards society and states' policies either distorted or confused and careful. Oman's female candidates know that they need an

¹³¹ In chapter 6 is dedicated to female candidates' final perspective on self, people, and society which uncovers a better and deeper understanding of the society culture and behavior.

environment that empowers and supports, if not equal, fair representation; however, they do not know how to create this environment while the civil society is restrained, the women's movement is absent, and state policies are not gender sensitive.

The next chapter discusses and analyzes the female candidate participants' understanding of their election experiences and their new perspectives concerning society, culture, and state policies related to women's political, legal, and social status. The goal of chapter 6 is to discover and understand the female candidate participants' final standpoints through investigating their description of their experience in the elections and how they explained the factors that made them, individually, win or lose the election.

CHAPTER 6: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE, PERSPECTIVE, AND STANDPOINT

The aim of this chapter is to examine whether the election experiences has changed the female candidates' views and understanding of themselves, their society, and political dynamics in Oman. This chapter also seeks to uncover the participants' closing thoughts, attitude, and understanding toward the election experience and how it impacted their thinking and plans for political engagement. This chapter also explores whether these new perspectives could lead to a standpoint for women, a standpoint that was a product of personal and political change.

As Harding explained, starting research on women's lives "will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (2004, p. 128). Smith writes, "the only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within," therefore women can "never stand outside" (2004, p. 28). Making women's direct experience of the everyday world, or a special experience like running in the elections, the primary basis of their knowledge, would lead to investigating their directly experienced world as a problem. This in turn leads to "a mode of discovering or rediscovering the society from within" and women bring the world into their grasp in making it observable and in understanding how it works (Smith, 2004, p. 29).

Most of the female candidates revealed intimate statements. Some participants were conservative in revealing clear subjective thoughts and feelings about the impact of the election on their personal lives. However, the overall outcome was that the experience was worth trying and it provided the participants with new perspectives, despite the struggle and the pain some of them felt. One main observation is that the participants have raised new and different awareness based on experience, close

connections, and communications with voters, society's culture, and state policies. This awareness initiated a different kind of consciousness about self, other people in the society, and the state's policies on issues concerning women. The consciousness they feel changed their thinking and raised new questions about women's status socially and politically, the extent of appreciation for their role in the family and workplaces, and their status as citizens.

A significant contribution in this chapter is the similar final perspective attained by participants regarding the importance of running for the elections and representing people, despite the differences in generation, experiences, and time. For instance, this occurred with Zahra, who ran in 2019 and failed, and Tayba, who ran twice, in 1994 and 1997, and won. Zahra doubted that society deserved all the sacrifices she made by neglecting her children and her health for the sake of people who did not appreciate her dedication and did not vote for her (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Tayba doubted the significance of a representative's role, a role she played for six years because Majlis A'Shura has significantly limited powers (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Although both advised other women to run and politically participate, they think that they cannot repeat this experience, which indicated a substantial inner-change.

In this chapter the participants discuss their experiences, address their views regarding society and people, and present their advice for future female candidates. They also explained how the experience of elections changed them and led them to shape new perspectives and, for some, a new self.

Female Candidates Reflect on their Election Experiences

Although most participants did not win the elections, all participants said that it was enriching. However, they could not hide disappointment and dismiss the bitterness

they felt in such a unique experience. The depth of bitterness and disappointment differs depending on the effort, time, and hope given for the experience. Those who felt extremely disappointed gave all they could, and those who felt less disappointed, said that they should have done things differently. They developed self-criticism while they were aware of other challenges. The participants' evaluation of their experiences varied and can be sorted into three groups. First, there are those who lost the elections and remained positive and thought that the experience was useful and instructional. Second, there are those who lost and became disappointed. Within this category, there were two sub-types of participants: those who kept positive feeling towards the elections and the experience, and those who lost and felt bitterness with negative feelings towards the experience. In addition to these categories, there was a third category which included winners and the representatives' experiences that presented different and insightful perspectives.

Rahma is a perfect example of the first category; she lost but remained positive and motivated. Rahma ran twice for A'Shura council but did not win in either attempt. However, she said that she considers her experiences running in two elections successful, regardless of the result. Rahma's experience made her more convinced that there is no difference between men and women in serving their country and society, and women can perform and deliver at all levels and areas (Rahma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Although Rahma thinks that she lost both elections because of her honesty, not making false promises, and the lack of people's trust in a female candidate, she believes that did not reflect traditional views of women. She said that people, men and women, have the right to vote for the candidate they think is good and can represent the people rightfully.

Maryam positively described her experience and said that running in the

election in 2011 was a fundamental step in her southern district, where few women ran in the entire governorate. She considered getting the fifth place by the end of the elections an achievement, because it is hard for a woman in a tribal, male-dominated society to advance that far in the winners list (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020).

Nasra also thinks that her experience in the elections was rich and positive regardless of the result (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She said she was positive regarding women's ability to win, despite the traditional values, because women already took fundamental steps towards convincing society that they are capable of representing people. She said that women should increase their presence in their communities and prepare ahead of time, and, when the elections are due, they should practice good management skills in campaigns.

Badriya's experience made her learn skills she did not have before the elections, such as communication and public speaking skills, and the ability to express her opinions and ideas (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). Despite thinking tribal and familial affiliations control voters, she believes that youth and educated people will change course toward selecting the right candidates. She understands that society at large needs to learn more about women's roles and qualifications to elect them as representatives. However, in addition to this, she thinks that people should be educated about A'Shura council duties and powers. Badriya described her experience in running in the elections in 2019 as "enriching."

Despite failed expectations and little disappointment when she did not win the A'Shura election in 2015, Fatima H. said that her experience was "very beautiful, and very sweet" (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). She said that it was a challenge, and she likes to be challenged. However, she lost the election, and it

was “disappointing” even though she knew that she would not have won.

With little excitement, Muna said that her experience was “good,” because she ran to encourage women in her district and other districts to challenge and engage in political and social issues. She emphasized that women’s participation is incredibly low, and “we need more courageous women to continue” (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020).

Among these participants who lost but remained positive, three participants were significantly positive and motivated and had a plan to run again despite the difficulties they faced. For example, Mahfūza said, “It was a good experience, I learnt much, and it motivated me more” (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Despite her loss in A’Shura elections of 2019, she remained focused and motivated. She said that this experience pushed her to go out and be with people more often and share with them ideas and opinions about common interests and issues. Mahfūza mentioned that by doing this she stays close to the people, “and when I think about running again, this could pave the way for me.”

Samīra said that her experience was enriching. She knew her shortcomings and weakness in managing her election’s campaign and failing in understanding individuals’ characteristics and people’s collective thinking concerning female’s candidacy for A’Shura (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Samīra mentioned that she was not fully aware about the elections and winning requirements, such as the financial resources and other moral aspects. She said,

“The experience honed a lot of my potential and allowed me to know many educated people who are enthusiastic about women’s political participation. I knew my status in the district; I was the only female candidate among 24 candidates, most of them known sheikhs and dignitaries in my district, I got the fifth place in the race and this motivated me significantly, I understood that I have reached a place in people’s minds and that made me think positive.”
Samīra concluded that her experience was wonderful regardless of winning or losing;

“this experience built for me a large grassroots base. Also, people respect me as a woman and appreciate my two experiences in running in the elections.”

Khalsa ran in three A’Shura elections and described the last election as the most difficult experience (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said, “I thought the seventh term would be the most difficult because it was my first election, yet the ninth was the challenging one because the competition was more severe and harsher.” Khalsa explained that the hardship she encountered was not managing the election campaign, it was the use of the electronic voting machines on election day.

Despite the result, Samīra developed a new self-definition that is positive and empowering because she felt appreciated and respected as a female and a candidate (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019). This statement was only expressed by her, whereas most female candidate participants, except winners, had a negative feeling, despite describing the experience as good and enriching. Comparing the assessment of Samīra’s and Khalsa’s experiences, both felt the respect and the appreciation of the people. However, while Samīra was more optimistic about winning in the future, Khalsa wondered about the result that she could not explain because of the confidence she had in her supporters (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She created her own thoughts about the competition and the mechanism of voting, and while she did not arrive at a concrete idea, she kept asking questions. Hartsock said that “developing an independent sense of self necessarily calls other areas of our lives into question” (1998, pp. 19-20), and these questions would lead women, who are seeking answers, to understand the nature of social and political systems that work to keep women marginal in politics. However, consciousness and self-redefining would develop a new self, and “independent and strong selves at the personal level must be expressed and reinforced by organization” (Hartsock, 1998, pp. 19-20). Because the

personal change often led to a political change, consciousness, awareness, and realization at the personal level will put other areas of women's lives into question.

The participants in this category were disappointed and bitter, and thought that the elections were unfair. Although H.A said that she had a "beautiful" experience during the elections despite hardship she encountered, she could not hide her bitterness because of her discovery that money and materialism are the most important element in the elections. The most important skill H.A gained from the election experience was knowing people well, and she stated that a candidate should have power and influence because people will follow power (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Salema, like most female candidates, said that knowing people closely was the major element of the election experience. However, for Salema and other female candidates this knowledge was not pleasant (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). On the contrary, they discovered a side that they never saw or knew before the elections. Salema said that people who knew her voted for her, and other people, who just heard about her and did not know her personally, did not vote for her because they chose money over qualifications. Salema was grateful for her friends and family because they supported her and for her campaign's team by volunteering to help her during the election period. She said, "I did not spend a lot of money on my campaign because I had selfless individuals who dedicated their time and effort to support and back me." However, she thought that elections are "unfair" because winning is not for the best candidates.

The election experience, also, led Basma to conclude that it was "unfair" (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She said, "Although in the beginning when I decided to run I did not care much about winning, my goal was to design and deliver a national message through a perfect campaign in the social media

and on the ground. I felt exceptionally disappointed and frustrated after the announcement of the results.” Basma said that she lived this experience with her mind, heart, and time, and while campaigning, she felt the support of people and wanted to win for them and for her. She wanted to achieve what she promoted and keep people motivated. Basma explained her feeling of unfairness. She thinks she was not given equal opportunities in campaigning, talking, and meeting voters freely. She thinks it was unfair that people like her who have a strong feeling for change and spent time educating people about their rights and duties under the Basic Law of Oman (constitution), do not have chances to compete freely, and consequently, to win. Basma also mentioned that she learned that courageous candidates who speak their minds freely are not preferred, and they are under fire all the time. Similarly, Salema, H.A., Zahra, and S.H. stressed this notion in different ways. They said that it was unfair and people who are honest and loyal to people and society do not have equal chances in comparison to those who pay money and depend on their tribal name and the support of influential personalities (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020; Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019; S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019; Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). These participants as one group presented insight into how power works in communities, and they proved as Wylie said “the oppressed may have an intimate knowledge of local power” (2004, p.348), and understood that the world was organized for them even before their involvement.

Another example of participants in this category was Amīra, who thinks that she had a “good” experience, yet she was bitter that she could not achieve a “good” result (Amīra, personal communication, January 4, 2020). Amīra was deeply disappointed that people did not show support, nor empathy, with her as the first female

who dared to run in her district. With more details, S.H. talked about her experience, saying “my evaluation takes two directions: the first is that the election experience was “very beautiful and very useful” regardless of my three-time failure in winning, which made it also bitter and disappointing and that was the second direction.” From the positive side, S.H. gained new experience in facing the people; “for example, giving a speech to more than 100 people with confidence and fluency, sometimes I did not prepare for the talking points, but I was not afraid or worried to speak my mind and express my opinions” (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019).

S.H. also attended a workshop on campaign management and trained on how to gain voters’ trust (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said, “I visited most of the houses in my district and I met all kinds of people, men and women, old and young. I made many friends; however, unfortunately, I did not win because of many reasons. One of them was that my family and tribe abandoned me and did not support me. Their reason was ‘our traditions and values.’” S.H. was extremely disappointed after the third elections for A’Shura she lost in 2019. After her previous attempts in the A’Shura elections in 2015 and the Municipal in 2016, she thought that she could do it again for the third time despite all odds. Nevertheless, the third loss was hard, she said, and affected her essence. Sometimes, S.H blames herself because she did not prepare well for the competition, and she was not strategic in her moves in approaching voters.

From the personal to a broader political position, Aziza said that her experience in the elections indicated that women’s status did not evolve, and women’s real participation did not yet happen (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Aziza emphasized that the expectations from the elections did not occur as well. She believes that without a women’s union or coalition, or some sort of women’s movement

focusing on supporting women's political participation, women cannot increase their representation. Nor can they change society's perception regarding women.

Although Aziza's proposal reflects a deep understanding of women's status in Oman and her suggestion to create a common ground and a platform to boost women's political participation is the right direction, the role of Arab women's movement in supporting candidates has not been as successful as its role in bringing attention to women's issues in general. This could be linked to several factors such as legislation that prohibits all NGOs from dealing with political issues, or to the patriarchal structures such as tribalism or political families, where women's support for candidates is unconsciously directed towards the family candidate (Sabagh, 2005). Establishing free and active civil society in Oman is a significant element, not only to create a women's movement but also for the formation of human rights and political organizations that could preserve and advance the democratization process that started with the establishment of Majlis A'Shura and the election. However, in the Gulf region, "through pacts and laws, control is exercised" (Krause, 2009, p. 19). There are strict laws that regulate self-organizing groups, limiting their methods and ability to engage in interests or debate social issues that may conflict with the interests of the leaders (Krause, 2009, p. 19).

Oman Women's Associations (OWAs), located in all districts of the country, uphold the idea that there is no need to empower women in relation to men or religion. Half of the female candidate participants are either heads or members of some of these associations. Women could convey this message without realization that they are working against women's empowerment. It should be clear that many women, most I suggest, believe that it is their job to keep women obeying and following right path of Islam and society's values. Discussing women's empowerment could only mean

making women prepared and aware of issues that are approved by political and social leaders, while women's liberalization could not be a discussion topic in these women's associations. Therefore, the purpose of these associations is "building a national identity and filling women's time with concerns other than politics and their lack of rights" (Krause, 2009, p. 23). Their role leads in fact to disempowering women by not informing, educating, and raising awareness regarding women's rights and legal inequality and political challenges. Moreover, through OWAs there are some women who do their utmost to defend and protect the state interests because their purpose is to "secure their positions of advantage within the social hierarchy" (Krause, 2009, p. 33). That is the reason which makes this disempowerment unequal itself because it will be tailored according to women's classes and groups.

