

# What is preventing Jordanian women from working?

A Minor Field Study on the female labour force participation  
in Jordan

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# Abstract

This paper investigates the labour force participation among Jordanian women. Although most indicators, such as the country's political economy and relatively high HDI scores, the high percentage of female students at universities and encouragement from the Royal family, signal that the situation ought to be different, Jordanian women's labour force participation is below the Middle Eastern average. In order to understand this contradictory phenomenon, modernity and political economy theories are employed in combination with qualitative methods. In-depth interviews with students, professors and representatives from NGOs and ministries were conducted during Minor Field Study in Amman, Jordan. The stay lasted from November 2008 to January 2009 and was financed through a scholarship from the Swedish International Development Agency, Sida. The study shows that cultural, economical and political factors such as social norms, economic hardships and lack of adequate and necessary legislation are preventing Jordanian women from joining the labour force.

*Key words:* Jordan, modernity, female labour force participation, Minor Field Study, Middle East

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 The research question

*Women work. Women of all ages and marital statuses – single, married, divorced or widowed – work. Women in nearly all circumstances of class or status work, and have always worked. However ... much of the work that women have done and continue to do is invisible, or is either assumed to be ‘natural’ or of little value.*

Laurie Nisonoff in “The women, gender & development reader”

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is with its authoritarian regime, patriarchal society and emphasis on Islam by many means a typical Arab country, but in at least one sense the country stands out from the rest of the region. With its remarkably low female labour force participation at 15 percent, Jordan deviates from the pattern among the Middle Eastern economies where the female labour force participation is about the double (DoS 2008, The World Bank “GEM Country Brief – Jordan 2007”). What makes this percentage unexpected is that most research shows that the situation ought to be different. Studies show that industrialized countries with a large degree of manufacturing for export traditionally have high female labour force participation. The Latin American and south eastern Asian economies illustrate this with a high degree of female employment in the manufacturing sector. Many Middle Eastern countries have not industrialized their economies in the same extent as the previously mentioned economies because of their high dependence on oil incomes. Due to their huge oil income, they have not had the need to industrialize. By being a non-oil dependent economy, with manufacturing for export as one of the biggest contributors to the GDP, all indicators point to that Jordan ought to have a relatively high female labour participation. In order to investigate the reasons to this contradiction, a two month long Minor Field Study was conducted in Amman, Jordan. Female students, scholars, representatives from different NGOs and ministries and others were interviewed in order to answer the research question, which is as follows:

*What are the determinants of the low labour force participation among Jordanian women?*

This issue is of concern since the position of women within the formal labour market is often studied as an empirical measure of women's status (Shukri 1999, p 13). During the interviews, I have learnt that the fact that only 15 per cent of the women are participating in the labour force, does not necessarily imply that 85 per cent of the Jordanian women are housewives. On the contrary, many women participate in the informal sector, working at home as hairdressers, seamstresses or cooks, or contribute in the agricultural field in rural areas. Manal Sweidan, head of the Gender Statistics Division at the Department of Statistics of Jordan, claims in fact that 40 per cent of the Jordanian women are currently working in the formal and informal sector. This study will focus on why women do not join the formal labour force because of theoretical reasoning, but the phenomenon of the informal labour market will be discussed in this study.

## 1.2 Jordanian women, modernity and labour

The relationship between Jordanian women and the formal labour force is complex and has largely been undocumented; hence this following chapter will only provide a few examples of the Jordanian history of female labour.

Since the early Islamic period is perceived by Muslims as an important and founding period of Islamic history, the gender practices of the time matter in the pursuit of understanding the situation of Jordanian women today. Contrary to many beliefs, women participated actively in the economy during this period. They worked and earned money, they owned land, they took loans to be able to expand their enterprises and they administered and supervised endowments. Their involvement in the economy was not seen as unusual or challenging to Islamic scholars of the time (El-Azhary Sonbol p 54-71). This trend remained during the Medieval Age and continued until the modernity pursuit of state-construction. The modernity strivings of Jordan afflicted women labour and made women 'invisible'. Due to the creation of the division of formal and informal labour, women's participation in the economy became neglected. Traditional female occupations like taking care of agriculture and livestock did no longer count and were seen as part of the family economy, not as individual contributions from women (Hijab 1996, p 41, 46).

The transformation from being the British mandate Transjordan to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan implied many changes. In its quest to become a modern state, but also because of the regional turmoil of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict 1948, half of the state spending has been directed towards the military over the years. Due to its geographical position as a buffer between Israel and the rest of the Middle East, Jordan's leaders have felt the urge to protect the state. This development has been sponsored both by the West in terms of USA, and the Middle East in terms of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The reliance on external incomes instead of a vibrant domestic economy has affected women and women labour negatively. The state expenditures on military have been carried through on the expense of the female-dominated parts of civil and public sector (Brand

1998b, p 98, Brand 2003, p 143-144). The policy affected the private sector negatively which hindered the development of a lively industry. In other regions of the world, such as Latin America, the industrial sector has employed women in a large extent (Brand 1998a, p 102). The modernist project also implied commercialization of agriculture and SAPs whom have had adverse effects on women's productive role (Moghadam 1998, p 7).

During the late 1970s, because of male migration to the Gulf states, Jordan faced labour shortages. The government then advocated female entry into the labour force through consciousness-raising activities and media campaigns. This interest later declined when the men returned from migration and suddenly female labour became unwanted – yet again (Hijab 1996, p 47). The last fifteen years, although the numbers of female students have increased substantially, the figures of female labour force participation have been quite stable and have remained at 11-15 per cent (Moghadam 2006, p 241, DoS 2008).

