



OUR WORK IN TUNISIA

THE TUNISIA SCHOOL OF POLITICS: OPENING DOORS FOR YOUNG POLITICIANS

Yasmine Ben Hamida is one of the youngest people in Tunisia to be elected to a political position. Shortly after her election as a City Councillor, she decided to join the Tunisia School of Politics. She saw it as a way for young politicians to come together in a multiparty setting, and acquire the skills and knowledge that they need to go further in their political careers. What she did not foresee was the impact the School would have on her own aspirations and relationships.

When she was growing up, Yasmine didn't hear about politics much. It wasn't a frequent topic of discussion in her family, and it was rarely mentioned in her friend group at school.

It was only after the Jasmine Revolution, when Yasmine was 12, that freedom of expression took hold, and politics became more accessible:

“Suddenly, there was an explosion of political discourse across all levels of society. Overnight, everyone became an expert in political analysis.”



But it wasn't until a few years later that Yassmine also started to take notice of the new opportunities available to her. Her civil society work opened her eyes to the power of politics. Among many other projects, she was part of a team who organized medical consultations. She saw the concrete impact that the consultations had on the lives of her fellow citizens, who would otherwise have had no access to this kind of service. That's when she decided to bring services closer to the people through politics.

So, Yassmine embarked on a political campaign at the age of 19. It wasn't an easy ride for her. She had to juggle campaigning and studying for her university exams. And many people didn't believe that someone so young could be there on merit. The criticism Yassmine faced only spurred her on: "It was my motivation for passing on a clear and positive message about young people. We are there and we are ready to take up our place in politics."

A first step into politics

After months of arduous campaigning, Yassmine was elected as a City Councillor. While she had a lot of experience working in civil society, it was her first time working in politics. From her campaigning, one lesson stood out to her: as a young woman in politics, she would have to fight to prove herself in this domain and be accepted by the older generation.

With this in mind, Yassmine decided to take part in the Tunisia School of Politics (TSoP), a platform for young politicians, run by our Tunisian partner, the *Centre des études méditerranéennes et internationales* (CEMI), with support from NIMD and Demo Finland.

New knowledge and new perspectives

At TSoP, Yassmine was excited to meet so many people from different backgrounds and ideologies; young people who, like her, had entered politics for the first time. She took part in a whole series of interactive sessions, including training and group work, focusing on public law and political sciences; economic sciences and social science. In each, she learned a bit more about the political landscape in Tunisia.

She learned about the role of municipalities, which helped her to see her tasks as City Councillor in a new light. She learned the definition and objectives of Tunisia's decentralization process – a crucial task of shifting power from the national to the local level.

And, through the School's focus on political communication and leadership, she learned to refine her soft skills and enter negotiations in her political life on a different footing.

But, what she soon also learned is that the School was about much more than political knowledge and skills. It was about democratic culture.

As Ahmed Driss, Director of CEMI, puts it: "Democratic culture goes beyond the traditional understanding of democracy as a political system and the rule of law. Participants also need to understand values such as integrity; how to bring about change through peaceful means; and respecting minorities and people who are different."

This started, of course, with the multiparty setting. Before taking part in the School, Yassmine did not have contact with people from other political parties. While Yassmine had always believed in human fraternity as a key principle, TSoP helped her to put this into practice with people who held very different beliefs.

As time went by, her relationship with the other participants went beyond mutual respect. She made friends with many participants; learned about their motivations; and forged a long-lasting connection.

Expanding horizons

Through the School sessions, it was clear that Yassmine was thriving. Based on examination results, CEMI and NIMD selected her as one of 10 high-performing students who would take part in a series of regional exchanges between young politicians in Jordan and Tunisia, including a final exchange visit to the Netherlands.

Yassmine was inspired by the experiences that her peers in Jordan shared. It was refreshing to see things from a different perspective and work together to consider practical ways to help young people into politics and address regional challenges.

She also believes that the exchanges helped her to widen her perspectives. Meeting other young politicians from Jordan opened her up to the possibilities of a more interconnected world, one where she could work directly with other young leaders across her region.