Zahra, also, said that the election experience left her bitter and disappointed because of the undesirable and unexpected vote count (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said that the number she counted as confirmed votes would have qualified her for winning; however, the electronic voting devices changed the scene.

Aisha described her experience as "weak" and blames only herself for such experience (Aisha, personal communication, January 5, 2020). She said that not taking the candidacy seriously enough, and not preparing for it well, was her fault. She realized how challenging the competition was only during the campaigning period. She saw other candidates prepared and ready to compete while she was solely struggling to convince people to support her. Asma described her experience in the elections as "negative" with "little positivity" (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). She said that she became more known to people, and although she was already known through her community work, people now "appreciate me more as a candidate."

Shakera said that the election experience taught her how to hold up and keep

going despite the hardship she encountered (Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that she was criticized considerably for her weak campaign and education degree, because when she ran in the election in 2015, she had not finished her university degree. This experience made her finish her degree and start studying for a Master's. The experience Shakera went through during the election drove her to see herself through the eyes of others, and she realized as a candidate she was not perceived by people as she saw herself. This ultimately led her to a personal change. She saw that lacking a higher education certificate made her less confident and made voters think that she was not qualified to represent them. She developed a new understanding of herself and others.

Reflecting on major issues regarding participants' feeling towards the elections, it was noticeable that the doubt Zahra carried about the election's result (despite not being able to prove otherwise), the urgent need of courageous women that Muna expressed, and the regret which Aisha's heart was filled with, displayed the rise of consciousness inside the female candidates at all levels -- personal, social, and political. They faced challenges and hardships, uncovered people's intentions and attitudes, and encountered fierce competition. They constantly confronted new situations in which they acted out of their "changed awareness of the world and experience the changed reactions of others" (Hartsock, 1998, p. 20). Zahra's lost trust in the electoral system, Muna's yearning to collect women's achievements, and Aisha tackling self-blame for not doing what was necessary to win, are actions and thoughts which indicate the changed awareness about the political environment that women try to coexist with, its reality, and the changing reactions of others.

The category of winning and representation experiences presented a different perspective. Nevertheless, it did not dismiss the hardship female candidates face in the

elections. Two female candidates won the A'Shura election of 2019, Tahera and Fadīla, who talked about their experiences from different locations to those who lost. Tahera, the winner in A'Shura elections in 2019, said that she managed to win in the competition because she had the right tools and a successful election campaign that navigated the race lucratively. Tahera mentioned that each experience is different; the first attempt is exploring, whereas the second is addition and expertise (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said, “maturity, experience, deep thinking, and new skills are all tools a person should use to enhance their own work; that is what I learnt from the election experience.”

Understandably the views of a winner would be significantly different. Tahera emphasized the features of a successful campaign leading to winning instead of focusing on the challenges and the hardship she faced (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She also stated that culture and social values encourage women to engage politically, and she was convinced after she ran, despite having different views before, that society is open to women's political participation and leadership. Tahera dismissed totally that being a female, gender roles, and social views concerning women and political leadership have an impact on women's candidacy or women's representation. She thinks that winning and losing depend on how well the election campaign was managed. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there was one major factor which helped Tahera in winning in Matrah. The primary election held in the district to determine the strongest candidate for her tribe and district gave her a significant advantage toward winning in the general election.

Underscoring the main value of the election, Fadīla said, “My experience in the elections was successful; however, it needed time and huge effort” (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). Fadīla ran for A'Shura three times before she won in

2019. She announced that believing that the A'Shura system is a need, and a strong pillar for building the future, in Oman motivated her in all three elections. She indicated that expanding people's political participation makes society's goals clear and specific. She stressed that she wanted to be part of this process of studying resolving mechanisms, suggesting plans and laws, and achieving national strategies.

The insight of representation experience provides another new and different perspective because of the unique locations of those who were female candidates, who spent terms in the elected councils. Three participants evaluated their experiences in representing people; two were encouraged to take a bigger step in their political career, and the third was disappointed and questioned the value of the experience. Sana is a second term representative at the Municipal council of Al'amerat, and she said her experience was enriching and gave her the motivation to run for A'Shura in 2019 (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). However, she did not win, and despite that she feels that her experience in the Municipal council was successful and inspired her to go one step further. Fatima S. also emphasized that her successful experience in the Municipal council in Qurayat encouraged her to try and run for A'Shura council (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). She also did not win; however, she is planning to run again for the next Municipal council elections.

Tayba, who was mentioned in the introduction of the chapter, said that her experience in the elections was rich and fertile because she was close to people and felt the support and respect they paid her. She enjoyed being popular and appreciated, not only in her district, which she represented twice from 1994-2000, but in the entire country. She was outspoken and sided with people's rights, talking on their behalf and advocating for the public interest and common good. However, she felt disappointed while serving in A'Shura council because of the limited powers granted to

representatives. Tayba said, “there were times I felt I could not continue because I was frustrated about not achieving tangible results from the government side. The cabinet ministers ignored our recommendations because they knew that we did not have the power to hold the government members accountable” (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

Tayba said that working hard, regardless of time and family commitment, without the expected result was exhausting and damaging. She doubted the purpose of being a representative. When people asked her why she did not run again, she said it was because of the limited powers of A’Shura. She added, “we studied many of the existing laws and presented our suggestions and recommendations to the government, but they did not take any of our proposals, especially those laws related to women’s issues such as civil service law regarding maternity leave. Women in Oman used to have two months leave, we recommended that women should have longer leave between 3 to 5 months; however, we were surprised that the law was passed with 45 days only instead of extending it to 3 to 5 months. Who took that decision? Men in the government who did not know much about women and children, they did not have the right to take such unjust decision without consulting female representatives.” Tayba gave another example that frustrated her and the other female representative, Shukūr Alghamari, and that was a study they conducted about the importance of having a daycare facility in the workplaces. She said, “we suggested that if the government was keen in increasing women’s employees’ productivity, creating a suitable environment would help. We proposed a step-by-step project and explained the added value to it in hiring young females which would have contributed to solving unemployment among youth. However, as usual, the government did not respond to our proposal” (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020).

Tayba's experience as a representative is proof of the problematic situation that both male and female candidates confronted during the election. The situation occurs when voters ask what a candidate can do under extremely limited powers of Majlis A'Shura. In women's context, Tayba's experience is an example of a woman's reaction against leadership; in different cultures it was "a reaction to the earlier experience of some women in a male-dominated organization, which later became an issue within the women's movement" (Hartsock, 1998, p. 20). Similar reactions from other female candidates who encountered the same experience of rejection and lack of appreciation in a male-dominated environment could lead to the formation of women's unified agenda and, therefore, to a women's movement in Oman.

About the discussion of power, leadership and legislation lead to the importance of highlighting a few facts about the political system in Oman. The country is a monarchy where all the powers are concentrated in the hands of the Sultan, who is the head of the state, the prime minister, and the commander-in-chief. Political parties and associations are banned in the country. As Harik mentioned, it is common knowledge that Oman, along with other Gulf states, is a traditional monarchy with a consultative council but no "conventional representative institutions and that their people enjoy very limited political rights" (2006, p. 676). The personal rule by the Sultan overrules any broader formal policy inputs from the society to the extent that power is centralized above ministerial level. Moreover, tribalism is integrated into the state, embodied by "clientelistic relationships" with the royal family. Within Oman's political system, there is only a small space for social or political pluralism. While Oman witnessed fast economic growth and adopted some aspects of modernization, cultural elements suggest that the "exercise of leadership is much thicker and ingrained in tradition than the rapid centralization of political power through a phase of rapid economic

modernization” (Common, 2011, pp. 217-218).

Stressing women’s political leadership and participation, it is evident that practicing politics and leadership is in fact a matter of state and society and there is little margin to negotiate. In this regard, men and women are alike. However, the inherited hierarchical system, with the male sheikhs of the tribe on top of it, added a thicker layer of challenges in front of women’s political ambitions. The institutional factors are interconnected, and they work in solidarity to keep the power in the hands of the dominant groups whose culture is also dominating the social space. Nevertheless, Oman started a few steps towards some political openness by establishing three consultative bodies: A’Shura, the State, and the Municipal councils; two are elected, the level of democratization will determine size and the effectiveness of this political openness. When Oman marches towards such transition, this would create a broader opportunity for women’s political participation because emerging democratic societies can be expected to promote widespread political and civil liberties, including the women’s rights (Norris & Inglehart, 2011).

The experiences of Oman female candidate participants showed the process of how these women came to understand how the world came about for them and how it is organized. The process of knowing people better and differently started with confusion. This is because as a female candidate “she lacks the inner principal of her own activity. She does not grasp how it is put together because it is determined elsewhere than where she is” (Smith, 2004, p. 33). She discovered that other candidates pay voters and steal support, and society favors men, and hierarchy became clearer in the social order. She could see the contradictions in behaviors and attitudes towards her as a female who belongs to a certain tribe and a certain social and economic status.

Harding said that “understanding ourselves and the world around us requires

understanding what others think of us and our beliefs and actions, not just what we think of ourselves and them" (2004, p.138). That was the process of realization and consciousness of self and others, which the participants experienced during the election's campaigns when they directly saw or knew what voters/people think about them as women and as candidates. They compared their beliefs and actions to society's reaction to their candidacy. They understood that their relations with people/society, in this particular experience, have new and different terms and rules. They realized that society was forgiving and appreciative for their roles as domestic and private beings, content with roles assigned to them long before their existence. They were confronted by a society that told them that you should be thankful because you are allowed to learn and work. They understood that coming into the public sphere seeking leadership is a new game and it requires different rules.

Only a few participants seemed optimistic regarding peoples' role in the future in supporting the election process and improving its practices. Fadīla sees a greater role for people in the future as she learned from her election campaigns (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She said A'Shura Council currently is an essential need for Oman, because advanced societies are in constant need of social mobility to accommodate international developments. There are social issues that appear on the surface from time to time, such as youth and job opportunities, in addition to issues of culture and information, which require maximizing dialogue with communities.

However, most participants admitted that their views towards people changed in a mostly negative way. Participants' views are divided in three categories: negative, positive, and unchanged. From her location, Amīra said that her views towards people and society changed, she learnt that people are not always telling the truth, because they are polite and they do not wish to tell a woman to her face that they will not vote for

her because she is a woman. Amīra thinks that society under-appreciates women, even after they have proven their success in many fields. She feels that mistrusting women is painful and discouraging (Amīra, personal communication, January 4, 2020). Confirming her changed views concerning people, H.A. said, “of course my views changed, society was harsh to me, I discovered new characteristics of my relatives and friends, that they were greedy and sold their votes instead of voting for me” (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). H.A. also said that other people discriminated against her because she is a woman and poor. People respected her less because they were looking at candidates with prestigious tribal names and money.

H.A. believes that running elections made her see the nature of people and the kinds of motivations that drive them (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). Generally, she thinks that people are neither honest nor frank about their intentions in the elections. This is the reason candidates cannot trust people. H.A. stated that reactions were divided about her, with some encouraging and others opposing her candidacy. H.A. is disappointed because society does not support women: “frankly Oman society does not endorse women, even if they run in larger numbers, acceptance would be little compared to men.” She strongly believes that even if “bribes” and the use of money is abolished, women would not achieve the goal they aspire to. However, she thinks this is a global phenomenon: “it is not only in Oman where people act against women. I know that women around the world are not accepted, they think women are less than men, and they believe men are the foundation of everything.”

Salema explained how her perspective changed about people and society; “I knew larger segments of people and society during the elections, I knew the culture of the society, and how educated people were thinking. Because of my educational background I thought that our society has a higher level of awareness; nonetheless, I

found the society naive, and anyone can trick naive people easily” (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She said during the elections period, she witnessed people changing their minds quickly and easily; “a week before the election they announced their support, and then two days before the voting day, another candidate would come and give them 20-30 Omani Rials and they would go and vote for him.”

Nasra said that her experience in running in the elections changed her views towards people and society: “it uncovered the masks of some people” (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). However, she stressed that not all people were dishonest about their support and promises. Aziza expressed a strong position against a particular segment of voters (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She said, “Yes, I changed. I am frustrated, especially, regarding those who call themselves intellectuals.” Aziza stated, “I see them dishonest in their demands from the candidates and A’Shura council, and other people in the society make it hard on the candidates by asking them issues they cannot fulfil because these issues are not under the representatives’ power; sometimes they demand that candidates change laws they cannot touch - such as state’s foreign policies and sovereign decision taken at the highest level of the government.” Aziza grasped that people do not have enough awareness about A’Shura’s limited powers, and what a representative can and cannot do. Zahra said that her mother was the most supportive person. She called other women and gathered females’ groups to promote her and advocated her agenda. Also, her ex-husband did not hesitate in gathering his family to vote for her. However, “the rest of thousands of people whom I helped and supported did not show me a significant result.” She felt betrayed: “I knew the truth about people’s nature and society’s direction, and my perception about people has changed.” Zahra mentioned that she discovered

members of her team who were dishonest; they promoted other candidates while working for her (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Zahra changed her volunteers' team to start again with trusted members, "after I realized that they were close to me only to get benefits."

The other category kept positive views and positions from people and society because they thought that people did what was possible for them to support and show respect and appreciation even after the results were announced. For example, Basma was completely grateful for people's support and encouragement along her campaign and after the announcement of the result (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She stated that people kept calling and telling her that she did not lose, but rather, the country has lost a person like her with patriotic and loyal intentions. She said, "I knew people and I knew their views towards women's participation, I knew their thinking about female leadership and how they evaluate candidates." Mahfūza said that she met people who were looking for personal gains and benefits and others who understood what public interests are, and they cared about the common good (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She stated that she became closer to the people who supported her pursuit for change, while she stayed remote from people who were seeking self-interests because they eventually disappointed the candidate and lean to the side where their interests are.

After the elections, the feeling of people's appreciation stayed with Samīra who said that she will always carry respect and appreciation for her people and society (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Nothing changed after the elections. Samīra stated, "I believe that my district needs its qualified and efficient sons and daughters to help sustain development,; working on development issues does not require a position nor employment, it requires strong and faithful feeling to serve

community.” Samīra announced what she believed in before and after the elections; however, she mentioned that her only criticism is that the community still clings to the tribe.

Khalsa and Samīra are examples of the two female candidate participants who talked highly about their communities’ support and appreciation for them as females and candidates. Also, Basma said she is grateful for people and the support they showed during the election and after the result. However, Khalsa and Samīra’s experiences are different from Basma who brought her support to the national level, and mostly on the social media platform (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). As for Khalsa and Samīra, they lived all their lives and worked in the same districts, growing up in these communities. Samīra ran twice and Khalsa three times; people knew them well and understood their aspiration and running goals.