### 1.3 Research overview

When analysing the labour force participation of Middle Eastern women, it has been common to suggest that cultural and religious factors influence women's lives more than economic factors (Moghadam, 1995 p 7-8). Sociology professor Valentine M. Moghadam instead introduces an alternative approach where she makes three propositions: (i) there is variation in female employment and occupational patterns across countries in the Middle East; some of these patterns are consistent with global patterns of female employment, (ii) women's employment patterns are largely shaped by the political economy of the region, and women's industrial employment in particular has been constrained by overall limited industrialization, (iii) a useful framework for examining and explaining patterns of female employment rests on the concepts of gender, class, state policy, development strategy and the world-system. In the case of Jordan, Moghadam argues that the construction of gender and the orientation of state managers may explain the female employment pattern. Moghadam's propositions are insufficient in explaining the situation of Jordanian women, since the political economy of the country is suitable for high female employment. Although Moghadam's will to focus on other approaches than culture and religion is understandable, it is imperative to take in account how the cultural norms of a country are constituted. Which role have women played in Jordan's history, how do women function in the tribal system, how are women portrayed in school books, media and literature? Which view does society hold on working women? Also, Moghadam can be interpreted as ambiguous in the question of culture. The construction of gender is implied to serve as an explanation to the exceptionally low female labour force participation in Jordan. The construction of gender can be interpreted as a part of a country's culture since the role that is created for women reveal the national culture and mentality. In her zeal to avoid an orientalist perspective, Moghadam overlooks an important explanatory factor.

In her paper *Economic Reform Policies and their Effect on the Status of Women in Arab Countries*, Maisa Sabh from the Arab Monetary Fund argues partly against Mogdham's second proposition and means that industrialization and trade liberalization do not necessarily lead to increased female employment. Sabh points to the fact that the trade liberalization in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco did not lead to the expected increase of female employment in the industrial sector. According to Sabh, this outcome depends on several factors, among them a new reliance on the temporary and informal sector and the timing of trade liberalization measures with the privatization of labour intensive sectors such as textiles, clothing and food. The privatization of these traditionally female labour dominated sectors resulted in many women losing their jobs. According to Sabh, the structural adjustment programs that Jordan went through during the 1980s are another reason for the low female participation in the economy. These programs, imposed by the World Bank and IMF, impacted the female employment levels in the public sector negatively. Also worth pointing out is that unlike Moghadam, Sabh utilizes culture as one of the explanations to the low female labour participation, claiming that society and its cultural norms constrain women in their pursuit to participate in the economy (Sabh, 2006 p 137-138).

The balanced approach to the problem in the Sabh paper is appreciated. Culture, laws or data are not used as sole explanatory models, instead they are linked to each other, implying that all three are needed to understand the women's situation in the Arab world. What the paper lacks is an aim to problematize the issue of female participation in the economy. There are no in-depth explanations, just descriptions of the Arab women's situation. Sabh claims that while a strong link between industrialization and female labour force participation is found in Latin America and South East Asia, the same relation is not found in the Arab world. A further development of the reasons to the difference would be appropriate.

The most comprehensive explanation to the paradox of the gap between education and employment among women in Jordan is provided by Amira El-Azhary Sonbol. In her book *Women of Jordan* (2003), she thoroughly presents explanations to the situation of Jordanian women. El-Azhary considers cultural and political factors as the main hindrances to why the employment rate among women in Jordan is so low. Conservative interpretations of Islam as well as tribalism shape and influence the Jordanian society to a large extent, standing in the way of female ambitions to engage her outside of her home. Furthermore, policy-makers and state managers lack a true will to pull through the necessary changes in the personal status law and state orientation, fearing to conflict with Islamists and scare away voters. El-Azhary focuses on three obstacles to the female participation in the Jordanian economy: the legal constraints, the stress on morality, and the notion of 'difference'.

El-Azhary points at that although the Jordanian constitution guarantees equal right to work regardless of sex, the laws stress gender differences and patriarchy. Women are peripheralized and denied full legal competence. Also, anti-discrimination laws are lacking. The issue of morality is strongly linked to cultural habits and religion. Many Islamic thinkers are strictly against gender

mixing at work places and promote that women should visit female doctors, female lawyers, female hairdressers and so on. Women should not in any way risk to entice men to act indecently, a pattern of thinking which is based on the idea where men and women are reduced to their essential nature as potential sinners and that they are different by nature (El-Azhary, 2003 p 94, 220). This notion of 'difference' provides a further basis for discrimination. Women are seen as the weaker sex and are therefore in need of protection. This way of thinking is externalized through the "special protection" laws which are aimed to lessen the work burden for women and keep them safe from "dangerous" jobs. Also many laws serve as double-edged swords, since in their aim of protecting women, they create employer preferences benefiting men. 'Special protection' laws also encourage women to retire early, which can interpreted as the state not considering women's work as useful or as a contribution to society (El-Azhary Sonbol p 103-107).

El-Azhary Sonbol presents a detailed description of Jordan labour laws regarding women, and explains how the state explicitly and implicitly encourages women not to participate in the labour force. The laws are problematized and the deeper meanings within them are found and El-Azhary Sonbol reveals and clarifies these patterns of thinking and shows their absurdity. The analyses would gain more authority if some theories or models had been utilized, the conclusions appear thin without any theories.

## 2 Theory and Method

### 2.1 Theory description and aim

Two theories with gender perspectives will be employed in this paper. As the formal employment of women can be understood as an outturn of modernity strivings, modernity theories will be used in order to comprehend the general context. In addition to that, with the aim to understand the specific context, a theory regarding the political economy of Jordan and the other Middle Eastern countries will be utilized.

Many modernity theorists argue that the ‘modern’ is gendered and perceived as male (Felski 1995, p 2, Jolly 1998, p 2, Stevens 1998, p 51). Modernity implies rationality, domination over nature and abandonment of traditions and is exemplified by a rational and industrial male in contrast to the emotional female (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe 2003, p 1, 3, Felski 1995, p 4). Also, modernity is claimed to build on a dichotomy between the West and the Oriental (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe 2003, p 1-2). What does modernity imply for the Oriental women, those who seem to symbolize the antidote to modernity? Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe argue (2003, p 7) that modernity both liberates and constrains women through two simultaneous movements. On the one hand, it contains aspects of liberation such as freeing the individual from local settings and facilitating new spheres of action. But on the other hand, it limits women to the domestic and private sphere and newly substantialized borders. They also argue that ‘it is among the women in the non-European that the tensions and contradictions between tradition and modernity, public and domestic [...] are most acutely discernible, felt and sensed, and where attempts are being made to integrate and overcome them’ (Tanabe & Tokita-Tanabe 2003, p 9).