The exchanges also affected her view of her future prospects. She recalls how, during her visit to the Netherlands, she entered into conversation with H.E. Elyes Ghariani, Tunisian Ambassador to the Netherlands. They discussed possible agricultural cooperation between her municipality and the Netherlands.

While she had previously focused solely on working locally, this conversation showed her the more international possibilities and awoke in her a commitment to explore different sectors in her role as City Councillor.

New opportunities for her community

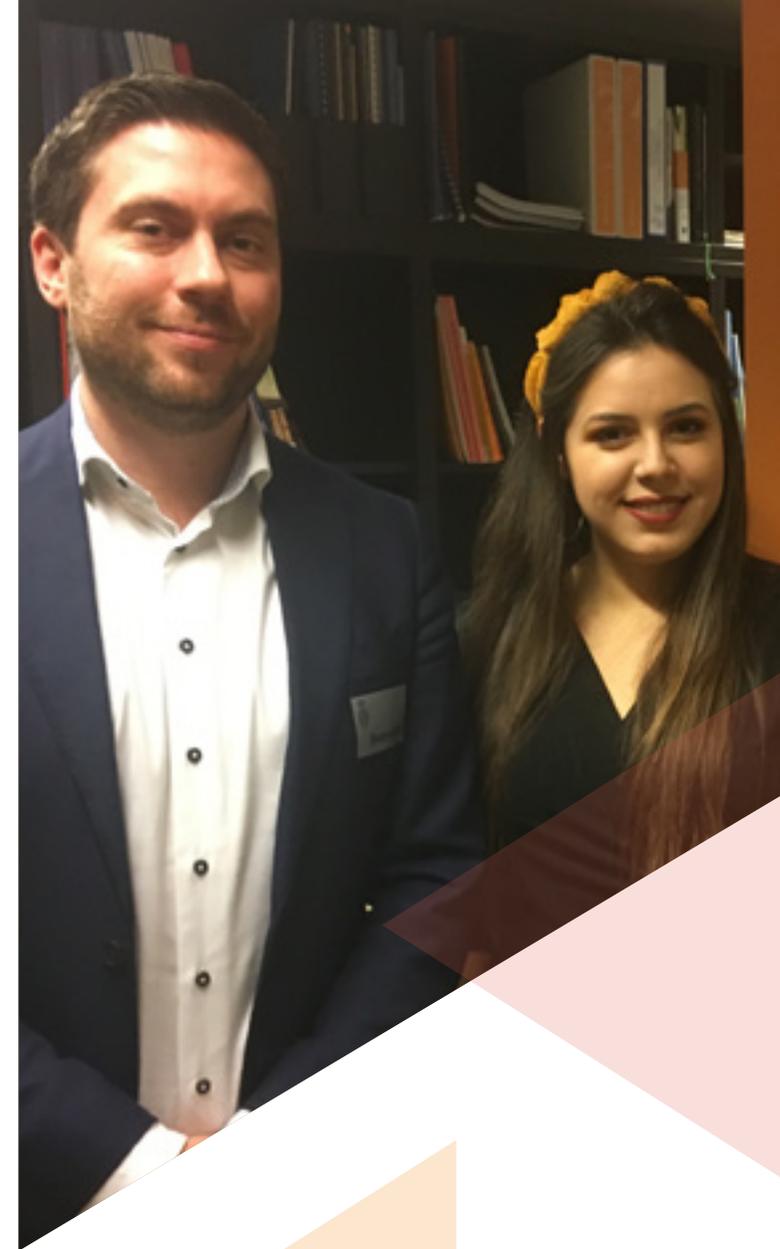
Yassmine is determined to take what she has learned back to her community. For example, she is working on an international architecture and urban planning project entitled “space for citizens”. As part of this project, she is creating a space in her city dedicated to managing citizen affairs such as complaints and registrations. This will increase responsiveness to citizen demands and, ultimately, bring the services of the Municipal Council closer to the people.