The relationship between Khalsa and Samīra and their communities was clear. Both did not win, but their appreciation for their communities was sincere and genuine, without bitterness nor anger. Samīra said that she will always carry respect and appreciation to her district’s people who supported her and stood with her. She mentioned that she has only “good feelings” for them, despite her one reservation that society is generally still biased to the tribe (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

Khalsa said that reassurance came from everywhere; “male’s encouragement is proof that they are convinced regarding women’s political participation, they did not say no to women and that we vote only for men because men should win A’Shura seat. This could happen in other districts in Oman.” However, Khalsa believes that this feeling of male favoritism is less than it was a few years ago, and women are more accepted to take part in political participation. Khalsa mentioned that she comes from

the Interior governorate, which is considered one of the most conservative areas in Oman, yet she noticed that biases against women were much less in the last election in 2019 (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

In this category, participants whose views changed about people and society said they understood people and their conditions and issues that motivate their behavior. Badriya, for example, emphasized that her views and perception of people and society changed after she ran in the election (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She said, "My thinking became deeper and more understanding." She indicated that she knew what people want, believe, and aspire. Badriya said that she understood what issues concerned people, and she knows how to improve these issues when she runs again in the future. Rahma hoped that society realizes the importance of voting according to qualifications and honesty, and that voters should be aware that their voting choice is their future (Rahma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Rahma said that her experience in the elections changed her thinking towards many things, including voters; however, her desire to serve and represent her people did not change. Despite their realization that people's honesty was not at the level they thought, Badriya and Rahma's views concerning people and society are moderate and leaning toward forgiving rather than blaming and regretting the experience. However, that is not a general observation for all participants--the more the participants engaged, the more they felt bitterness. The depth and the level of involvement in the elections, in addition to the preparation, expectation and people's appreciation afterwards, were elements which made the participants' positions from the results vary.

While S.H. admitted that her views substantially changed regarding people, she also discovered a new reality she did not expect in her society (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She said, "my views towards people and society

changed totally.” S.H said,

“I thought, because I come from a wealthy family, that all people live at the same standard I live; however, my thoughts changed when I entered people’s houses and I saw how they live, I saw poverty and need, there were people who could not buy their basic and essential things. Others could not pay the water and power bills, and families could not provide their children’s expenses, and I met children who did not attend school because their parents could not provide the school supplies, and there were houses that needed reconstruction. I saw 8 people living in one room. All these human rights issues left me with sad impression.”

After S.H saw the suffering of people, she decided to open a private office to provide help and support for the needy families.

Muna highlighted that she developed a new perspective regarding society and people because during the election she heard many opinions, thoughts, views, and reactions. (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). She said, “some shocked me, and some backed me and advocated women’s right to run and represent their people in the elected councils, I met people who walked against the stream and stood in my way. I learned how to navigate through all that.” From that, she formed her perspective about people in her society. Fatima H. said that her views and understanding of people had changed; however, her new understanding did not affect her spirits or her outlook about her role in the community and her belief regarding women’s political participation (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020).

The last category of participants said their views did not change because they knew people’s attitude and behavior before the elections. For them there was no surprise in this regard. Sana, who won twice in the Municipal elections, said that her views regarding society “did not change even after I lost” (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Sana said that her loss in A’Shura election in 2019 did not make her feel angry or upset from people, and she is still doing her job as

the people's representative in the Municipal council with the same excitement and passion. However, Fatima S. changed her views about people when voters asked for money in exchange for their votes (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said that she in principle does not accept this attitude. She reiterated that she would persuade people to vote for her only because they believe in her, because she knows people well and her changed views do not include all people. She mentioned that they voted for her the first time she ran for the Municipal councils and won.

Tahera, also, stated that her experience did not change her views regarding people and society. She said, "on the contrary, I am more optimistic that women can run the elections and win. I think when female candidate works seriously and follows a specific method she can win." Tahera said that she had this idea before the election; however, after winning it was proven true. Previously, Tahera thought that the quota was the only solution for women's representation dilemma (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Unlike Tahera, Asma said that the election experience "of course changed my views concerning people and society." She said that dealing with many people from different backgrounds made her know and discover the nature of people and their intentions. She discovered that women do not encourage female candidates, and they favor men over women (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Aisha said that her views about society and people did not change much. Nevertheless, it changed relatively after observing candidates and voters' behaviors during the election period. The use and the acceptance of political money, in addition to loyalty to the tribal affiliation, made Aisha rethink and assess people with a different understanding (Aisha, personal communication, January 5, 2020).

Tayba was the one participant who said that she is surprised how far people have changed their attitude towards candidates since 1994, the year she ran, and how

society became negative and motivated by money and tribal affiliation (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Tayba said that she did not change; however, the society did. Nevertheless, she thinks that in general “society is supportive of women.” She said, “people who voted for me were females and males, society was supportive of women’s representation in A’Shura council,” nonetheless, “I noticed in the last elections of 2019 that society has changed, and people became controlled by money and materialism, as well as the tribe. I am surprised, instead of going forward and people voting for the most qualified candidates, it became easy to control people’s vote with 10 Omani Rials. Unfortunately, those people, now, give their votes in exchange for money, not for public interests; society converted into greedy materialism that falsely elects candidates.”

Tayba was puzzled regarding the reason that pushed people to such behavior and said, “I cannot say the economic status is forcing them because Omanis in the past were more in need than now. I do not want to generalize; however, most Omanis are not in poverty to the extent that pushes them to accept money for their votes” (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Another concern Tayba mentioned was regarding the growing influence of the tribe over the voters; she stated that tribalism became stronger than it was in the past. Tayba is concerned as well about other issues related to people’s behavior towards wrongdoings. She explained that people do not report them because they are afraid, they cannot prove it, and then they do not have protection. She mentioned that sometimes there were candidates talking to people in a public place telling voters: “vote for me and I will give you a refrigerator,” or other things, and if people had recorded that and presented it as evidence it would be accepted.

Tayba mentioned a short story about herself monitoring one of the elections and

said that an old woman came to the polling center holding a candidate's picture in her hand (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She said, "she did not know the candidate. She was told to vote for the person in the picture. The old woman said, 'He gave me 10 Rials.'" Tayba said "I was shocked and did not believe it, but then the old woman showed me the 10 Rial note." Tayba expressed her regret concerning this negative phenomenon that extended to young voters, adding: "when I ran for the elections, people were different, not like this, they respected us and believed that we could achieve goals, they did not ask for money, and we did not pay anything, I think what we witness now is the decline and deterioration in the system of values and ethics."

Lessons Learned from Female Candidates' experiences

All female candidates, except one, advised women to run in greater numbers, and they encouraged women to engage politically in order to pave the road for a younger generation of females who would consider running. Regardless of a female's own decision whether to run again or not, they all think women should not stop trying; nevertheless, they think that women need to have unified goals and form an organized coalition or movement that supports and helps achieve these goals. Participant Amīra said that she does not advise women to run for the elections because she thinks that voters will always support male candidates over females. She said that people are convinced that they should not let women lead them (*yuwalu 'amrahom imra'ah*) (Amīra, personal communication, January 4, 2020).

Unlike Amīra, Fadīla advised Omani women to run and participate in the elections, and she set the goal: "women should run until we have a female representative in each district or at least one in each governorate" (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). Also, Badriya advises women to run for the elections and learn from

previous experiences. If they did not run before, they should be prepared and understand people's thinking and know society's needs and problems (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). Rahma as well, advises women to run for the elections. She said, "I advise women with qualifications, capability, and possibility to run, not only aiming for political participation but also to fulfill their duties." Rahma believes that running in the elections is a religious and ethical obligation for those who are qualified: "amanah diniyya wa donyawiyah" (Rahma, personal communication, March 7, 2020).

Despite disappointment and hopelessness, H.A. said women have "no luck at all in winning in the elections because society does not accept women in the elections," yet she did not say that women should not run for election, and instead that they can try (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). However, H.A. indicated that according to her experience, people see no role at all for women in the elections and representation. Salema who comes from the same region as H.A., expressed similar views - women can run; however, their chances are very little if they don't have the resources or the tribe's power behind them (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019).

Although Salema decided not to run after her failing attempts, she also did not discourage other women from running (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She said:

"I will not run again. I ran three times, and the result is the same. I will not run because the society did not change, and I do not think it will change in the next four years. I work in the education sector; we measure people's behavior and their awareness and what we see is that people's awareness will not be raised because of the difficult economic status of the country. Nothing new is expected, and as a result, women's empowerment is on hold."

On the contrary, Maryam enthusiastically encouraged women to run and advised them to redouble their efforts to represent their districts in Dhofar governorate and prove that

women can “impose” themselves through qualifications and hard work (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020). S.H. also said “Yes, I encourage women to run for the elections, I strongly do,” and “women should run in greater numbers, it would be better if they can outnumber male candidates so they grant winning in larger numbers and consequently, increase women’s representation in the elected councils.” She stressed; “I advise them to break the fear barrier of failure, they should be patient, and hard working in confronting difficulties, they should not be afraid of repeating the attempt without losing confidence and self-esteem.” She stated that her experience taught her that “greater number means more chance to win” (S.H., personal communication, March 7, 2020).

Nasra, like most of the female candidate participants, urges women to run for elections and try to increase women’s representation in the elected councils. Nasra said that these councils need to include more women among the representatives (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Basma said, “of course I encourage women to run; it is their right as citizens.” Despite the result she and other female candidates got, Basma thinks that women should remain positive and keep trying because this is the only way to have the citizens’ voices heard (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). Muna wishes that more women would consider running for the elections in the future: “I encourage women to display their skills and qualifications and seek serving the society” (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Aisha encourages women to run as well. She said that a larger number of women running means more possibilities to win. She thinks that women should run to increase females’ representation in elected councils because women are half of the society and 50% of the population, thus they must be represented by larger numbers than the two representatives in A’Shura and the 7 in the Municipal councils (Aisha,

personal communication, February 25, 2020).

Aziza also thinks that women should continue running in larger numbers; however, she advised that before running, women should know how to build coalitions and be part of civil society organizations such as women's associations (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Also, she highlighted that women should not allow the decision of forming these coalitions to come directly from any authority; it should be independent and led by women's desire to change realities in favor of women themselves. Stressing the importance of independent women's forum/coalition or movement in changing the women's status is proof for the dire need for substantial changes in Omani society because an active and effective civil society would change not only women's participation and representation, but also the political landscape in the country. Nonetheless, demanding that this women's coalition should not come by a decision from the authority would delay and complicate the establishment of this coalition, because of laws which prohibit forming any kind of NGO without official approval and establishing NGOs from practicing any form of political activity.

However, Aziza's demand is understandable because the existing NGOs and OWAs could not fulfil the role of supporting women politically because of their direct link to the authorities. Moreover, in societies of similar political systems, the states "need women as allies who challenge the state and criticize its general exclusion of the population from the decision-making process" and although the state is not the sole actor with unified vision for women, it remains a significant "agent in determining and shaping the position of women" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, pp. 21-27). The State would not give up such an important ally of negotiation with the society; however, the state should not reject women as agents who may endorse state projects, resist patriarchy at the personal and political levels, and adopt hyper-feminist agendas or they retreat into

extreme conservatism, defending the system that excludes and marginalizes” (Al-Rasheed, 2103, pp. 21-27).

Despite her negative feeling during her campaign, Shakera encourages women to run for elections and be prepared (Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). After she ran in 2015, Shakera made a promise to herself that she would look at all criticism she heard from people and try to improve and fix what she can and think it is true and consider how it might affect her confidence and electability. She thinks that women who consider running should also do so. Fatima H. advises women to think deeply and study the circumstances and resources well, before deciding to participate in the elections (Fatima H., personal communication, January 20, 2020). In comparison, Zahra, before encouraging women to run, demanded reform in the terms of reference of A’Shura council and its powers (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said, “before I advise women to run for the elections, the council must play its role properly, so we choose the right people who are worthy of the council.” She stated that granting more powers for the council would solve the problem of electing the wrong representatives.

As an example of a successful female representative, Tayba encouraged women to run in significant numbers so they can seize the chance and motivate more women to run (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She explained: “most men think that when they reach the representation seat, he will be a minister in the government, but a woman does not care about this matter as she will fight and work hard to get things done to benefit the society; the highest ambition she has is to prepare a plan about a specific issue so she achieves the purpose of being a representative; running in the election, she doesn't care about being a minister or any other positions.” Tayba mentioned that men, especially after 2011, ran in the elections and competed,

and their goal is reaching the position of a minister in the government.¹³²

To encourage women to run for the elections, Tayba suggested several ideas (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). These included, illustrating women's experiences in running in the elections in the school curricula, creating parliaments for school students aiming to train them in political participation and citizens' engagement in public issues, and allowing female and male students to attend sessions in A'Shura and State councils, which would help in identifying young leaders and qualifying them for future political engagement.

Sana calls on women to run in larger numbers to increase women's representation (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). She emphasized that men should accept women running for elections and respect female participation in politics. Sana also mentioned that she is planning to run for the next term of the Municipal elections. Fatima S. has the same plan and motivation, and she advises women to run without fear and to not depend on untrustworthy people (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). Fatima S. thinks strongly that a female candidate should run her campaign by herself and plan for the next steps. She mentioned that she faced difficulties and hardship; however, she could overcome them with her strong personality and enthusiasm. Adopting the same belief, Mahfūza said that women should run and keep trying because "our society needs more qualified women" (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She is optimistic that in the future females' representation will grow because the society's traditional views about women will change; however, she says that this change will not happen automatically; it would happen only when people are educated and aware concerning women's role in

¹³² After the protests during Arab Spring in 2011, Sultan Qaboos appointed 4 ministers in Oman government from the representative who were elected that year for A'Shura council

politics. Also, there is the role of A’Shura council in facilitating ways to change.

Tahera encourages women to run for elections and expand their political participation (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that women should run in larger numbers; “this is a major factor to increase women’s representation. However, a female candidate should know how to manage an election campaign, she should be armed with campaigning skills.” Asma agreed that women should run in greater numbers and she strongly advises women to run because “we need many women in leadership positions, and we need to change society’s perspective about women and persuade people that women are capable of making political decisions” (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020).