In order to comprehend how Jordanian women can take part of modernity in form of entering the labour force, we need to understand the political economy of the region. Valentine Moghadam presents an interesting take on Richards and Waterbury taxonomy of the political economy of Middle Eastern states. The taxonomy categorizes the development prospects of the economies and divides them into five groups and places Jordan in the same group as Israel, Tunisia and Syria. This group, the ‘Watchmakers’, consists of small countries with limited natural resources and therefore concentrating on investing in human capital and on exporting skill-intensive manufactures. Richards and Waterbury do not include a gender perspective in their theory, but Moghadam suggests that it is plausible to apply such a perspective on their taxonomy. The highest female employment rate

is believed to be found among ‘The Watchmakers’. This can be explained by the countries’ pursuit to develop sustainable industrialization strategies where export-led manufacturing is in focus. These strategies generate relatively high female employment rate since high levels of industrialization or manufacturing for export leads to high female proletarianization and activity in the productive sectors. The two countries with the highest female employment rate, Tunisia and Morocco, are also the two countries in which manufacturing make the relatively largest contribution to the GDP. Despite the fact that Jordan is a “Watchmaker”, the country’s female employment rate is surprisingly low (Moghadam 1995 p 17). Moghadam does not present any explanations to this deviation and I therefore aim to test this theory in order to find out why Jordan deviates from the pattern.

## 2.2 Sample

The process of finding material was complex and needed different approaches. The interviewed students were approached in two different ways, partly by randomly being picked on the university area and partly by the “snowball method”. The “snowball method” implies that a respondent helps the researcher with getting in contact with another potential respondent, who in turn does the same and so on (Dalen 2007, p 64). The reason to why two approaches were picked was a desire to avoid an inadequate sample as much as possible. The process of finding respondents from the NGOs, ministries and university faculties differed from the previously mentioned approaches. The NGOs were chosen after consulting different sources like books, articles and the author’s supervisor from the Centre for Women’s Studies at University of Jordan, on which NGOs played the most important role in lobbying and working for women’s rights in the Jordanian society. NGOs that were chosen were Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW), General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW), JOHUD and Arab Women’s Organization of Jordan (AWOJ). Representatives from the organizations Freedom House and UNIFEM were also interviewed. Three ministries were considered to be useful to interview, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and the Ministry of Statistics. In all three cases, the gender division of the ministry was matter of interest. Also, an additional group of people with good insight in the issue of low female labour force participation, such as a professor in labour laws and the former head of JNCW, were interviewed.

## 2.3 Interview method

Interviewing was the selected method for this study. Interviews are considered to be useful when interested in understanding how people understand and interpret

their environment (Esaiasson et al, 2007 p 285). Even though surveys would have covered more answers, they do not provide the degree of depth that is needed for the study, since the aim of the interviews with the female students is to understand the goals of their studies, but also how they perceive the expectations from their environment and the society.

Interviews conducted in a semi-structured way were considered to provide the most valuable information since this kind of interview offer the respondent to engage in wide-range discussions and the interviewer a chance to get beyond and beneath pre-manufactured answers (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002 p 673). A test interview was conducted in order to evaluate the questions, the technical equipment and the author's interviewing abilities (Dalen 2007, p 36). The questions revolved around themes such as "The situation of Jordanian women" and "Religion and women working". The students were also asked about their own situation and whether they faced difficulties because of their choice to study at university. The interviews were conducted at locations familiar to the respondents and where the respondents felt at ease, in the students' case the university area while the other respondents were interviewed in their offices.

The use of a tape recorder is recommended when conducting qualitative interviews since it is of great importance to capture the respondent's own words (Dalen 2007, p 34). Before all interviews the respondents were asked if they approved with the use of a tape recorder, which they all did. After the interview, they also had the opportunity to correct or remove their remarks.

## 2.4 Categorization of the determinants

The interview answers were analysed and thereafter categorized. Three major determinants of the female labour force participation among Jordanian women were traced. The determinants were economical, cultural and political factors.

## 2.5 Problematization of context

When conducting a field study the researcher has to adapt to the context and circumstances of the setting. During this study, this implied doubts and thoughts about the utilization of interpreter, tape recorder and code names. Since some of the female students did not know any or little English, the usage of an interpreter was needed. In order to make the students feel as relaxed as possible, the interpreter was a woman in their own age. The interpreter was Swedish, which was fruitful in many ways. The interpreter and the researcher could communicate with each other easily and freely with no risk of misunderstandings. Jordan is classified as a "patriarchal-conservative" or "neo-patriarchal" society that differs from liberal democratic states (Moghadam 1993, p 11). With this in mind, there

were some doubts about the usage of tape recorder since it could raise questions among the respondents about real intentions with the interview. However, by guaranteeing the informants the opportunity to skip the tape recorder, go off-record anytime they wanted to and/or be anonymous, the researcher tried to reduce the doubts. All female students were given anonymity and code names in order to lessen the risk that others would recognize and identify them, hence making them feel more relaxed and open.

## 3 Analysis

First, the three factors that determinate the labour force participation will be presented and analysed. A discussion concerning this issue and how to deal with it will follow. Eventually, modernity and political economy theories will be examined and final remarks will be presented.

### 3.1 Factors

#### 3.1.1 Economical factors

The economic situation in Jordan was perceived among the respondents as one of the major determinants to the low labour force participation among Jordanian women. The long-running economic crisis with high unemployment rates was recognized as a hinder for women's entry to the labour market. Many of the respondents blamed the economic situation on Jordan's lack of natural resources and well-established industries, high dependence on other countries' generosity and unstable service economy. Abeer Dababneh, scholar at Centre for Women's studies at University of Jordan, and Shirin Shukri from UNIFEM also pointed at the turbulence in the region with the effects of the Lebanese, Israeli-Palestinian and Iraqi wars influencing the economy. Amal Sabbagh, former head of JNCW, expressed her view on the situation: "We've had economical problems since 1988 and the minute we started to overcome them, something new came to undermine whatever has been done". Leila Hammarneh, Project Director at AWOJ, was of the opinion that the Jordanian state, because of SAPs and directives from IMF, WTO and the World Bank, is not doing enough for the important agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy and this affects the Jordanian women negatively. The policy has benefited men in larger extent than women. Shukri argued: "Anytime the open market has a problem or faces any economic crisis, the first thing the companies and the managers do is to send the women back home."