In addition, Yassmine wants to make sure that other young people also have access to TSoP. She is working with CEMI to start to involve even younger people from her municipality in the School, including secondary school pupils. These pupils will attend training and even Multiparty Council sessions. They will learn how local politics works, how it affects them, and how to get involved.

“For me,” explains Yassmine, “the idea of cooperating with TSoP to help young people in my city came from my deep belief in the need to create new generations of engaged citizens.”

Unlike Yassmine, these young people will have the chance to grow up in a democratic environment, with real understanding of how they can make their voices heard.

“It’s an opportunity for today’s young people, but also for the future of Tunisia. This is how we make sure democracy is here to stay.”



Plans for the future

Yasmine is excited for what the future will bring. For her, TSoP is about expanding horizons. And one of her possible ambitions is to pass from local to national politics, where she can propose national solutions to the challenges her country faces.

Whatever path Yasmine takes, she is pleased to have the continued support of TSoP and the new friends she has made. Her network of alumni cuts across traditional party boundaries. Its members are not only Tunisian, but hail from across the wider region. They share a vision of a more democratic future, and they will be there to help each other towards achieving that future.

As Yasmine puts it “Perhaps one day, we will be the leaders of our parties, and the connections we have built through TSoP will have a major impact on the decisions we take as leaders”.





OUR WORK IN UKRAINE

FEMALE LEADERS OF UKRAINE BATTLE FOR CHANGE

Kateryna Chyzhyk is a lawyer and activist from the city of Dnipro in Eastern Ukraine. Situated not far from the separatist capital of the Donetsk People's Republic, Dnipro city turned into a fully-fledged warzone during the Russian military intervention, denoted by the symbol of Ukrainian unity and independence - "Heart of Ukraine".

Out of the dangers of war, Kateryna went from humanitarian volunteer, to search and rescue leader, to inspiring advocate for women's equality. This is her story.

A sense of public duty

Coming from a family of military veterans, Kateryna was actively involved in numerous voluntary and humanitarian initiatives from a young age, supporting veterans, victims' families and young activists during Euromaidan. Together with other volunteers, Kateryna created a number of local initiatives such as "Victims need our help", which sought to help coordinate aid for wounded and injured protesters during the Euromaidan clashes. Kateryna also participated in the formation of a coalition of public organizations and political parties called the "Headquarters of National Protection of the Dnipropetrovsk Region" (HNPDR). The coalition aimed to reinforce the border area of the Dnepropetrovsk region by strengthening existing checkpoints and establishing new ones.

In 2015, Kateryna began helping individual units and families of victims in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) zone. She led the formation of the first search centre for killed and wounded soldiers following brutal clashes with Russian military units in Ilovaysk.

After this, the HNPDR coalition sought to support those facing hardship in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Through that coalition, Kateryna was actively involved in providing humanitarian aid to internally displaced families from Crimea and assisting with their resettlement.

EECMD Democracy School as a platform for change

It was during the Russo-Ukrainian war, while providing legal help to activists, families of war victims and veterans, that Kateryna found her political motivation. She decided to pursue her postgraduate degree and soon received her second master's degree in Law.

Then in 2019, she was invited together with other volunteers and ATO veterans to an introductory meeting on a "Democracy School" hosted by the NIMD's partner, the Eastern European Centre for Democracy (EECMD), in Dnipro. At that time, EECMD was in the process of deciding where to open its latest Democracy School, with the top choices being Dnipro or Karkiv. So, the meeting with representatives of local civil society was to help to decide between the two cities.

"I felt that this was the decisive moment to convince the organization to open the Democracy School in Dnipro, as the city and local community desperately needed educational programmes like this. Thus, we did our best to present our arguments and prove to EECMD that Dnipro was the right place for their next Democracy School. I was extremely interested and motivated to become part of this group and continue my studies" - says Kateryna. EECMD duly decided that Dnipro would be the best place to establish their next Democracy School.