While other participants recommend women run for the election, they do not recommend they run in significant numbers because they think that lower numbers bring more support. Samīra affirmed: “I am against women’s running in large numbers randomly without planning or studying the situation carefully” (Samīra, personal communication, January 30, 2020). Samīra explained that before running, the district’s women should agree upon one or two female candidates to run on behalf of the district. She said that following this advice would concentrate women’s support for few female candidates or 1-2 only. Most importantly, as Samīra suggested, lower numbers mean more support and more chances to win. Khalsa shares the same idea with Samīra regarding females’ candidacy numbers. She said that she encourages women to run in larger numbers; however, they should not run in large numbers in the same district. Khalsa mentioned that women should be motivated to run in larger numbers only in governorates where no women have run before, like in Musandam¹³³ and alwusta,¹³⁴ or

¹³³ A governorate in the far north of Oman

¹³⁴ A governorate in the mid-west of Oman, where most of Oman’s Bedouin located

where extremely few women ran like in Dhofar (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said, "we should encourage Bedouin women to run." However, Khalsa stressed that women should avoid running in the same district in significant numbers, and she expressed her wishes that the tenth term of A'Shura election in 2023 would witness female candidates representing all of Oman's governorates.

How the Elections Experiences Changed Women?

Becoming realistic, mature, and aware of people's intentions and attitude was the main change that happened to most participants after they had experienced the elections. They learnt and enhanced skills and became more understanding of society and politics. With disappointment and bitterness, most participants acknowledged that the election experience made them more conscious regarding themselves and the change they seek in the society.

There was a major difference between the change that winners experienced and the change of those who lost the election. For example, Fadīla focused on the moment she announced as a winner: "I had a strong feeling and realization, in the moment of victory, especially after three attempts, that Oman's Shura is a reciprocal vision between the state that preserves freedoms and people who appreciate and accept the burden of the responsibility" (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). Fadīla said that she felt that burden once she was sworn in. While the change Fadīla experienced was looking to the future, the change most of the candidates experienced was assessing the past and evaluating the viability of women's political experience; however, they highlighted the positive influence that the election's experience left inside them.

It is noteworthy that none of the participants mentioned that religion was an obstacle, although among them, few were religiously committed. However, female

voters tried to advise them not to continue in this direction because they would have to mix with men and told them that a committed religious woman should not. Although after the elections Basma became bitter and disappointed because the election was “a dirty war,” she was convinced that religion and people’s beliefs had no correlation with the attack against her (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She said that she encountered severe and harsh competition because she was not wearing hijab and competitors shifted the attention from her message to the way she looked. This is the same idea Tahera discussed regarding using religious and cultural values (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She argued that although Omani society is holding its traditions and values, it is also open toward women’s participation in public life. She also said that competitors took advantage of the nature and the identity of the society to spark conflict among voters regarding their values and those who appear to not adhere to these values.

Describing the change that happened to them, participants were divided into several categories: 1) focused on the positive side of the elections. 2) disappointed and positive. 3) bitter and negative, and finally, 4) participants who said no change happened to them. However, most participants preferred to focus on the positive changes and gains that came out of the election experiences despite mistrust and the elections’ unpleasant surprises. They said they became more realistic, mature, and aware of people’s motivations.

A major feature of the change that female candidates underwent relates to other people. For instance, Asma highlighted that distrusting people is the most substantial change that happened to her. “Many things changed about me,” said Asma, “I do not trust people, and I reduced my interaction with them. I used to treat people contentedly, but now I am careful.” However, Asma thinks that her outlook became broader after

experiencing the election (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Fatima H. said that nothing has changed regarding her dedication to serving the community and helping people; however, she learned many things and knew many people (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). She understood how people think and what values they hold, and said, the elections “basically changed my thoughts and perception about people”.

Realizing that elections were a complicated issue, Aziza said, “I became more realistic after the election; this was a major change that happened to me” (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She added: “I look differently now at the society and A’Shura council, I know now how the election process happens and what kind of environment in which it happens.” Aziza confirmed that she has, now, a better understanding regarding how people vote and that made her realize that an individual female cannot change the reality without getting help from a larger entity formed to support women’s engagement in politics.

Despite disappointment, Nasra felt confident, a feeling she did not feel during the elections (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). She said:

“I became more mature, which is what changed inside me because of the hardship, the sad and happy experiences I went through during the elections. In the past, I was superficial and simple, but after I have met people and being close to them, I discovered many things, things that were unclear. I trusted people, yet I lost trust in others who disappointed me.”

Badriya said that running in the elections changed her and she became more mature in looking into issues and assessing challenges (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She stated that now she understands society better and more insightfully.

While Aziza and most participants talked about major change in their lives,

Tahera and Sana did not change after the elections. Tahera said that “Nothing changed” (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She continued: “I am still the same as I was, I do not think that a mature person who already has a formed personality and has his/her own views and opinions toward the world and life could change easily. I think a person like that is confident and winning a new position would not change her personality; nevertheless, the election experience added expertise and cognitive accumulation.” Sana also stated that nothing had changed in her personality, saying: “I am still the same regarding my performance and doing my job as a representative and a family member, I am more committed, focused, and interested” (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Sana won the first and the second Municipal election and she is serving her second term. However, she experienced losing an election in 2019, when she ran for A’Shura election but that did not impact her. She highlighted that A’Shura competition is harder than the Municipal; nevertheless, she thinks that severe competition is not far from reaching these elections as well.

The only participants who said nothing changed about them or about their way of thinking after the elections were Sana and Tahera who were both winners. They emphasized the same idea that their personality did not change. They are “still” the same person because a mature person, as Tahera indicated, cannot easily change, which means that Tahera and Sana understood change as a negative process regarding her personality, principles and views (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019; Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). However, when they discussed what they learnt from the election experience, they said that they learnt a variety of skills, while what they learnt did not lead to a change in their views and thoughts.

Another category of participants includes those who experienced change in feelings to bitterness. The depth of this feeling varied between these participants

according to depth of involvement. The direction of disappointment also varied; some were disappointed from voters and others from authorities. For instance, the change happened to Rahma towards the official institutions that dealt with the elections. She said nothing substantial had changed about her feeling towards participation in the elections; however, she thinks that there was mishandling from the authorities' side regarding the election process (Rahma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She mentioned for example, the use of the electronic voting machines, and other organizational issues related to the individuals handling voting and electoral committees, whom she described as "unqualified persons" working for several government institutions.

While S.H.'s disappointment was towards her people, H.A. admitted that she changed after the election (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). She was disappointed and sad because her closest relatives and friends did not vote for her. Other people treated her unequally compared to other candidates. H.A. became more careful in assuming that people are honest, and she became more doubtful about their intentions.

In Salema and Zahra's cases, the change reorganized the priority of their lives. Salema said that she does not consider "not winning the election a loss" (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She said that she did not change, and she still feels the same excitement about her work and studies. She stated that; "However, my direction has changed, I had goals towards changing society, now my circle of interests changed, I focus currently only on myself and my closest people"

By comparison, Zahra had conflicting ideas that led her to the same result (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). Zahra said, "The change happening in me is the conflicting feelings and confusion regarding society and the

state's willingness to improving the election process." Zahra explained that since the announcement of the election results, she suffers from two conflicting ideas about whether she continues serving the community or stops spending her time and effort on people, some of whom were not honest with her. She said, "I provided everything I could to give and help people and by the end I discovered that a small amount of Rials made them abandon me at the only time I asked for their support." She highlighted that she would continue to serve her community and people with needs; however, she will never do that with the same motivation and enthusiasm. Zahra's new position is like Salema's conclusion about continuing working and serving people and communities; however, the priority, now, is for self and family. It is a decision made after years dedicated to community service and helping people. For Zahra, it was a disappointment because she thinks that people and the problematic issues of the voting machines, while it was hopelessness for Salema because she thought it was unfair and unjust that in three elections she ran, people voted for tribes and money and abandoned a qualified candidate.

From a different point of view and different location, Tayba explained the change she encountered over the years (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She said that being one of the first two females elected in Oman and being a representative for two terms changed many things in her life and thinking. Her belief in being a concerned and committed citizen took her to demonstrations and sit-ins to join other citizens in 2011 and led her to express her support for the people's demands for equal opportunities and full citizenship rights.¹³⁵ All these incidents contributed to her

¹³⁵ After Tayba finished her second term in A' Shura council, she continued her efforts and activism in defending people's interests which led to her imprisonment for six months. She was in prison from July 2005 to February 2006

inner change, which she started to realize first when she was a representative and felt that she was walking on a dead-end road. Now Tayba still feels people's respect and appreciation and said; "despite the very difficult circumstances I went through in my complicated experience of imprisonment, in addition to attempts to tarnish my image, people still respect me and appreciate my solid position towards people's rights; however, I lost part of my popularity maybe because people do not want to look supportive for a person who stood against the government or opposed some of its policies."

This category of participants focused on positive changes and the knowledge and skills they gained from the election experience. Amīra, for example, said that she became more open to learn about a variety of issues after the election experience (Amīra, personal communication, January 4, 2020). She said, "I learnt new things and understood people, I gained more knowledge regarding how to deal with different types of people. I became more aware of the challenges and more careful regarding people's attitude during the elections."

Maryam said that she gained a special experience by running in the elections and learnt how to manage a campaign. She stressed that she felt her strength and realized her skills; "I felt strength when male candidates were threatened by me and asked me to withdraw and join their coalitions" (Maryam, personal communication, February 13, 2020). Muna said that after the elections, she had this feeling of enthusiasm and excitement concerning goals she dreamed of achieving. She stated that she did not become disappointed nor affected by losing the election, and instead she felt committed to working hard and running again, yet with new plans and different approaches (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020). Aisha did not win the A'Shura election she ran for in 2015; however, she said that running in the elections

made her feel more passionate about political participation (Aisha, personal communication, February 25, 2020). She became more educated about women's rights and women's issues in general. Afterwards, she educated herself about laws and legislations concerning women locally and internationally.

Fatima S. became more strategic and planned her moves in advance (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). She mentioned that her success in the first election of the Municipal councils in Oman motivated her even after she lost the A'Shura elections in 2015;she emphasized that each experience is different, and it has its positive sides and negative ones. Knowing people during the election campaign was the highlight of Mahfūza's experience (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). She knew people closely, which made her understand that people differ according to their goals. She said that before the elections she did not know much about people's thinking and ways of treating candidates. She did not know people's expectations from the elections and A'Shura council; however, now, she said that having known the reality she became aware and can differentiate between good and bad humans. Mahfūza concluded that; "I would not have known people that well if I had not been in the elections. Because of this experience and encountering people in different situations I learnt and understood a lot about people."

For Samīra the involvement did not start with the elections' experience, it started long before and that made the change for her significantly positive and optimistic (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019). She said that since she was a young girl, she volunteered and was known to people in her community. She added; "being a school principal and having served two terms as the head of the women's association in my district, that established my name. When I ran in my first elections in 2011, I found out that people knew me well. In the second elections in 2019,

people knew me better, encouraged me, and were excited about my candidacy.” Samīra mentioned that males, whom she did not know previously, volunteered to manage her election campaign and they work hard to reach out to voters for her behalf. After the elections, Samīra said “I felt the respect of people and their appreciation for my social participation; that was tremendous motivation which made me insist on reaching leadership position and look forward to running in elections in the future”.

Khalsa said that she is proud that she ran in the ninth A’Shura election in 2019 because despite the hardship and difficulties, she did not regret running because of “people’s positive reactions and the continuous encouragement I got from society” (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She said that there were voters who did not accept the result like her, because “we counted the votes we expected to get, and it was more than the results showed.” However, Khalsa said that the change that happened to her was in a positive direction; she is not disappointed, but is proud, and considers her experience as an indication of success, and “I cannot deny that I was shocked to get that number of votes.” She announced that she is going to run in the future hoping that she will win “In sha Allah¹³⁶. ”

Samīra and Khalsa are two different examples among the participants because they represent cases that have similar features and perspectives about their communities and themselves. They both come from the Interior region in Oman, which is considered conservative socially and they both ran against many male competitors. They both ran more than once and lost; however, they kept a positive attitude towards society and the experience. They did not blame culture nor hierarchy for their loss, rather they discussed the dynamics of the elections and the competition and understood the

¹³⁶ A prayer and a phrase used to express dependence on Allah and asking his help

electoral situation in each of their districts. They genuinely think that society appreciated them and respected their experience as women and candidates.

They entered the elections knowing what to expect, like the rest of the candidates, without prejudgment about voters' preference of male candidates. They accepted the result, although Khalsa doubted the functionality of the electronic voting machines, and they remained optimistic about future elections that they think they have chances to win (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020). Samīra and Khalsa's cases could prove the argument made by Tahera, Basma, and Salema regarding Omani society openness about women political participation and their involvement in public life.

Reflecting on Women Experiences and Perspectives

This section presents the participants' final views and perspectives regarding the impact the election experience left and the direction they are heading in the future in terms of political participation. The discussion and analysis of these final perspectives is divided into four groups: 1) representatives and winners, 2) positive and optimistic, 3) pessimistic and doubtful, and 4) personal and political. Although the first group of winners and representatives includes 5 participants, only four are discussed because the fifth is included in the fourth group because her views are closer to this group of participants. Starting with A'Shura winners of 2019¹³⁷, Fadīla expressed her new idea about the ideal representative because this is what she became, and she wants to fulfil the duties of the job (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). She described the representative she wants to be as she/he should know and understand public interests and represent and work for the people not for her/himself. A person

¹³⁷ Note that I interviewed A'Shura winners of 2019 Fadīla and Tahera just after the announcement of the election results and before they start their representation experience which is not reflected in their answers and views.

who is qualified to activate all the parliamentary tools that are available to use and who can create new powers for the council. She said that the Majlis and the people do not want a representative who cares only about public appearance rather than performance in a real political institution. Fadīla emphasized that her electoral message and promise to people was bringing public issues to discussion and using the parliamentary tools as does a real politician seeking more powers for Majlis A’Shura.