Hammarneh meant that the large unemployment rates create preferences among employers to employ men before women. The reason is that it is perceived as employing women leads to extra costs such as maternity leaves, days off for taking care of sick children and less commitment to the job. Sabbagh was of the opinion that men are still regarded as bread-winners and therefore they find employment easier than women; employers believe that men have an economic responsibility for the family and hence they employ them to a larger extent.

However, the economic situation was not solely perceived as an obstacle to female employment. Some respondents, among them Etaf Halaseh, director of Women Affairs at the Ministry of Labour, argued that the economic situation may instead lead to higher labour force participation among women, since many families no longer can rely on only one income. It was assumed that the effect of the economic crisis would be that more married women would seek employment after giving birth instead of becoming housewives. Dababneh tried to problematize this view by asking: "Does this really reflect a change in the social structure? Does it really reflect a change in the belief that women doesn't need to work? Does it reflect that the woman have right to work because they are human or because we need the income? I think that we need to think more about this".

The respondents had different opinions on the concept of micro-funds and its outcomes. The state-created GFJW has offered women micro-fund loans on 500 to 1000 JD for ten years and claimed that this has been a very successful project. This positive view on micro-funding was questioned by Eman Al-Nimri, deputy executive director at JOHUD, and Winkie Williamson, an independent development consultant placed in Jordan. Al-Nimri expressed worries about the situation, meaning that the limited access to decent work opportunities has lead to a disproportionate, positive view on micro-funding. Williamson argued that micro-funding should not be viewed as a universal tool that can be employed with the same successful results everywhere, since the context and the social structures varies. She also underlined that this kind of enterprises did not address the underlying reasons for female poverty.

When analysing the outcomes of the SAPs and the directives from IMF, WTO and the World Bank, which are typical symbols of the rational modernity thought with a linear and liberal idea of the world, it becomes obvious that the measures taken have afflicted women and female employment. The agricultural sector is an area in which Jordanian women traditionally have participated and since industrialization is believed to lead to increased female labour force participation, the setbacks in the two sectors have probably augmented the female unemployment and lessened the job opportunities. The concept of micro-funds and micro-credits can be understood as a typical modernity measure. Instead of utilizing family structures to assume means for the informal enterprise, micro-funding implies bureaucracy, state involvement and shifting from the informal to the formal economy. This can be understood as a way for the state and the economy to encapsulate the informal sector.

### 3.1.2 Cultural

Cultural issues were the most discussed topic when the respondents were asked what they believed to be the reasons for the low female labour force participation in Jordan. The respondents mentioned patriarchal society, norms surrounding female employment and lack of will to work among women as obstacles facing women entering the labour market. Some of the respondents were reluctant to the

use of the notion 'culture' as a hinder, instead they preferred words such as 'habits', 'customs' and 'tradition'.

Winkie Williamson claimed that the foreign NGOs did not want to use the notion 'patriarchy' in their analyses, since "they fear that a critic of patriarchal abuse of power will be interpreted as an attack on Islam". Eman Al-Nimri called the Jordanian society 'patriarchal' and claimed that a change was needed to get more women to join the labour force. Assma Khader, head of JNCW, argued that patriarchal systems are found all over the world and that Jordan is no exception. Al-Nimri, Khader and the other respondents that used 'patriarchy' as an explanation to the low female labour force participation, were of the opinion that men want to control society and thereby women. Rula Quawwas, former head of Centre for Women's studies at UJ, argued that men want different rules for men than for women, that only men should have access to the public sphere while Amal Sabbagh claimed that patriarchy prevents the Jordanian society from developing: "I believe that every society has the right to develop its own norms, but can we develop our own norms when half of society can't speak out and the other half would rather keep the status quo?"

The majority of the respondents brought up the issue that the home is seen as the place where women are expected to work: taking care of the children, the house and her husband. Abeer Dababneh explained the mindset: "There is a belief that women should be at home, being outside the home is not normal". Quawwas described the situation of many women: "the woman's role is to stay at home, she is the home-maker, she is the baby-maker, she is the wife, she is the mother, she is the sister, she is the daughter. It was very hard for women to cross the boundaries and say: let me go from the private sphere into the public sphere and find a job". Many of the respondents also pointed at the fact that besides the physical work at home, women are also expected to manage the social relationships with the extended family, friends and neighbours. They considered the social pressure and expectations as the main reasons to why women do not participate in the Jordanian labour market. One respondent claimed that the typical imaging of women as care-givers is the primary challenge facing women working.

According to the respondents, the image of women as care-givers is also reflected in their choice of profession. Quawwas shared her view on the matter: "Many women in Jordan are teachers[...] the profession itself is domestic in a way". Al-Nimri pointed out that teaching is one of the few professions that is seen as acceptable by conservative families, since teachers work in a gender segregated environment. Aida Tawil, journalist, explained that another reason why teaching is accepted is because of the short working hours, which enable women to work and still manage to take care of the home. Some of the respondents argued that many Jordanian men do not want their wives to work.

One obstacle for female entry into the labour market that some of the respondents addressed was the limited control women have over their own lives, especially outside of Amman. The respondents mentioned among other things limited control over decision-making concerning oneself, mobility, and choice of profession. Williamson described the situation of many young women living in rural communities: "In terms of physical space, the mobility and the extended

individual freedom to move in space and time on their own, it's almost negligible". She shared her experiences from the field where many young women have told her how they feel that they have been controlled from the day they were born. They perceived that the only difference was the people controlling them: first the father and the brother, later on the husband. An employee at a foreign development agency, argued that some working women do not have any control over their own income: "In some cases, women that work don't even handle their salaries, their deposits are in the bank and emptied by their husbands. It's a exploit of the situation and it's happening. It's a part of the power relations, many women accept it and this is one of the reasons to why men allow them to work. We're realising more and more that this is a practice".