Stepping into the political world

Kateryna sees joining the Democracy School in Dnipro as the catalyst for her future career and professional development. Ahead of graduating from the Democracy School, she told us: "EECMD's Democracy School provides an opportunity to explore the new horizons and possibilities, to come up with novel ideas for different projects, and to meet new people and establish partnerships."

"If, before participating in the programme, I was hesitant about whether to go to politics and make a change, the Democracy School experience has changed that. It has made me understand the importance of being able to influence events not only as a public figure, but also as a politician. I realized that as a responsible citizen you have to take things under control and try to make a difference - in both my native city Dnipro and in Ukraine as a whole. Hence, I made a decision to participate in the upcoming local elections in Ukraine".

Since graduating from Dnipro Democracy School in early 2020, Kateryna has been working on issues of gender equality and women's active participation in Ukrainian political life. Together with her colleagues, Kateryna launched a new platform that would bring together groups of women from different backgrounds and industries, assisting them through training and workshops on issues like campaign management, political financing etc. The meetings served as an additional platform to introduce their policy initiatives to local civil society and political parties, strengthening their candidacies for the upcoming local elections in Ukraine, which are scheduled for October 2020.



Joining the Battle Against the Pandemic

2020 started with significant uncertainty around the world, with the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak threatening health and economic sustainability nationally and internationally. Kateryna joined forces with her fellow Democracy School students and local volunteer organizations to create a support group. This group sought to provide families of war victims and veterans with humanitarian aid, so as to minimize the spread of the Coronavirus and the adverse impacts of mass quarantine in Ukraine.

The newly formed initiative soon established a support centre for elderly people who lost their family members in military actions in Eastern Ukraine. Through the centre, Dnipro Democracy School students and their networks have managed to distribute hygiene and food products to more than 500 socially vulnerable families. Due to the major shortage of medical masks in Ukraine, activists also started to sew homemade masks and distribute them for free.

"The rapid escalation of COVID-19 and unprecedented crisis put all citizens worldwide in a vulnerable situation. That is why it is crucial to take care of our communities and especially of those who belong to the risk groups" Kateryna tells us.

Dnipro Democracy School students have also been actively involved in awareness-raising initiatives. The alumni have been helping with activities such as distributing information on threats and consequences of the pandemic, and introducing material on the health and safety measures being implemented across the country.

Looking Ahead

Kateryna is determined to continue her endeavours and make a significant change for her region and the society. After the lockdown, she plans to start campaigning together with other female leaders and prepare for the local elections in autumn 2020. "I am a team player. I need to be sure that my female colleagues are prepared and ready to run for the office. Thus, my aim is to consolidate potential political leaders of our region and support their political aspirations for the upcoming elections."- says Kateryna.

EECMD is proud to see its graduates rising to the occasion and providing substantial support to people in need, particularly in challenging times like this. Through its Democracy Schools across Ukraine, EECMD will continue to inspire and empower more female leaders like Kateryna, working restlessly for better future of their communities.





OUR WORK IN JORDAN

CAPACITATING JORDANIAN YOUTH TO WORK TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

Abla Al Hajaya is a young aspiring politician and member of civil society from Al-Hissa in the Southern Badia, a remote and conservative county in Jordan. In 2017-18, she took part in NIMD's first Young Political and Civic Actors training programme, where she and other young Jordanians honed their political skills and knowledge. Based on the advances she made during the training, Abla decided to take part in the first round of NIMD's Jordan School of Politics in 2019. The new skills she gained helped Abla to establish an NGO to provide better transportation solutions for women. The first of its kind in Jordan, the NGO aims to increase women's economic participation.

Abla has always been a fierce advocate for the rights of women and girls in Jordan. Through her work with various organizations, she has led a campaign on the importance of family planning; lobbied to create a local maternity clinic in her county; and worked with Syrian refugees to re-engage girls in schools.

Her dedication to this work stems from her own past, and the recognition that she, too, has had to face many challenges to thrive in her career.

According to Abla: "The area I live in has restrictions on women, who are expected to be housewives or be very careful in how they advocate their message about women empowerment and women's role in public life."