Fadīla formed her perspective about the effective representative: “I have become fully convinced that A’Shura representative should be innovative and anticipatory. Representatives should have a future vision that reflects understanding of reality, and they should work hand in hand, with the society” (Fadīla, personal communication, March 9, 2020). However, Tahera, the other winner of A’Shura election in 2019, stated that the election experience added depth to her accumulated knowledge that strengthened her personality and provided her with more insightful views about people and society (Tahera, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Sana said that being a representative in the Municipal council made her learn about municipalities and how to serve society in different capacities (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019). Also, this experience presented her with a new perspective on women’s role in the society and it proved that women could extend their volunteer work to the municipality effort. Sana said that the election experience made her proud of herself and of other women who went through the same experience. She stated that she has more respect and appreciation for all women, because she realized how much women struggle in serving their families and society without being noticed or recognized. Sana highlighted that she became more persistent in helping people; nevertheless, sometimes she could not complete missions because it was beyond her capability (Sana, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

Her winning and losing election experiences helped Fatima S. understand that she cannot expect the same result in each experience (Fatima S., personal communication, November 23, 2019). She believes that she learnt from her success and failure and she became determined to continue and reach the goals she set for herself. Fatima S. is, also, proud of being the first female elected in her district on the first attempt. She is proud because she could win without getting help from anyone. Fatima S. became more focused on issues and more goal oriented. She said she plans things ahead of time and counts her steps strategically. Now she understands what tactics to follow to achieve goals.

The following group of participants were positive about their experiences and optimistic about the future of the elections and women's political participation, despite losing in the elections (Mahfūza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Although Mahfūza is a trainer in human development, she gained new skills and knowledge by running in the elections and meeting people closely and understanding their motivations and behaviors. She became more insightful and goal oriented. Mahfūza said, "I understood that I have to work harder and to keep working." While "I do not have to be a representative to serve my society, I can meet our representatives and officials and suggest projects and plans that would help people and serve the society's goals." She highlighted that her goal is not a seat in Majlis A'Shura, rather it is achieving society's development goals. She looks for change and believes "all have to work hard while seeking change".

Shakera also remained positive and hopeful (Shakera, personal communication, February 8, 2020). She described her experience and said, "I only had my family and my female association members on my side; that was the first experience and I still have many more to come." Shakera emphasized that "we keep learning throughout our

lives.” She expressed her hopes that women will be involved in remarkable experiences that would change perception and increase representation. Shakera said that she promised herself to run for a future election to win a seat in A’Shura council.

Describing herself as strong and educated, Fatima H. highlighted that “the level of confidence is the most important element that changed in addition to my new evaluation of myself” (Fatima H., personal communication, January 10, 2020). Fatima H. said that during the elections she “was encouraged to talk about my rights, I became stronger and confident talking to the public.” Despite Fatima H. not winning the elections, she is still motivated to run in a future election. She mentioned that she is working on the agenda she presented in her election campaign in 2015. Fatima H. said:

“I have a consultancy office where I bring retired experts in various field to train new graduates. I do this to help my community in supporting unemployed young graduates, who are without work experience, to provide them with training opportunity and on the other hand, I give the retirees the platform to deliver their expertise and participate in serving the community.”

Fatima H. stated that was her dream when she ran for the elections, she said, “I did not win, yet I achieved my dream in my own way”.

The same positive perspective could be grasped in Noora’s statement, describing her election participation as a successful experience “by all means.” She said that she gained confidence and people’s trust, and she also discovered issues about her society she did not know before. Noora stated: “I became able to confront people and to give back to my community.” She stressed that she believes that any female who knows that she is capable and qualified to represent people should run for the elections (Noora, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

The experience made Asma a “strong woman,” nevertheless, less trusting of people. Asma described the election experience as an “eye opening” process. She said,

“I knew well people’s views regarding women, I learnt about A’Shura and how to campaign and reach out and deal with various kinds of people” (Asma, personal communication, January 5, 2020). Nasra described her new self as ambitious and with strong patriotic feeling (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). The election experience was an opportunity for Nasra to read and study laws and legislations concerning A’Shura council and increase her knowledge about policies and government. She said that her experience in the elections made her willing to help the people and serve the country “much more than it was before” because she met and saw people from different social and economic status, and she felt that there is great work to be done. Also, running in the elections and managing her campaign helped her to develop new skills and enhanced other ones, and it helped build her self-esteem and confidence (Nasra, personal communication, November 25, 2019). Muna, as well, sees herself differently now: “I look at myself as patient, ambitious, and supportive of women’s rights. The elections made Muna closer to people: “I knew people who were supportive and inspiring and who helped me to withstand difficulty” (Muna, personal communication, January 6, 2020).

From a different location and more experience in the elections, Samīra said that she always has the same “positive” standpoint from her society because she is the daughter of the society and she belongs to her district. She said that her new perspective is concerning herself; “I need to enhance my skills and improve my qualifications. I plan to finish my PhD and continue serving my community and district from any position. I came to understand that I do not need to be in A’Shura council to serve and help my people.” Samīra said that although she ran twice, she is not sure if she will run for the third time at this moment; nevertheless, she is sure that she has the aspiration to reach a leadership position to serve her country. However, if that is unreachable, she

says “I will not be restricted on the contrary, I will strive to serve my country from any position and any place” (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

Samīra said that her experience in the elections was “extremely enriching and excellent.” Samīra, who ran and lost twice in A’Shura elections, emphasized that women should keep running for election despite difficulties. Samīra stressed that women are accepted in the society; however, the reason that made them lose is that they do not have sufficient community presence before announcing their candidacy. Samīra concluded that a candidate who has a fingerprint in his or her society is closer to winning people’s votes than any other candidate who does not have a history in society (Samīra, personal communication, November 23, 2019).

Closeness to people is a significant issue to Khalsa as well. She said that the election experience added many positive things, and she learnt about laws and society, and how to overcome difficulties and hardships. She described her relationship with society as “excellent,” and said that she still receives calls from elderly, mothers, and young females; “reaching out for all these people is success and it is preparing me for the next elections” (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

She said that she follows positive steps, corrects her mistakes, and focuses on specific issues. Khalsa said that the most significant perspective she developed was concerning motivation with relation to people; “I feel motivated because of the positive reactions I got from my community, people tried to keep the momentum, especially males who pushed me to continue and run again.” Khalsa stated that she is optimistic regarding women’s support and society’s motivation because everyone advocated for her and pushed her to success (Khalsa, personal communication, February 8, 2020).

Appreciation is the main factor that made the participants decisions differ regarding their plans regarding public engagement. Regardless of the undesirable

results for most of the participants, what made it possible to accept the result and move forward was how the supporters showed their empathy and sympathy for the female candidates, or how voters abandoned the female candidates during the election and after the announcement of the result. The female candidates needed to feel the support of the people/voters at all times, but especially after the result because they wanted to be confident that they were appreciated for the courage, effort, and hard work they delivered for the campaign, and ultimately, for the people.

The following group of participants, although mostly positive, felt the bitterness of the experience and were not as optimistic as the previous group. For example, Rahma's new understanding is related to the society's culture, and to voters' behavior during the elections (Rahma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She sadly said that people see a candidate through shiny media appearance and through money and favors. Rahma was bitter to monitor how voters' awareness grew towards benefitting from candidates in an attempt to blackmail them in exchange for their votes. Rahma stated that people under the influence of monetary gain do not look for qualifications, honesty, and hard work, nor do they appreciate how long a candidate spent in community service or volunteering helping people. Despite two unsuccessful attempts to win representation, Rahma feels proud of herself and confident about her skills. She said that her experiences motivated her to work harder and push her to serve her country. She stated that running for office is a great responsibility and she feels the burden because she knows that she can represent her district, and that she is qualified for this mission.

Badriya said that she sees the world differently, now, yet through a realistic lens (Badriya, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She looks at her society deeply and she thinks that people need support in several issues, and she can help by

insisting on continuous effort on political engagement. Although Badriya did not win the elections, like most of the participants, she said that the election experience made her a stronger human being. Dealing with various mindsets and solving campaign's problems made her understand that strength is stored within the person but needed a unique experience to discover it.

The election experience added many values to S.H. such as deep thinking, maturity, insights into people's attitude and behavior: "When I visited people's houses I saw things I had never been exposed to before, I met people who treated me well, and I met others who mistreated me. I learnt much about people's nature and morals. I also learnt how to ignore so I can live in peace" (S.H., personal communication, November 27, 2019). She also expanded her understanding and expertise of society's challenges and aspirations, saying: "I look at myself after the election with a lot of pride, confidence, and self-esteem." S.H. stated that she restored her confidence while she was reviewing her experience, and she realized that thinking of engaging in politics means that she was competent. Enduring the difficulties and challenges of three elections means that she was confident regarding her skills and qualifications. She said that despite the previous results, "I did not stop and cry over spilled milk; instead I overcame all barriers of fear and failure; I am very proud of myself that I could repeat the experience for the third time, which was my biggest achievement." S.H. announced that she will never quit running, and she would even run ten times, regardless of the result: "from this moment I am preparing myself to run for the tenth term of A' Shura elections in 2023."

The third group of participants are pessimistic and doubtful regarding the elections and women's political participation; nevertheless, they recognized the positive side of the experience. For instance, H.A. came out of the elections

disappointed by her community, family, and friends (H.A., personal communication, February 8, 2020). She felt that all abandoned her when she needed them the most. She said that she became less trusting of everyone, yet she thinks she is stronger and has better insight than she did before the elections. She explained: “I was hurt by my closest relatives, and my friends supported other candidates; they voted for whoever paid them.” She feels, now, that she understands people better and she is more aware that they follow their own interests. Nevertheless, the experience provided her with confidence, courage, and devotion; “I feel motivated and not despairing.” The world around H.A. changed, then she changed, and a totally new perspective emerged. She looks at things differently now. The election experience made her realize that election is a highly competitive environment, and to survive it requires much more than what she had. H.A. said she wanted to serve her community and to support women’s issues when she decided to run; however, she discovered that she cannot be a representative under these circumstances of severe competition where money and tribalism play the major role.

After the undesirable result, Amīra evaluated her experience positively because she thinks that she left her fingerprints as the first woman to have run in her district (Amīra, personal communication, January 4, 2020). Despite Amīra’s feelings, during and after the elections, and her conclusion that the experience was bitter, she mentioned that she feels that she is capable of running for the elections in the future if she decides to try again. However, she did not encourage other women to not run. Amīra thinks that the experience was hard for her and females who will run for the first time might face discrimination and favoritism for men and that would hurt them tremendously.

The Personal and the Political

This group of participants had a more complicated and deeper involvement

whether at the personal emotional level or at the social and political levels. Their political engagement started long before they became candidates and their persistence to make change widened their perspectives and understanding of self, society, and state's policies. This group included the most bitter and disappointed participants. For them, the failure in the election was not only personal; it was not their loss only, it was the society's loss as well. They felt that they have the qualification and the passion to represent people; however, the opportunities were taken from them. They are not as optimistic although they believe in the continuous work in pursuit of change. They could see the challenges clearly at all levels and yet they cannot overcome them alone. Some decided to divert their effort to other channels than elections and others are still assessing and reflecting.

For example, Salema decided that time had come to change her direction (Salema, personal communication, December 18, 2019). She explained:

"I found out that I should take care of my job, my PhD, my association, and my volunteer team because society is not aware yet, and it needs a long time before real change happens. I realized that this is not my role; this is the government and the society's role. It is also the families' role, while raising their children. They should work on changing perceptions, maybe sociologists and politicians can help but not me. I thought society was aware; nevertheless, I discovered otherwise, I grasped that I cannot, as an individual, make change happen, but it is a collective work."

Salema talked about her "transforming experience," and said that she was convinced that she had the capability to make change due to her field of study and her volunteering activities, in addition to her participation in community service. She went on to say, "I am still convinced. And I have the passion for change and for political participation, and I still believe in women's right in holding higher political representation; however, I do not feel the election process is fair, but I feel it is an injustice." That is the reason that made Salema made the decision to not run again.

Despite defeat and some negative feelings, Basma sees the elections as a large project, larger than individual ambitions; it is a project for Oman (Basma, personal communication, March 7, 2020). She said, “my decision to run was right and smart, I saw the people's reactions to my election's message by people from all regions and districts of Oman. I was proud and happy to witness that kind of interaction and desire to change.” The election experience made Basma realize that she is a different person after the elections, and she confessed that although she became more mature and stronger, she transformed from an idealistic person to doubtful. Rethinking the events and incidents during the election campaign made Basma see things she did not realize before, she said that “depth comes after all.”

Aisha said that the election experience uncovered the society to her and presented a new image she did not expect (Aisha, personal communication, January 5, 2020). She said, “I discovered the low level of the community's awareness about political participation. It was not only about women's political engagement, it was also, about the whole concept of the elections and representation, and the laws and the government, and it was about people's understanding of public interests and voting for common good not for personal gains.” Aisha's biggest realization was mainly about people's awareness and understanding of the election process and its purpose. This made her question other issues related to the election dynamics and women's political participation, issues such as the quality of elected representatives and whether they were qualified for the job. Because of the “low level” of people's awareness, they elected candidates for tribal reasons and money, and not for qualifications. This is what Aisha found extremely disturbing because it threatens the whole election and democratization process. At the same time, Aisha regrets that she ran in the elections without efficient preparation. She said, “it was my fault. I depended totally on my personal effort in

meeting people, distributing flyers, and knocking on doors. I should have had a proper campaign with organized teams.”

Aziza also developed her own understanding about the society and the government through her experience in the elections. She said, “I have, now, a better understanding of the society and the institutions, and I see them without make up or cosmetics. I understood that many of the institutions that work in the election field do not seek to effectively support women. There are many goals for these institutions; none of them is related to A’Shura advancement nor to its goals, rather, these institutions work to benefit from the process and from the elections ‘seasons. The real accomplishments were only financial benefits and cosmetic events” (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). The importance of functional institutions for the success of the election process and its goals is a remarkable emphasis from Aziza, because she is the only participant who highlighted and stressed the vital role the official institutions play in the elections in Oman. However, several participants expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the election organizing committees and the voting mechanism. Other participants demanded establishing an independent election entity that supervises the elections and ensures achieving the goals of widening the citizens’ political participation.

Aziza said that her view towards herself changed after the elections (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Now, she feels that she is different from other women who did not go through this unique experience. Aziza explained: “The special standpoint comes from that very personal experience.” Aziza is not optimistic about the future of women’s political participation in her country, and she is worried that her conclusion about the elections and women’s role in politics would influence other females who consider running for seats in the elected councils. Aziza stated that

regardless of her opinion, she shares with other citizens the aspirations to push the election process forward, saying, “If not for us, it is for our children.” However, Aziza emphasized that she does not want to “be taken advantage of as a human being and as a woman in a bigger political game, which is why I am more careful now.”