Some working women face restrictions from their families. Williamson described the situation for the working girls and women in the communities she visited and claimed that the parents and husbands have a set of conditions for the females to abide to, otherwise they were not allowed to participate in the labour force. The rules were such as "you must never be in a room with a closed door", "don't get familiar with men", "don't chew gum" and "you must never come home later than the Maghreb prayer". These kinds of restrictions limit the amount of job opportunities for women and as Al-Nimri pointed out, the right opportunity might never come. Williamson felt that the conditions were a sophisticated way of preventing women to work, since it seemed as if everything they did rendered the possibility of them being accused of not following the restrictions. The limited control over mobility was also apparent in the case of migration. Hammarneh pointed out that Jordanian men who face difficulties finding job opportunities have the choice to migrate to the Gulf States or other neighbouring countries in order to work as engineers, doctors or other professions that are requested there. But because of cultural reasons, Jordanian women do not have the same opportunity. Their families do not approve of them migrating and it is not accepted for women to live on their own in the host countries.

When asked how the Jordanian society views working women, the respondents gave mixed answers. Shirin Shukri, Assma Khader and Amira, one of the students, were of the opinion that the Jordanian society appreciates and respects working women. Shukri claimed that society perceives them as having dignity and positive traits. Two of the respondents, Amal Sabbagh and Winkie Williamson, argued that society has a mixed view. Sabbagh found that people admire working women, but on the other hand, they always want to find shortcomings for the working woman, for example that she does not fulfil her role as care-giver to her family. None of the respondents argued that the Jordanian society has a negative view of working women, but they pointed out that it was seen as imperative that it did not prevent her from performing her household tasks.

Islam was not seen by any of the respondents as an obstacle for Jordanian women to enter the labour force. Instead, most respondents defended Islam and pointed at its historical role as a reformative force for women's rights, and they turned against the stereotypical Western image of a suppressed Muslim woman. They were of the opinion that Islam wants women to work and gives her all the

rights she needs. Some of the students claimed that traditions are a much bigger obstacle for women who want to work than Islam. Rawan argued: “Traditions are tougher than religion, I don’t think Islam is not the problem for a woman who is not working” while Hoda meant that the roots of the problem of low female labour force participation are within the Jordanian society, not within the religion.

Many of the respondents pointed to that Islam is not restricting women, but that in many cases Islam is being used as a tool to gain power and control others. One respondent blamed the misuse of Islam as one of the main reasons to why the situation of Jordanian women has not improved in a faster pace: “I think that we should have moved quicker up the ladder. I think it has to do with the understanding of Islam. Some people translate religion as that they have to control women and not allow them to work.” Assma Khader saw patriarchal power strivings behind Islamic rhetoric: “In my opinion, Islam is not discriminating, Islam was a radical movement to empower women and I think the interpretation is sometimes very conservative. There is a hidden patriarchy, still using Islam to justify discrimination against women”.

While some respondents claimed that families prevented women from working, others meant that there is a lack of will among women to work. Fatima, one of the students, argued that many female students go to university not with the aim to study and prepare for a working life, but to find an appropriate husband. Khader pointed out that the lack of will to work can be perceived as logical thinking, since working women are constantly questioned and (that) work environment is not always friendly. She argued: “The suspicion around who you are talking to, what your colleague said, why are you wearing a beautiful dress, why are you staying late at work, all of these accusations make her feel not comfortable in a way. ... This gives women a bad feeling, why not stay at home, relax, do what ever I want, spend my husband’s money?”. Shukri claimed that it is not the Jordanian culture that is holding back women, by pointing out that women were the first people to have worked with agriculture in Jordan. Instead, Shukri argued, it is women’s mentality and lack of enthusiasm that is preventing them from entering the labour force.

The female students gave a relatively positive picture of their situation. All of them, except for one, felt they had received support and encouragement from their families in their choice to study at university. Amira explained that graduate studies was a natural and expected decision in her family while Nora had not been sure whether she wanted to study after high school or not, but had then been convinced by her father. Because of financial reasons, but also because of her sex, Hoda’s parents did not want their daughter to attend graduate studies. But after many discussions with her extended family, the parents approved of her plans and she became the first girl in her extended family to attend university. A third of the female students would stay at home if they were hindered from graduate studies, while the others answered that they would work or study at an institute. When asked how they would react if their future husband forbade them to work, a majority of the respondents answered that they would try to convince him and that it was not his decision to make. But a majority in this group also answered that if they failed to convince him, they would follow his decision. Fatima explained that

if she had to choose between her job and her husband, she would choose her husband and Neda and Selma clarified that they would only work if their income was needed. Nora's opinion differed: "I think that working is my decision and nothing that my husband can decide. I don't think that anything will stop me from working".

The situation of Jordanian women seems to embody Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe's modernity theory concerning Oriental women. According to their theory, modernity both liberates and constrains women in the Orient through different measures. The opportunities for Jordanian women to attend university, enter in the formal labour force and participate in the public sphere can be seen as agents of liberation and 'new spheres of action'. But at the same time, women are not allowed to participate in society on the same conditions as men, since they are mainly encouraged to educate themselves to become teachers and nurses, i.e. occupations that are care-giving. This can be interpreted as Tanabe and Tokita-Tanabe's theory that modernity leads to women being limited to the private and domestic sphere. The allowed sphere of action is within care-giving jobs. This sphere is also substantialized in other manners. When working in a gender segregated environment, women allow themselves and are allowed to take space and follow their own norms and rules, but when the genders mix at a work place, women are expected to behave in immaculate, feminine and morally unquestionable manner.

### 3.1.3 Political factors

The Jordanian legislation was an issue that the respondents constantly referred to, "legislation is key" as one of them put it. Problems with implementation of laws and lack of fair legislation were discussed and viewed as central obstacles for women to join the labour market.