One common restriction that prevents women from working is a lack of access to transportation. Abla recalls the difficulty she has often faced during her career, when work required her to commute, even within her own county. Indeed, Abla's county is extremely remote. It is divided by a highway, with no pedestrian bridges, and many people have lost their lives as they cross from one side to the other.

Entering politics to make a difference

Far from holding her back, these challenges strengthened Abla's dedication.

Determined to find a wide-reaching platform where she could make a difference, Abla nominated herself for local municipal elections in 2013. She had limited financial resources but her family supported her as she ran an unconventional campaign, knocking on doors to communicate her message to voters.

This was in contrast to traditional campaigning strategies, where candidates set up large social venues, spending lots of money to win voters. Her message focused on women empowerment and childcare. Abla was elected to become a member of the local municipal council, where she served until 2017.

Abla ran again for municipal council in the same year. She recounts that, when the results were announced, she believed had won. A few days later, she was surprised to be informed that she had not, contrary to the previous message. She considers her loss to be the result of deliberate manipulation of legal loopholes by influential powers who were uncomfortable with her progressive thinking.

Embarking on NIMD's training programmes

Recognizing the many obstacles that still stood in her way, Abla decided to take part in NIMD's Young Political and Civic Actors Trainee programme and, later, the Jordan School of Politics programme. She was driven by her motivation to learn, and was looking for a venue to express her views with her peers and connect with decision-makers.

When she attended her first session of the youth training, Abla was therefore excited to be surrounded by such a diverse group of young people.

The training brought together people from different backgrounds and counties, and, most importantly, people who held different political and ideological beliefs.

Abla soon found that, despite these differences, the group had one thing in common: a deep motivation and energy to make a difference in their society. As she got to know the students, and understand their different viewpoints and ideologies, she started to build a network of young political actors keen to make a difference in their communities.

Reflecting on her journey with NIMD, Abla values the opportunity it gave her to create new connections and friendships: "The participants provided rich and enlightening exchanges, often challenging me to see things in a different light. They definitely inspired me to learn and read more."

In addition to the opportunity to network, the youth training and School of Politics also offered a comprehensive curriculum and a focus on personal development. Abla enjoyed gaining new knowledge through classes on political and democratic theory, electoral systems, political parties, constitutions and legislation. And she learned technical skills such as public speaking, critical thinking, and economy and political analysis.

New initiatives

With increased skills and deepened knowledge, Abla now feels motivated and equipped to make a greater impact on Jordanian politics.

“The programme enhanced my skills, especially when it comes to reaching out to the constituents in my district; it helped me to better prioritize what my county needs, and to connect youth and women in my district with decision makers and make their voices heard.”

Since the training, Abla has become more engaged with her political party, the Social Democratic Party, and is now considering running for elections in her area. In addition, her new network of young people has opened doors for Abla. She is now able to think along with her peers from other counties in Jordan, and come up with more ambitious projects together. For example, she is looking at ways to cooperate with the Ministry of Tourism to promote local tourism in her county.

However, Abla's main passion is empowering other women to participate in economic and political life. Since the training, she has used her new public speaking skills to carry out workshops to raise awareness within her own county.

She has also teamed up with an associate to set up a local NGO called Raedat Al Hissa Al Tawonieh (Al Hissa Pioneers' Coop for Women). The first of its kind in Jordan, the NGO focuses on improving transport for women.

Abla was pleased to count on her negotiation skills, honed through the NIMD training, to lobby the municipality, who dedicated a plot of land to the project. This allowed the NGO to create a public transportation hub. Abla was also successful in presenting the NGO's work to UN Women, who donated a bus to the cause.

Abla hopes that Raedat Al Hissa Al Tawonieh will provide a sustainable solution to women who would otherwise be unable to travel, allowing them to make the most of new opportunities. She considers herself an example for all women who are disempowered by social restrictions and economic hardship. She believes that, with self-confidence, courage, and some practical support, they can go much further in their careers.