Being a journalist who covered women’s issues for a long time, and then ran for the elections twice, gave Aziza a deep understanding of the complexity of women’s political participation (Aziza, personal communication, December 17, 2019). Although she understands that women face multi-level interlocking challenges, she also realized that the major challenge is related to the official and political institutions that limit the advancement of broader political participation for all citizens. She emphasized that institutions are not taking the election seriously and do not want real change to happen. Moreover, these institutions do not want to change women’s status quo because they want the hierarchical system to remain; opening the door for women to largely represent communities and hold leadership positions would lead to larger popular participation, which is not a desirable outcome for the political system. As Krause (2009) described, granting women the vote has been more than anything else a bid for international acceptance. Since the 9/11 attacks, the Gulf states have been keen to gain international reputation that promotes democratization, public liberties, and women’s rights. However, gender discrimination spread through public and private institutions in ways that make women less likely to end up in leadership positions, and women’s inclusion process is still new and therefore, there needs to be strong political will to guarantee that women make it to decision-making positions (Alsharekh, 2018, p. 20). Aziza’s saying that she refuses to be used as “a human being and a woman in a bigger political game” reflects that she lost faith in the political system, and the benefit from the election process which continues to exclude qualified candidates (Aziza, personal

communication, December 17, 2019). This view is shared by around 50% of Oman's eligible voters who boycott the elections every term and demand more inclusion and more powers for A'Shura. A situation threatens the future of the elections and yet, as Aziza mentioned, that did not alarm the state to change anything to restore people's trust.

Toward an opposite direction, the election drove Zahra to decide to be realistic and to take care of herself and make new plans for her life (Zahra, personal communication, February 9, 2020). She said, "I have to make plans that put me and my children first, then when I have extra time, I will give it to society." She added: "I do not, anymore, feel the same excitement as the past regarding society because I did not get the appreciation that I deserve." Zahra said, "I learnt to draw boundaries between me and people and limit my relations to those who deserve my trust and respect." Her shaken relations were not limited to people and society, but Zahra also blamed authorities for not taking the proper actions towards issues that occurred on election day. She mentioned for example: "when the voting devices stopped working in some districts in the country, an extension voting period of time was announced, yet we did not need extension, there were no people waiting to vote, and there were no voters in the polling centers; however, I knew at that moment that I will not win; I heard people talking about the names of the two candidates expected to win, my name was not one of them." Zahra said that she is convinced that the election field is not fair, and is characterized by fraud, and winning depends on money and influence. She concluded that the country and public interests are not considered in the elections process. Nevertheless, Zahra wishes that A'Shura council would be reformed and granted powerful privileges that enable its representatives to play their real and effective role.

The main electoral and political obstacles in Oman are related to the

state/government's control of every aspect of the elections; from approving and disapproving candidates, how to campaign, the role of NGOs, the voting process to the announcement of the results. The risk with such a situation is that people do not trust the government's handling of the elections because, from the beginning candidates fear that they will not be accepted. This was the situation with Basma. Then there are limitations in campaigning, where official and non-official actors would interfere with who is allowed to speak in specific venues and who is not, and this happened to some participants such as Basma and Zahra. Also, women's associations are limited and controlled by the Ministry of Social Development. Adding the limited powers of elected councils, especially A'Shura, creates a situation wherein all of these elements of the election process in Oman created questions of these institutions that decide the goal of the elections and supervise its process.

The problem of Omani women in politics is a citizens' problem interlocked with cultural and social factors that magnify and deepen the resistance of wider women's political participation. Nevertheless, that does not mean that women are unable to identify the real causes of their problem as Al-Rasheed described, " it is a strategy to avoid confrontation with the state at a time when they have not achieved society's consensus over the need to shake gender relations and move towards equality" (2013, p. 28). Omani women are waiting for the state/government to advance their status and give them more rights as it happened before. For example, this happened when women were granted the right to vote in 1994 without demanding it. Women in Oman, like the rest of the citizens, expect the state to change their status because the state often plays the role of the provider and mediator, even in issues related to gender equality. Nonetheless, it is unfortunate for women in such a political system that they appeal to "the same agency that deprives them of their rights and confines them to a second class-

citizenship" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 28).

As a seasoned politician, Tayba had developed a new perspective during the election and representation and after the incident of being the first female arrested in Oman for her political opinions. She changed her standpoint regarding how she understands people's views on women, to reflecting on the elections and A'Shura powers and representatives' performance. Tayba confirmed that "without a doubt I gained rich and substantial experience" (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). She learned to maintain honesty always and be truthful in transmission of information from and to the people and the government. Tayba knew how to deal with decision makers and simple citizens. Her work as a representative in A'Shura enriched her experience, not only locally but also internationally. She mentioned that she traveled to several countries and visited parliaments and attended conferences and as a result, she gained lessons from advanced parliamentary experiences.

Tayba said, "I hate it when people compare young female candidates or representatives to me, this hurts me and disappoints young candidates. Some of these young female candidates are discouraged and stopped running, this disturbed me considerably" (Tayba, personal communication, March 8, 2020). Tayba sometimes accompanied female candidates and met people with them, and asked voters to give a "chance for these young females to prove themselves, they might be even better than me." Tayba believes that youth are the future of the country and they, at all levels and fields, should be encouraged and supported. Empowering youth from Tayba's perspective should be a main concern to reinstate the duties and rights of citizenship, and to widen the political participation.

Furthermore, Tayba wondered about the reasons that made the election experience in Oman stop developing and evolving (Tayba, personal communication,

March 8, 2020). She said, "I think that the government should not be the organizer of the elections. Some people think that results are not trustworthy, I believe that people should have confidence in the election process." She mentioned the controversial electronic voting machines issue and the chaos caused in the 2019 election. Tayba suggested creating an independent committee to supervise the elections instead of the Ministry of Interior which oversees everything related to the elections. Tayba stated that if the situation remains as it is now, the election experience in Oman will never evolve.

Establishing an independent elections committee has been a critical demand for Oman's political activists from the early years of the elections. The higher committee of the elections, and all entities related to it, is still part of the government ministry and keeps raising questions concerning the voting mechanism and increasing doubt about the elections' result as it was mentioned by several female candidate participants.

Exploring female candidates' views and perspectives about their changes as a result of the election experience showed that the election was an intrinsic experience that contributed to the transformation of a female candidates' views about themselves, society, and the election process and electoral system at large. Or it changed substantially her views about the people and the social values and the place of women in traditional communities. The most important impact of the election experience, regardless of the level of self, societal, and political awareness, is the consciousness towards these primary aspects of personal and political change.

The election experience made female candidate participants ask questions and wonder about what kind of role they should perform to change society and policies toward a more egalitarian social and political environment. They also wondered what they can do to transform this consciousness in producing change. These questions led

some female candidate participants to criticize the institutions and question the performance of the organizational/electoral and political institutions. These kinds of questions contributed to the process of changing how a female candidate felt regarding herself and her understanding of herself. Hartsock said that “by working out links between the personal and the political, the women's movement has begun to understand existence as a social process, the product of human activity” (1998, p. 20). Although Omani women have not yet shaped a women's movement, they are in the process of forming such a movement because like other women's movements it started with the consciousness of a small group of women wondering and asking questions. As Hartsock (1998) explained, small group consciousness, with its emphasis on clarifying the links between the personal and the political, led women to conclude that change in consciousness and in the social relations of the individual is one of the most important elements of political change. Because women talked to each other to understand and share experiences and to set out a firsthand account of women's marginalization/exclusion, they came together with shared perspectives and outlook for women. That is what this small group of Oman's female candidates experienced and are experiencing. Although the vision is not clear yet, the shape of women's unified entity is forming.

Summary

Investigating female candidates' views and perspectives after enduring the elections, about self, society, and states' policies concerning women and elections, uncovered the dimensions of the impact that the election experience had on the female candidate participants on personal, social, and political levels. It also presented various points of view that differ according to the personal level of political awareness and the social and communal environments.

One of the goals of this chapter was to examine whether the election experience changed the female candidate participants' views and understanding of themselves, their society, and politics dynamics in Oman. The main element of the impact of the election's experience was disappointment, frustration, confusion, and distortion. Disappointment for most of the female candidates who did not win and discover that people/voters who promised to vote for them did not. This was an action most female candidates described as dishonesty and betrayal. Frustration was expressed by several female candidates who thought that the electoral system failed them because of their doubt regarding the functionality of the voting machines and mistrust of the elections organizational committees. Confusion was expressed by all participants because they could not grasp the real/actual reasons that hinder women's progress in political participation and leadership. They experienced many challenges on different fronts: familial, cultural, electoral, and political. However, it was not clear for them which of these structures has the significant impact on women's political involvement. Some thought that social traditions and cultural values have the major impact, while others thought it was the competition and the ill and wrongdoings that happened during the election campaign periods. Yet, another part of the female candidates thought it is the political environment and the limited powers of elected councils that are the decisive factor. However, what builds confusion in the female candidates' minds was that each of them saw the other factors and recognized that they also impacted women's political participation. Each of them encountered all the factors and they understood that they all impacted them on different levels.

Distortion was experienced by most of the participants because of the confusion and because of their awareness that women still face and encounter discrimination and inequality in everyday life; voters/people look at them as a second-class citizens and

think males are better representatives as they are favored socially and legally, and they have the support of the society and the state. While the participants are aware of that, they also see the state actors and the media magnify the government/states' role in granting women the right to participate equally like men in politics and other fields, and that was the reason that made several participants say that there are no laws in Oman that prohibit women from equal political participation. While that is true, there are other laws and rules, in addition to unofficial norms and traditions, that place women in a lower order than men.

Another observation is that sharing such experience made participants get together and talk to each other discussing issues of the elections and the difficulties they face. Several participants mentioned that all female candidates of 2019 met in a workshop that was designed for them only, which initiated a relationship that continued during the elections. The participants called each other asking for advice and looking for motivation. The election experience planted a seed for shared planning and joint work. The participants realized that they have common issues and common goals, while talking about the challenges they faced they use "we" alternately with "I," because each of them felt that she is not alone in this, and she knew that other women faced similar challenges because they are women.

On the personal level, all participants admitted that a significant change happened to them. Two of the participants reported that although neither their personalities nor their views about society and people had changed, they learnt many skills and gained more knowledge about people, elections, government, and state's laws and policies because of the election experience. Most of the participants indicated that they became mature or more mature after the elections. They said that they look at people and society differently, mostly less trusting, and more carefully. Among the

adjectives they used: disappointed, betrayed, deceived, and misinformed. However, all participants thought that the experience, although it was disappointing for many, was good, enriching, excellent, and informative and eye-opening.

Participants re-defined and re-evaluated themselves and their goals, and decided either to continue to run or to change direction and find other ways to serve people and communities. Some decided that they cannot compete with the influence of money and tribalism alone or they cannot challenge hierarchy and inequality without support and collective work. They cannot fight bribes, betrayals, and money power alone. They discovered that there are issues bigger than what individual female candidates can solve. Therefore, they changed the direction or stopped participating.

On the social level, participants discovered the women's place in society. For some this was unexpected, and for some this was traditions and culture; however, most candidates mentioned that hierarchy and tribalism were the main social challenges facing them. They also mentioned that these factors affected male candidates as well, while it affected women more because of their place as second class, socially and legally. It was noteworthy, that participants split equally around the idea that being a female was the major factor that socially dismantles women's political advancement; both parties defended its point of view strongly. One party said because they are females, they have no place in the tribe and therefore in politics. The other party said that Omani society is open and its traditions and culture do not prevent nor stop women from public and political engagement, but the problems are in the political system that does not give citizens the freedom and the rights to compete and express their views freely and in the severe election's competition and campaigning management. They said many female candidates are unprepared and unarmed.

Most participants highlighted that the level of people's awareness regarding

women's role in politics and leadership position is significantly low. Most think that this could be the most impactful social factor on women's political participation and advancement. Although none of the participants believed that the traditional gender role divide was a factor in the election, they said that society/people prefer men for leadership positions and elected representation positions. It was evident that participants when talking about gender, gender roles, and gender inequality, all or most of them do not make the links between these concepts and what happened to them. For example, they think that the traditional roles of women as wives and mothers give them additional skills and qualifications, rather than looking at the issue from the society and male point of view, a view that sees women as only mothers and wives and considers the private and domestic sphere is the appropriate place for a female. This same view emphasizes the leadership of men whether as a sheikh of tribe or as a representative in an elected council.

On the political level: elections are not just and unfair, qualifications have no place. They are reduced to money and tribalism. There is less trust for the state policies and a deep desire for political change that gives women their rights and increases their representation in elected councils and in government and appointed councils. Several participants questioned the purpose of the election process and the goal of electoral and political institutions from holding elections and electing representatives, if the state is not going to empower the people by granting broader effective powers for the elected councils. Questioning the political system and the official institutions was greater and stronger from those female candidates who were involved longer and deeper in politics and communities' services and volunteering activities, in addition to those who developed over the years because of their work on women's issues, specific views and firm opinions about women's status in Oman.

Another goal for this chapter was uncovering the participants' closing thoughts, attitude, and understanding toward the election experience and how that impacted their plans for political engagement. As it was mentioned, participants differed in their decisions depending on the depth of the disappointment and hopelessness from the election process and/or challenging societal hierarchy and gender inequality. Some decided to stop engagement and said that they will never run again, either because they think people and society will not give a chance for a woman to lead and represent or because they think they cannot defeat money and tribalism. Others thought that elections are complicated political issues, and it required the state intervention in order to change the current status quo. However, all participants, except one, regardless of their own decision about re-running, said that they advise and encourage other women to run and engage politically and to become involved in public life. Despite the undesirable and disappointing results, except for the winners, most participants remained positive regarding their desire for social and political change. While some were hesitant whether to run or not, some were optimistic and hopeful that winning is waiting for them if they try again, despite some of them running more than once.

The final goal of this chapter was exploring whether the new perspectives that participants developed could lead or not to standpoints for women, standpoints that are products of personal and political change. The participant cannot avoid the realization that they experienced discrimination and patriarchy on a daily basis, but particularly confronted it during their candidacy period. They realized that they must oppose the institutions of male power during the election period and daily as well in every area of their lives. The election experience was a process that made female candidates recognize that human activity is also self-changing. Therefore, a redefinition of the "self" occurred, which led to redefinition of the society, the elections, and the political

system. However, only few participants reached a standpoint for women that could see deeply and insightfully the construction of inequality and the structural issues that confront women, such as patriarchal and hierarchical systems. They understood the impact of political and social institutions that hinder women's advancement in politics.