The retirement laws were brought up most often and were considered as unjust and discriminating. According to article 41 in the Social Security Law, women are allowed to retire after 15 years of work or after reaching the age of 55, while the corresponding figures for men are 20 years of work and reaching the age of 60 (El-Azhary Sonbol 2003, p 108). The majority of the respondents was dissatisfied and claimed that the legislation prevented women from reaching high job positions. Khader argued that 15 years of work is not enough for women to make a career and called for a raise of the retirement age. Rula Quawwas usually told her colleagues who opted to retire at the age of 45: "No, it's the peak of your achievement because if you start as a teacher, when you hit 45 you can become a principle". Neda, one of the female students, were of the opinion that the retirement age should be the same for men and women since the sex does not determine how long an individual is able to participate in the labour force. An amendment bill concerning among others the retirement laws was being discussed by the parliament during the period of time of the interviews and many respondents expressed hope for a raise of the retirement age and equal conditions

for both sexes. Etaf Halaseh, director of Women Affairs at Ministry of Labour, called the amendment bill “the biggest challenge right now”.

But some respondents questioned if a raise of retirement age was desired by Jordanian women and if the timing was right. Two of the interviewed students were critical to the amendment bill and wanted to keep the current legislation. One employee at a foreign development agency explained her stand concerning the retirement laws: “There’s a balance that we need to strive between the laws that we are asking to change, the reasons to why the public is asking for it, what is workable in terms of on the ground, how does it fit with other laws and what would the impact be.”

Many of the respondents raised the issue of special labour laws concerning women. Article 71 of the Jordanian Labour Law requires that any employer with more than 20 female employees with children under the age of four must provide child-care with qualified personnel. Also, the employer must pay for the employee’s 70 days long maternity leave. The respondents argued that this kind of legislation create employer preferences favouring men since it is more profitable and means less dealing with bureaucracy.

Other legislation issues that the respondents brought up were the problems of implementing existing laws and the need for equal rights and discrimination legislation. Hammarneh pointed out that Jordan do have good labour legislation, but the problem is the lack of will among employers to abide to it and that the state does not do enough to stop the violations. The foreign development agency employee agreed and reminded that the state itself do not follow legislation in cases like offering child day care when employing more than 20 women. Many pointed at the fact that Jordan is lacking ‘equal work, equal opportunity, equal pay’ legislation and laws preventing discrimination. According to Adi Ghanma at Freedom House, these questions were highly prioritized by the organization and seen as one of the main reasons to low female labour entry. One respondent shared her frustration over that when asked at an employment interview if she was planning to become pregnant, she could not hold the interviewer accountable or take him to court. She pointed out that there are no accountability measures by the state, the public institutions, the justice system or the private sector to manage the law practices and the discriminatory actions. A ‘discrimination audit bureau’, a system for monitoring labour legislation violations, was requested to decrease discrimination. The respondent called for increased awareness within the state and meant: “Financially, we have no problem in monitoring and holding everyone accountable, so why not our laws? We need an internal mechanism within the state”. Hammarneh argued that Jordan lacks adequate sexual harassment legislation. According to her, women face harassments at both offices and factories. She pointed out that ironically a sexual harassment draft is on its way, but not because of demands from Jordanian women or NGOs, instead it is the foreign workers and their embassies that are raising this issue. She also saw a part of the solution in the unions: “What I think should be strengthen are the unions, because then there will be more respect for the working hours, the minimum wages, the gender balance and less sexual harassments”.

Ghanma and Khader considered the lack of nurseries as one of the main obstacles for female entry into the Jordanian labour market and regarded it as an issue where the government was not doing enough. The GFJW underlined the need for nurseries at reasonable prices, since the high prices for child day care in some cases do not correspond with women's low incomes. Khader also called for employment policies and legislation that were family and child friendly. More possibilities to work part-time, flexible hours and the possibility to work from home were suggested by Shirin Shukri. The civil society was also blamed by one respondent for, when monitoring human rights, not having sufficient tools to comprehend the situation of women: "They haven't looked at the perspective of women in terms of Kindergarten or looking at certain applications of the law when it comes to interviewing, that type of thing".

According to some of the respondents, the discrepancies between what women study and what the labour market demands are too big. The respondents claimed that women study humanities and other gender stereotype subjects instead of looking at what the labour market is requesting. The respondents called for state-led training programs in order to make the necessary adjustments to the needs of the labour market. Hammarneh argued that it otherwise would be a waste of money, both for the state and for the women.

The respondents did not perceive the Royal family as an obstacle for female entry into the labour force, instead it was the contrary to that. Many considered the Royal family as an agent of change and claimed that they are more open-minded than the average Jordanian. Abeer Dababneh pointed out that since the establishment of the Kingdom, there has always been a member of the Royal family in what ever NGO, institution or association that is related to the work of the public sector and women in particular. Khader argued that the Royal family with their clear position was a great ally when struggling with changing the attitudes towards women. Some of the female students emphasized the role of Queen Rania and pointed at her will and effort to improve the situation of the Jordanian girls.

Winkie Williamson claimed that NGOs are not radical enough and believed this to be one of the reasons to why the situation of Jordanian women has not improved. Williamson argued that the donor agencies do not want to question the existing social structures of the Jordanian society, they just want to "disperse as high amounts of money as fast as possible". Because men's needs are already addressed in society, since it is men-dominated, agencies should focus solely on women instead of gender mainstreaming and gender equal projects. According to Williamson, it should not be desirable to address women's problems as human rights because "the minute you do that, you open the door to male dominated patriarchal institutions becoming the implementing agencies".

Williamson also saw two political factors as fundamental obstacles. She perceived the inheritance laws as unfair and the class alignment among women as disloyal. Williamson pointed at the fact that many women because of informal norms and understandings feel obliged to give up their inheritance, which is half the share of what their brothers are entitled to, and was of the opinion that equal inheritance laws were imperative to increase the gender equality. Williamson

raised the question of middle class women believing that aligning with middle class men will serve them better than creating alliances with women of other classes: “What we do witness consistently in Jordan is that social class trumps gender any day”. Williamson wondered when Jordanian women would start identifying common causes and act collectively. She argued: “Because the greater good is achieved by all women having their rights. At which point do you say: I am a woman of privilege, I’m middle-class, I’ve had all those things, but seeing what’s happening to other women who haven’t had access to more resources, it’s not right, it’s not fair and I don’t feel that I want to take place in this world if they don’t get it and therefore I will walk away from my entitlements. [...] Why would somebody give up her share to another woman? Because it strengthens both. I think that women need to understand that it’s win-win, that you can give to woman that is less powerful than you and you actually enhance your own situation by doing it”.