This small group of participants have in common the long experience in politics and public life, and the election is the major experience that made them realize the interlocking nature of women's marginalization and oppression. They also stressed the newly emerged values like the use of money and people's dishonesty during the election, while they highlighted the gender inequality socially and legally. The threads in their minds are clear; nevertheless, they do not have the freedom to expose these issues, nor to advocate for equality and women's rights. Moreover, they are deprived of the rights of political association and organization. They understood that a real change in women's status would happen when a political change takes place.

Yet, there are most of the participants who shaped new and fresh perspectives during and after the election experience; however, they did not arrive at a standpoint for women because they lack independent self-evaluation and they see themselves and things around as it was presented to them socially and politically. They did not grasp how the world is put together, and they could not see the links clearly because their world, socially and politically, was determined elsewhere. However, experiencing the elections directly was a means of discovering or rediscovering the society from within. They could grasp the essence of the experience and make it observable and they understood the dynamics of the elections and the society and how they work. Nonetheless, they could not bring all links and threads together to form a standpoint for women.

The difference between the two groups in terms of how to advance women's

political participation is that the first group thinks that change must happen through political change by granting political freedoms and reforming the electoral system and elections process, in addition to elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women. The second group believes that change would happen if/when women prove that they deserve the trust of the state/government and wait for the reward to be decided. This group does not wish to invoke the state because they think that the state is a better ally than social radical groups ignoring that the state's policies played a part in women's exclusion and marginalization.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Starting research from the standpoint that focuses on women's experiences in the elections provides the ground for new knowledge and fresh perspective on social and political events, issues, and phenomena, and offers an opportunity to investigate the election experience from the point of view of women's place/location as candidates, and explore the status of women's political participation in Oman. Understanding that women's lives as a marginal group could provide better grounds for certain kinds of knowledge on culture and society by taking advantage of their location as "outsiders within" provides important resources of knowledge that has a "stronger objectivity" regarding the cultural, social, and institutional factors that impact women's political participation in Oman. The female candidate participants argue and discuss other and different and sometimes oppositional views to women's lives, which also provides new resources for knowledge. This dissertation seeks to grasp and explore female candidates' experience as a method of discovering Omani society, culture, and politics, and answering the questions of the research.

The central question revolves around Omani female candidates' understanding and explanation of the impact of cultural, social, and institutional factors on women's political participation in Oman. While attempting to find answers for that question, the dissertation investigates whether the female candidates made and understood the links between women's social and legal status and the size of women's political engagement, and how they explain the small number of women who win the elections and the size of women's representation in Oman's government and State council. The research also recognizes the female candidates' conceptualization of the political and social environment that could provide a better opportunity for larger women's public and

political participation. The findings of the research focus on three major areas: society and culture, elections and campaigning, and laws and state policies.

Gender, Society and Culture

According to the participants' views, the most challenging social factor in the elections is that society does not trust women in leadership positions and prefers men to occupy representative seats in the elected councils. Most participants stated that the traditional social hierarchical system does not recognize women as heads of families and sheikhs of the tribes, but it considers the role of political representation and leadership as an extension of males' leading responsibilities. Nevertheless, the participants think that male candidates are affected by such hierarchical system as well, because the tribal system in Oman is a class-based system that has strict and clear boundaries between the tribes. Society favors the male candidates who come from, or are affiliated with, a top tribe that is considered among the prestigious and powerful tribes in the society. While acknowledging that women are more affected because of the patriarchal nature and the dynamics of power relations of the hierarchy, the participants argued that if a female candidate is affiliated to one of these first class tribes, she would have the sufficient support and votes to win.

It was remarkable to discover that half of the participants disagree, strongly, that being a female was a decisive factor in the elections and voting decision. Although the other half agrees that being a female was a factor or major factor in voting for women, they also mentioned other factors and elements that contributed to excluding a female candidate from the winners list. They mentioned the competition and the male competitors using the gender/sex aspect to mobilize voters against female candidates. It was also remarkable that all participants believe that religion and religious teachings do not prevent women from public and political participation. Even the only female

candidate who does not wear hijab, and was criticized for it, did not think that was the cause of her failure in winning in the election.

Generally, the participants think that Omani society is tolerant and accepting of women's participation in different kinds of job fields, including in public and political positions. They think that the Omani people, and society at large, have moved beyond the idea of women mixing with men, limiting women to doing housework, and restricting their movement in the private sphere.

Having said that, it was noticeable that several participants could not see the links between the various social attitudes and the result of the elections, and they did not connect the points together to see the whole picture of women's spectrum that frames their movements and ambitions. For example, they did not connect the points between gender roles and society's favoritism for male candidates. The participants see traditional gender roles as a skill and a qualification that society should appreciate and consider it as bonus that a male candidate does not have. The participants could not see that this could be the reason behind society or voters thinking that men are better for politics and leadership. They could not see that society trusts men because they were tested in leading society whether as sheikhs or as heads of families, while women are still under social examination.

However, the participants stated that their gender roles as mothers and wives provided them with significantly limited time to manage and run good and successful elections' campaigns. This was a situation they compared to the male candidates who did not have such familial and social obligations, thus giving them the time and the energy for their elections' campaigns. The participants underlined another social element that emphasizes the conservative relationship between men and women in some of Oman's communities: several participants said that male voters were hesitant

to vote for a female candidate because they did not know how they are going to contact, meet, and deal with a female representative in the future.

The major finding was that most of the participants had their family's support and, most notably, male relatives such as husbands and brothers were the strongest supporters who provided the time and the effort for the elections' campaigns. Three participants said that their families did not support them although, they continued running despite family opposition. One of these three ran in three elections and, while her family did not stop her, they tried to make her decide to leave the race and stop her campaign. Another participant mentioned that her father and brother's opposition was not because she was a female nor for any other social issues, it was because they believed that the elections did not benefit the Omani people and Majlis A'Shura had limited powers that restricts representatives and constrains their performance.

Elections and Campaigns

Tribalism and the use of money in exchange for votes are the major factors among all factors that limit women's chances to win elections. All participants agree that these two factors are the most effective tools in persuading voters to vote for a candidate regardless of the gender/sex of the candidate. Without dismissing the contribution of other social and legal factors, the participants think that the factors related to the elections and campaigns have the most significant impact on women's campaigning, and therefore, chances to win and increase their representation in the elected councils.

However, the participants underlined an overarching factor relating to the elections and the state's policies that led around 50% of the eligible voters in Oman to boycott the elections. The limited powers of Majlis A'Shura and the privileges granted to the representative was a significant integral element that overshadowed all other

elements and factors in the elections process. The participants mentioned the limited powers of Majlis A'Shura and the elected councils in general in different contexts and occasions; some mentioned it as a reason for their family to justify refusal of their candidacy, and some said it was the reason that qualified male and female candidates do not win because the voters who boycotted the elections are mostly educated people who would vote for the most qualified, including women. Other participants said that was the reason for the spread of money usage in exchange for votes. The participants also said that the disappointing performance of the representatives and the weak powers and tools affected people's desire to vote and to become involved in public life, thereby impacting Omen's political participation as candidates and voters.

There are two categories of factors concerning the elections and campaigns that affected women's participation and winning; the first includes factors that impacted female and male candidates equally, and second includes factors impacting only female candidates. As for the shared factors, which are highlighted as the most significant, the participants said that tribalism impacted all candidates because people would prefer to vote for a candidate from a powerful tribe, because they think a powerful tribe has a voice with social and official institutions. Also, people affiliated with the tribe would vote only for candidates who belong to the same tribe regardless of the qualifications they hold. Large, powerful tribes have more followers and supporters; therefore, their candidates get sufficient votes to win. Few participants argued that they are sure if a powerful tribe nominated one of her daughters, she would win without any substantial challenge.

The other factor participants highlighted was the use of money and other materialistic favors in exchange for votes. Some participants think it is more effective than the power of tribes. However, most participants think this is a factor that

determines the winner in the elections. The participant said their refusal to pay for votes and their honesty with people did not pay off, and on the contrary, they lost and voters thought they were naïve and could be tricked and betrayed easily because they trusted that people would vote for them without getting a favor in return. Several participants said that if they had paid, people would have voted for them. However, most participants said that they told voters that they are not paying for votes and they want people to vote for their qualifications and because they think they are going to be good representatives. Most importantly, the participants were alarmed by such behavior and changing voters' electoral culture to such direction jeopardizes the integrity of the elections and puts at risk the democratization process in the country.

The third factor was the harsh and severe competition between candidates, where the use of money and tribal power thrived. The participants said that competition becomes harder every elections term and all kinds of ethical and unethical arguments and tools are used. They said that male candidates were suffering more than female candidates because in male mentality, male candidates are stronger competitors than female candidates, and therefore, they focused on excluding male counterparts from the competition. However, when they noticed a female as a threat, they would use every tool they have in hand to exclude her as well.

In this context a related factor was underscored. Participants said that the bigger number of candidates, especially among males, increased the competition among male candidates. However, this also affected female candidates when they ran in big numbers in one district. Participants stated that this situation affected qualified male and female candidates because votes scattered amongst many candidates, which led to excluding qualified candidates; not because they did not have significant numbers of votes, but because the votes were not enough to win. The participants blamed the candidates who

ran despite knowing that they do not have a chance to win. Some participants mentioned that some male candidates would do that just to exchange their voters/supporters for money, an action another male candidate would accept.

Late start and lack of preparation was another factor that participants highlighted, with some considering it as the most important and the most effective in the elections' campaigns. All participants said the early preparations and engagement with communities has significant impact on voters and the elections results. Several participants said that they regret not taking the elections seriously enough because either they started late, or they did not have proper teams running and managing their campaigns. Among the issues related to the campaign's management, they mentioned that they trusted people who did not deserve that trust. They advised that a female candidate should have a family member running her campaign or she should take responsibility of managing her campaign. Although this factor affected male candidates, the participants think that this impacted females immensely as candidates because they appeared inexperienced and immature.

The second category includes factors related to female candidates. The participants emphasized three main factors that impacted female candidates. First, is the small number of female candidates running in each elections term. Participants argued over the notion that women should run in large numbers and how that would affect their chances of winning and increase accordingly their representation. One side of the debate argues that female candidates should run in large numbers like male candidates because men win most of the seats due to the big number of male candidates. The other side of argument said that female candidates should not run in big numbers like male candidates; instead, they should run in bigger numbers but in different districts because the evidence shows that women did not win in districts where women

ran in the biggest number. In fact, it had the opposite effect; instead of focusing support for women, it scattered the vote and women lost. The participants concluded that women should run in larger numbers. However, it should be organized and planned well.

Although all participants said that gender roles did not impact voters' views about female candidates, they mentioned that spending a long time outside the house, away from their children, made them feel guilty and less focused in the campaign and campaign management. Participants said that working female candidates faced difficult situations when they had to spend hours at work and additional long hours campaigning. While it reduced the time spent with family it also did not give the time required to the campaign. The participants stated that although husbands were supportive, they could not commit to all household and childcare obligations. Balancing time, energy, and concentration was hard to manage, which led some female candidate to quit and suspend their campaigns. The participants advised future female candidates to run at a time when their family and social obligations are less, unless they have support system at home.

The absence of women's entity that supports female candidates and advocates women's political participation was one of the main demands that participants reinforced the importance of. They said that female candidates need training and preparations so they can compete effectively. They said that in order to increase female representation in elected councils and in the government's decision-making position, women need to have a unified vision for women and large umbrella under which all concerned women gather and organize. The participants blamed Oman Women's Association for not playing their role in supporting female candidates; however, it is common knowledge that OWAs cannot cross the line drawn for their activities.

Laws and State's Policies

Although most of the participants said that there are no laws which prevent or prohibit women from running and competing freely in the elections, they stated the importance of issuing new laws that support women's political participation and increase their representation in the elected councils. However, most participants did not mention other laws that discriminate against women and might impact women's participation. Only few participants mentioned that laws should be amended and changed to advance women's status and, therefore, their participation in public life. Only one participant said that laws do not allow all citizens to participate freely and fully in politics. However, none of the participants made the links between legislation and the number of women's representatives. They did not see the impact of discriminatory laws on women's image and status in the society as second-class citizens and therefore, on women's chances to win. The few participants who talked about discriminatory laws mentioned the retirement and civil services law and emphasized that women need longer maternity leave and additional breastfeeding hours for working mothers. However, none of the participants, despite most of them specifying their decision to run focused on support for women's issues and rights, mentioned the citizenship law or the personal status law, both of which discriminate against women. Moreover, most participants demanded that Oman Women's Associations should play a role in supporting female candidates, which meant that they are not aware of the associations' law that prohibits all civil society organizations from any kind of engagement in political issues.

Regarding state policies concerning women, the participants said the state policies are significantly important in enforcing women's political roles and widening their participation in elections and public life. And, although they acknowledged that

the state showed reasonable support, they think it could provide more to enhance women's status and advance their political participation, and representation. The participants suggested the state should appoint more women in the government and the state councils because women are qualified and have a different take on and understanding about public issues, specifically matters related to women, family, and childcare. They mentioned appointing more women would encourage people to trust women in leadership position, and consequently, would vote for women in the elections.

The participants also stressed the importance of allowing Majlis A'Shura to become a parliament with effective tools and powerful privileges that entitle representatives to act and perform as equals to the government's ministers. Granting Majlis A'Shura powerful tools and empowering its representatives would lead people to carefully choose their representatives and look for qualifications and skills instead of looking at the tribes' names and titles or exchanging votes for money. Although this desired situation would open the door for all qualified candidates, the participants think that this in particular would provide women with more chances to win and increase representation because they are qualified, close to their communities, and determined to serve.

The participants considered the challenges related to the elections and campaigning, including the limited powers of the elected councils, are the major factors impacting women's participation in politics. Second came the social and cultural issues, and despite few arguing that culture and society are accepting and supporting women's public engagement, most stated that favoritism to men was evident. Third was the factors related to the laws and the state's policies. The participants noticed that most of these factors impact male candidates as well, and they think that state' policies could

mitigate the impact of the social and culture challenges through more egalitarian policies and creating an enabling environment for all candidates.

It is noteworthy to highlight that all, except one survey, previous studies declared social and cultural factors caused the major impact on women's political participation, and their chances of winning the elections and increasing representation in the elected councils. Also, the previous studies overlooked the impact of the legal and institutional factors, which contributed significantly to stabilizing women's status instead of moving it forward. This main difference in findings is because this research is the first which investigated the impact of social, cultural, and institutional aspects on women's political participation from the perspectives of female candidates and exploring their elections' experiences. My assumption was that the institutional factors play the most effective role in hindering women's political participation. While the participants did not dismiss this impact, they thought that they run in the same political environment as male candidates, and they win the elections with incomparable rate to women. Therefore, they thought that the social hierarchy and patriarchy are not on the woman's side.