The difficulties of executing the legislation and the lack of nurseries to reasonable prices affect women negatively and constrain their involvement in the economy. Since modernity can be understood as gendered, the lack of will among the NGOs to question the patriarchal system may be seen as an indicator that the Jordanian society is modern. The NGOs themselves can form a part of the patriarchal system and hence have no reason to challenge the current formation of society.

## 3.2 Discussion

### 3.2.1 What is preventing Jordanian women from working?

The aim of this study is to try to understand what the determinants are to why Jordanian women, despite all indicators pointing in another direction, do not work. Economic, cultural and political factors such as employer preferences, limiting social norms and unfavourable legislation seem to be the main reasons to the low number of women entering the formal labour market.

It becomes obvious that the measures that have been taken to form a modern state have had different outcomes regarding female employment and labour. Although the modernity project has given Jordanian women the chance to enter the public sphere through opportunities to study and work, it has also caused negative outcomes such as restricting women’s mobility and enhancing their roles as care-givers. While they before were working on the fields with agriculture, serving as shepherds and selling crafts and food at market places, the modernization and bureaucratization of society have led to a restriction of the allowed sphere of action for women. Their access to the public sphere was taken from them and left women in a situation where the domestic and private became their only domain. The case of the informal economy illustrates this phenomenon

well. While the activity on the fields and at the market places used to be a natural and integrated part of the economy, modernization peripheralized typical female occupations and excluded them from the formal economy, leaving many women without social benefits and making their work invisible. To be able to enter the public sphere and the formal economy, women had no choice but to work from home or in care-giving domains such as teaching or nursing, which led to an enhancement of the stereotype picture of women.

### 3.2.2 Proposals on how to increase the labour force participation

The current situation of the Jordanian labour market is not attractive to many women who, despite university degrees or/and need for an income, decide not to enter it. The reasons behind this behaviour are many and complex and will not be fixed in a few days or, when it comes to some of them, in a few years. It will take longer time. The labour market is not attractive mainly because Jordan lacks essential and necessary legislation regarding labour and also because the social norms and rules concerning women are hard to combine with work. It seems easier and more logical to choose not to participate in the labour force.

Changing the Jordanian Labour Laws is imperative. As long as the Jordanian legislation lacks laws concerning 'equal work, equal pay', discrimination and sexual harassments, women will not be able to join the labour market and feel like they participate in it on the same conditions as men. It is crucial that women have the right to report injustices such as lower pay than male colleagues, questions about the possibility of marriage and pregnancy at work interviews and harassments at the work place. Instead of taking the fundamental measures as implementing the mentioned laws, the Jordanian Labour Laws has focused on 'special protection' laws for women concerning work hours and appropriate occupations for women and forcing employers to care for the female employee's child care. Without offering the basic legislation that ensures the same rights for both sexes, the previous mentioned laws are unnecessary and almost a ridicule. They are not protecting women; they are preventing employers from hiring them. Without the laws and amendments concerning equal rights and discrimination offering women right to hold employers accountable, the entry of female labour force will continue to stay at low figures. Both the families and the women themselves will feel that the labour market is too insecure to enter.

The labour market is also not attractive since women find it difficult to combine work with the expected role as a care-giver. Social norms and rules forcing women to provide an impeccable home and cater to children, husband, parents and in-laws make it hard for them to enter the labour force. In some cases it is not accepted by the family or the husband. For women to be able to participate in the labour force, their burden must be lessened. There is a need for both top-down and bottom-up approaches to this problem. The state must become better at providing child care and elderly care at reasonable prices by offering this kind of services itself or subsidize private alternatives. The issue of homes for the elderly is still taboo in Jordan and attitudes will not easily change, but steps

towards increasing the amount of such homes must be taken as the population is growing older and society's focus is shifting from the extended family to the nuclear one. A bottom-up approach is also required. The image of women as the sole care-giver and men as the sole bread-winner needs to be changed into two equal partners, both contributing with their incomes and in some sense sharing household tasks. When changing the image of the typical bread-winner, employers will also increase the amount of recruitments based on skills and education instead of gender. NGOs and other parts of civil society should play a part in encouraging the change of stereotypes. When the labour market provides much to win and less to lose and therefore becomes more attractive, the will and enthusiasm among women to join will increase. The same applies to the behaviour of controlling families and husbands. The pay-off of women working will be too high to refrain from.

Implementing necessary laws and changing social norms are important, but not the only measures that need to be taken in order to get more women entering the labour market. Raising the retirement age is also needed so that women may stay longer in the labour force. Besides increasing the number of women in the labour market at the same time, this arrangement would enable women to achieve more and reach higher position and consequently change the image of which positions and occupations women can have. Also, opportunities to retrain and adjust to the labour market must be extended. The needs of the labour market shifts swiftly and the skills of labour force must therefore regulate in order to keep the economy vital. A labour market policy that is based on the reality of the Jordanian people is needed to decrease the unemployment figures and increase the job opportunities for women.

Also, there is a need to find a functioning and appropriate way of tackling the issue of the informal economy and its labour force. Instead of trying to prevent and prohibit this sector, the state should try to simplify the business legislation and make the informal economy redundant. Many women keep their business in the informal sector in fear of the bureaucracy and big costs a venture in the formal economy imply. They and their employees, who are mainly women, would benefit from amending the legislation. The procedure would increase the attraction of the commercial world since the management of an enterprise in the formal economy would become easier. The shortened threshold to the formal economy would also serve as a pull factor for women who have had doubts about starting their own business.

One of the respondents proposed a radical solution on how to eliminate the employer preferences. Today's employers tend to employ men in a larger extent than women with the maternity leave being one of the reasons. The respondent suggested that the maternity leave should be changed in to a 'paternity leave', implying that the parents should share the leave equally with no permission to give one's period to the other parent. According to the respondent, this would 'set the employers at same stake'. In order to change the employer preferences and lessen the legislative differences between the sexes, this could be a solution. The change would not come immediately or in a few years. It would probably take

decades, but it would send important signals on how the state views the reproductive role of both sexes.

### 3.2.3 Theory discussion

Two theories were employed in this study. Tokita-Tanabe and Tanabe's modernity theory served well as explanatory model in clarifying and giving insights in what consequences the modernity strivings of the Jordanian state had on the female labour and the relationship between the two. Why does the Moghadam's gender perspective on the political economy of the Middle East fail to explain the low female labour force participation among Jordanian women? In addition to the fact that she claims that the labour force participation among Jordanian women ought to be high, she also mistakes herself on what kinds of sectors Jordanian women take most part in. According to Moghadam, Jordanian women should be active in the manufacturing sector, while in reality many of them work in care-giving domains or participate in the informal sector (Tzannatos & Kaur 2003, p 64-65). Like many WID and GAD theories, Moghadam does not give culture and social norms the importance they require when trying to understand a phenomenon. Jordan is expected to have the same degree of female labour force participation as Israel and Tunisia, countries that may have the same political economy as Jordan, but whose norms and gender roles are fundamentally different, especially in case of Israel. Therefore, despite Moghadam's assumption, it can not be expected that the female labour force participation in these countries will be on the same levels.

In the quest of trying to understand the reasons behind female labour force participation, more perspectives need to be utilized. When, like Moghadam, using economic theories to describe a phenomenon, one must be aware that the discipline of economics is gendered. Decision-making in economic areas often lack gender perspectives and consequently neglect how policies have different effects on women and men. Feminist economists have argued that the current mainstream research on economics is gender blind instead of gender neutral and that the study of economics is coloured by the fact that most economists are and have been male. This has had an effect upon the construction of the discipline in terms of the standpoint from which the world is perceived and which questions are being studied and addressed (Cagatay 2003, p 24, Ferber & Nelson 1993, p 1-2). At macro level has this shortcoming affected the understanding of women's invisible role in supporting the economy. The social reproduction, the time and effort required to reproduce human beings and to maintain the well-being of people in families and communities, is largely performed by women. Women do not only support families, they support the whole economy. This behaviour results in decreased access to employment and labour force participation for women which leads to two outcomes. First, women became more dependent on the income of the husband, father or brother and secondly, the wages for women workers drop because of expected higher expenditures for employers due to women's reproductive roles. It is therefore crucial for analyses at macro levels to

understand the economic implications of this fact and bring these insights into the policy sphere (Evers 2003, p 13-15).

Moghadam's explanatory model lacks an understanding of social norms, culture and contexts which results in a poor explanation to why Jordanian women do not participate in the labour force in the extent that they are expected to. To fully understand the reasons to female labour force participation, must these factors be included. Without submitting to cultural relativism, the differences in context must be acknowledged. For example does the wearing of hijab among Muslim women have different meanings depending on if they reside in Jakarta, Teheran or the suburbs of Paris. The meaning also changes depending on when, at which historic time, they wear it (Laskar 2006, p 13). Postcolonial feminist scholar Chandra Talpade Mohanty argue that we must include the micro-politics of context and subjectivity as well as the macro-politics of global economic and political systems and processes when analysing the situation of women (Mohanty 2003, p 223).

In order to understand the mechanisms behind female labour force participation, modernity and political economy theories need to be completed with feminist economics and postcolonial feminism. An explanatory model consisting of the four perspectives could give multi-faceted answers to the situation of women. Modernity theories are central to the understanding of how the current global system was constituted, but when discussing the situation of Jordanian women, postcolonial feminist perspectives are also needed. The recipe of successful feminist policy-making in Western countries can not be implemented in the exact same manner in other parts of the world with the same outcome. Contextualization is imperative. The discipline of economy can not serve as an adequate tool of understanding of women's role in the economy as long it does not include relevant gender analysis. Women's complex role in supporting the economy is too important to neglect.

### 3.2.4 Final remarks

This study only scratches on the surface when it comes to understanding the labour force participation among Jordanian women. For further research it is recommended to execute attempts to understand the situation of women residing in rural areas or small towns, Palestinian women, women belonging to ethnic minorities such as the Circassians and the Armenians or religious minorities such as Christians. It would also be of interest to investigate the attitudes among Jordanian men towards the allowed sphere of action for women in general and female labour in particular. The process of policy-making and why some laws are implemented and others are not could be interesting to follow. When conducting the studies, quantitative methods such as using statistics or carrying out surveys can be used as well as qualitative techniques: focus groups interviews or narratives.

The concept of culture and social norms can be, unintentionally and in some cases intentionally, misunderstood. The aim of this study is not to serve as a

typical Western project with an Orientalist perspective, but as an attempt to widen the view and see how cultural, political and economic factors are connected, intertwined and impossible to separate. As mentioned in the introduction, Jordanian women have always worked and will continue to work. What changes are the domains and spheres that women are granted access to and society's view of and relationship to women working.

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## 4.2 Interviews

### 4.2.1 Experts

Al-Hindawi, Rand (090115)  
Al-Nimri, Eman (081217)  
Dababneh, Abeer (081204)  
Employee at a foreign development agency (090106)  
Gender Division at the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation,  
representatives from (081214)  
Ghanma, Adi (090114)  
General Federation for Jordanian Women, representative from (081214)  
Halaseh, Etaf (081130)  
Hammarneh, Leila (081221)  
Khader, Assma (081217)  
Malkawi, Bashar (090112)  
Quawwas, Rula (090112)  
Sabbagh, Amal (081208)  
Shukri, Shirin (081222)  
Sweidan, Manal (090111)  
Tawil, Aida (081130)  
Williamson, Winkie (081125)

### 4.2.2 Female students

“Alaa” (081216)  
“Amira” (081207)  
“Farah” (081222)  
“Fatima” (081127)  
“Hoda” (081126)  
“Luma” (081201)  
“Neda” (081127)  
“Nora” (081201)  
“Rawan” (081207)  
“Selma” (081208)