The participants proposed that the state should adapt a quota system that grants women seats in the elected councils and increases women's representation. However, the participants did not mention the state should reserve a certain percentage for women in the government, as well as the state council, while also setting a quota system for elected councils. They also underscored the significance of creating an independent women's entity that gathers women under its umbrella and works towards a unified vision for women. The participants stressed that female candidates need such support, not only to win the election, but also to advocate women's political rights and women's perspective in policy making. Nevertheless, they did not mention the significance of

eliminating all kinds of laws that restrict the freedom of associations and organizations, and allows citizens, under the protection of the law, to express their views and positions regarding the state's policies freely.

The state's policies are significant in emphasizing women's political role in the government and the appointed and elected councils because in a rentier society people accept that the state is the provider and the giver. Also, as a monarchy, Oman's Sultan has all the powers and authority to make the decisions and appointments. All high positions in Oman are appointed by the Sultan's orders, and royal decrees are issued with each appointment. People usually highlight the appointments and consider them to be wise and right. When women are appointed, the society and the media would consider that as appreciation for women and support for their political participation. Therefore, there is not any obvious reason that would prevent appointing more women in the government and the State council. The government appointments of August 2020 included only three women appointed as ministers in the government among 21 male ministers. The negotiations and bargaining with state especially, and with the society generally, could not come with the outcome women are looking for. There are no challenges for appointing more women, in comparison to women running in the elections, except for the fact that hierarchy and patriarchy extend from the family private sphere to the society, and reach the state's institutions, which are male dominated and keen to reinforce the status quo and keep men on top and in control.

Under the ambiguity that surrounds the appointment process, the state transformed part of intellectual and highly educated people, including women, to a group of pragmatic benefactors waiting for a decision to transform their lives. However, it is clear that appointments in Oman are set according to a mix of measures consisting of tribal, technocratic, and loyalist appointees. Women as well could be appointed by

the same standards. Nevertheless, it happens at an extremely low rate that does not represent women's population, nor their participation in the workforce.

Unfortunately, the participants and Omani women generally do not publicly demand their rights to have good and fair representation in the government and in other high positions in the state because the freedom of expression is not appreciated and women refrain from criticizing the government and the state's policies as they want to be loyal and appreciative for what they have. Also, as the participants demonstrated, women in Oman consider discussing women's political participation and demanding rights and equality as sensitive issues that might upset the state. Furthermore, some are afraid of being accused of following a feminist agenda that does not relate to society's traditions and values, and might spoil women and damage our culture, while OWAs, the representative of state feminism, strive to keep women upholding these values and traditions. Only few participants realized and understood the positive impact of independent, free, and active civil society, and the result of enjoying public liberties alongside powerful elected councils would create a suitable and enabling environment for larger women's participation and would restore the trust to the elected councils, especially A'Shura, and would advance the democratization process in the country.

A small group of the female candidate participants could grasp the essence of the elections' experience and make the links between the factors, structures, and institutions that contribute to women's oppression and marginalization in the political sphere. They became aware that the political exclusion practiced against women is like the social exclusion they experienced during the elections, and the competition is not only about the elections and representation seats, it is about maintaining power in the hands of men in societies that are used to men's leadership and have come to think according to the dominant group mentality. Male dominated mentality and societies

work together to further marginalize women and push them back to their private spaces. This small group of participants who had this consciousness and realization could shape a standpoint for women that is aware of the interacting factors and interwoven causes impeding women's advancement in politics and public life.

Most participants presented new and different perspectives. They offered insightful thinking and deep understanding for the social and electoral dynamics during the elections periods, and they developed clear positions from society and people, yet they seemed confused regarding the nature of the society and the way women were/are treated differently and unequally to men. They could not deconstruct the traditions and the culture's values that favored men over them, and they did not build their own new self-definition and self-valuation. They could not oppose the dominant culture.

However, both groups provided the research with a more complete understanding for women's struggle in the elections and presented a new concept and new dimensions for the election experience, and the factors that caused women's low participation and representation in the elected councils. In the end, they all became voices for female candidates and women in politics, seeking to shift their place from the margin to the center.

Recommendations

Having studied the women's experiences and perspectives on political participation and the social, cultural, electoral, and state's policies that impact women's participation, I recommend, for a more complete understanding, searching, and examining other areas related to the topic. These include studying the impact of tribalism and money use on male candidates comparing to female candidates. Other areas worth examination are: the impact of discriminatory laws on women's lives and therefore, on their political participation, and the impact of the limited power of elected

council on voters' participation and the electability of women, and further investigation on the specific social and culture factors that hinder women's advancement in politics. Another suggestion is studying the impact of political and legal restrictions on public liberties, civil society, and how that affects, ultimately, citizens' political participation.

On the level of the Gulf region, a comparative study could be conducted focusing on the female candidates' challenges in two states such as Oman and Kuwait to investigate the similarities and differences. Another comparative study is recommended on the impact of the political system and state policies on women political participation in Kuwait and Oman considering the margin of political and media freedom in Kuwait and how that impacted women's engagement in politics. This study also, explores whether this partly free situation have provided a better political environment for women comparing to women in Oman who is described as not free according to global measures.

My thesis regarding Omani women's status and meaningful change toward larger participation is that top down policies have proven successful in social and political change, because as a monarchy and a rentier state, people respect, obey, and execute the head of state's decisions and royal decrees, not only because they think that they should obey the royal orders, but also because Omanis are open and practical to change that is useful and works for their interests. For example, among the Omani women who were appointed, over the past years, as ministers and State council members, were women who come from known conservative families socially and religiously, and none of the families nor the women refused such exposure to the public. On the contrary, they considered that appointment as an honor and an obligation they must fulfill to serve their people and country. There is common sense in Omani society that decisions coming from the head of the state/the Sultan are for the benefit of the

people. Therefore, it is not expected in the Omani political and social context, that if the state issues a decision for wider political participation and lifting restrictions on public liberties, that any Omani would oppose or reject such decision. On the contrary, people would welcome such a step and would trust that the state is looking to its citizens and seeking partnership in serving the country.

To advance women's status, a political change must happen. When Oman's state removes constraints on public freedoms and liberties and grants elected officials more and effective powers, the first step would be a call for wider popular participation. Adapting a quota model for women in elected and appointed councils and government would encourage women to participate largely as candidates and voters. A free and active civil society would allow a women's movement and other public platforms to form and act. The responsibility of these women's movement and organizations is to advocate and support women's rights in general, but specifically political rights. Among their missions would be tackling the gender and male mentality domination related issues, and other elements of social and cultural challenges facing women. The other option for Omani women is to work through the available platforms, such as the female representatives in A'Shura and members of States councils, ministers, and other male allies to advocate for changing laws and policies that affect women and their political participation; however, this option is not granted because women in these positions, especially ministers, tend to not involve in what they consider as sensitive political matters. The only approach Omani women have, currently, is the careful and unorganized use of social media, the effectiveness of which cannot be measured nor is it possible to know the extent of pressure it causes to decision-makers.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the importance of awareness, at all its stages and levels, in creating new concepts and perspectives concerning us as women, our

lives, our societies, and the political systems that govern us. Ultimately, what determines our ability to change is the level of our awareness, and as a standpoint theorist stated, that the realization that the social world is a human creation, and through our own activity, we have already changed important aspects of that world leading to a sense of our own power and providing a source of energy for further changes.

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Appendix

Participants Questions

الأسئلة للمشاركات في بحث الدكتوراه: المشاركة السياسية للمرأة في عمان: المجتمع والثقافة والسياسة

للمرشحات

العمر:

المؤهل الدراسي:

الخبرة العملية:

الحالة الاجتماعية:

الترشح للفترة..... عام

انتخابات: الشورى ... المجالس البلدية

المجموعة الأولى:

- لماذا قررت الترشح للانتخابات؟
- من دعم الفكرة ومن كان ضدتها؟
- ما شكل الدعم والمساندة التي قدمتها لك أسرتك أو أفراد معينين في أسرتك؟
- هل رفض أحد أفراد أسرتك ترشحك؟ لماذا؟ ما هي صلة القرابة؟
- ما نوع الصعوبات أو التحديات التي واجهتك داخل أسرتك؟

المجموعة الثانية:

- كيف بدأت حملتك الانتخابية؟
- ماهي الصعوبات التي واجهتك في الحملة الانتخابية، وما هي الأمور التي ساعدتك؟
- كيف كانت نتيجة الانتخابات؟
- لماذا في رأيك هذه النتيجة؟
- في حال الفوز ، ما الأسباب التي أدت لفوزك في الانتخابات؟
- في حال الخسارة، ما هي الأسباب من وجهة نظرك التي أدت إلى هذه النتيجة؟

المجموعة الثالثة:

- بماذا تفسرين قلة عدد النساء في هذه المجالس المنتخبة سواء الشورى أو البلدية؟
- هل تعتقدين للقوانين المتعلقة بالمرأة دور في حجم المساندة التي تحصل عليها المرأة من الناخبين؟
- هل تعتقدين أن هناك بعض القوانين المتعلقة بالمرأة ينبغي أن تتغير لتكون المرأة في وضع اجتماعي أقوى؟ اذكري بعض هذه القوانين التي تعتقدين أن تغييرها سيعزز وضع المرأة في المجتمع بشكل عام.
- كيف تقيمين أثر النظرة التقليدية للمرأة على مشاركتها في الانتخابات وبالتالي فوزها أو خسارتها؟
- ما الذي ينبغي أن يحدث ليزيد عدد النساء في المجالس المنتخبة؟

المجموعة الرابعة:

- ما نوع التحديات، من وجهة نظرك، التي يواجهها المترشحون الذكور؟
- هل تعتقدين ترشح المرأة يتطلب مؤهلات أكثر من تلك التي تطلب من المرشحين الذكور؟ لماذا؟
- بشكل عام هل تعتقدين أن سبب عدم وجود عدد كافٍ من النساء في مجلس الشورى أو المجالس البلدية يعود إلى كونهن نساء بالدرجة الأولى أم لأسباب تتعلق بالمؤهلات وفاعلية الحملة الانتخابية؟
- هل تعتقدين في حال ترشح النساء بأعداد كبيرة قريبة من أعداد الرجال هل سيحصلن على نتائج أفضل أو قريبة من نتائج الرجال؟
- هل تعتقدين أن عدم تصويت النساء للمرشحات أحد أسباب خسارة المرشحات في الانتخابات؟ كيف؟
- هل تعتقدين أن للأدوار التقليدية المطلوبة من المرأة مثل تربية البناء والعنابة والإشراف على منزلها واحترام الزوج وطاعته، أو احترام الوالد وآرائه، أثر في عدم ترشح المرأة؟

المجموعة الخامسة: مجموعة مشتركة لأعضاء الدولة والنواحي والمرشحات

- هل تعتقدين أن عدد النساء المعينات كوزيرات أو أعضاء بمجلس الدولة كافٍ؟ لماذا؟ أرجو شرح الإجابة والأسباب.
- بشكل عام هل تعتقدين أنه ينبغي أن يكون عدد النساء في الوزارات والمجالس المعينة والمنتخبة مساوٍ لعدد الرجال؟ اشرحني إجابتك إذا كانت بنعم أو لا.
- هل تعتقدين وجود عدد أكبر من النساء في مراكز صنع القرار سواء في الحكومة أو في المجالس المنتخبة والمعينة سيكون له أثر على سياسات التنمية وبالتالي خدمة الوطن والمواطنين بشكل أكثر فاعلية؟ كيف؟ أرجو الشرح.

المجموعة السادسة:

- ما هو تقييمك لتجربتك في الانتخابات؟
- هل تتصدين النساء بالترشح بعد أكبر للانتخابات؟ لماذا؟
- ما الذي تغير فيك بعد الانتخابات؟
- ما الذي أضافه لك تجربة الانتخابات؟
- هل تغيرت نظرتك للمجتمع والناس بعد الانتخابات؟
- كيف تنظررين لنفسك بعد الانتخابات؟

The Questions Translated into English

First set of questions:

- Why did you decide to run for the elections?
- Who supported you?
- Who was against?
- How your family supported you?
- What challenges you faced in the family?

The second set of the questions includes:

- What kind of challenges, do you think, male candidates face in the elections?
- Do you think female candidates need more qualification to run for elections?
- Do you think there is a smaller number of female representatives in the elected councils because of their gender?
- Do you think if women run in bigger numbers, they would increase chances of winning?
- Do you think women's vote is main factor preventing female candidates from winning?

- Do you think traditional gender roles would be among the reasons stop women from running for elections?

The third set of questions:

- How do you explain the small number of women in these elected councils, whether in A'Shura or in the municipal councils?
- Do you think laws related to women have a role in the size of support female candidate get from the voters?
- Do you think that there are some laws related to women that should be changed in order for women to be in a stronger social position? List some of these laws that you think changing will enhance the status of women in society in general.
- How do you assess the impact of the traditional view of women on her participation in the elections and thus her victory or loss?
- What should happen to increase the representation of women in the elected councils?

Fourth set of questions:

- What kind of challenges, in your view, do male candidates face?
- Do you think that nominating women requires more qualifications than those required of male candidates? Why?
- In general, do you think that the reason for the lack of sufficient numbers of women in A'Shura Council or municipal councils is due to their being primarily women, or for reasons related to the qualifications and effectiveness of the electoral campaign?
- Do you think if women run in large numbers, close to the number of men, will they get better results or close to the results of men?

- Do you think that the failure of women to vote for female candidates is one of the reasons why female candidates lose in the elections? How?
- Do you think that the traditional roles required of women, such as building up, caring, and supervising their home, respecting and obeying the husband, or respecting the father and his views, have an effect on the woman not running?

Fifth set of questions:

- Do you think that the number of women appointed as ministers or members of the State Council is sufficient? Why? Please explain the answer and the reasons.
- In general, do you think that the number of women in appointed and elected ministries and councils should be equal to the number of men? Explain your answer.
- Do you think the presence of more women in decision-making positions, whether in the government or in elected and appointed councils, will have an impact on development policies and thus serve the country and citizens more effectively? How? Please explain.

Sixth set of question:

- What is your evaluation of your experience in the elections?
- Do you advise women to run for more elections? Why?
- What changed in you after the elections?
- What did the election experience add to you?
- Did your outlook on society and people change after the elections?
- How do you see yourself after the elections?