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## **Jordanian Women's Perception of the Discrepancy between Education and Access to Labor Market**

Rana El Khawand  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Rana El Khawand

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2025

Abstract

Jordanian Women's Perception of the Discrepancy between Education and Access to  
Labor Market

by

Rana El Khawand

MS, Walden University, 2020

BS, Lebanese University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Specialization: Disaster, Crisis, and Intervention

Walden University

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## Abstract

This study is an examination of the perceptions of educated Jordanian women regarding the gap between their high educational attainment and limited access to the labor market, focusing on systemic sociocultural, institutional, and economic barriers. Targeting women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, the study was conducted using a feminist theoretical framework emphasizing societal norms, power imbalances, and institutional inequities as critical factors shaping women's professional experiences. A generic qualitative design was employed, collecting data through semistructured interviews and SenseMaker narratives from four faculty members at a Jordanian university. Thematic coding, discourse analysis, and sentiment analysis were used to identify patterns and themes. The findings revealed four key themes: (a) cultural expectations and gender norms prioritizing domestic roles, (b) workplace discrimination and inequities in hiring and promotion, (c) economic and institutional barriers such as inadequate childcare and limited mobility, and (d) resistance from male colleagues and husbands who felt threatened by gender equity initiatives. These findings underscore the interplay of cultural, economic, and institutional factors perpetuating gender disparities. Strategic recommendations include implementing gender-sensitive workplace policies, fostering inclusive organizational cultures, and addressing resistance to equity initiatives. The study's implications for positive social change include guiding policymakers and organizational leaders to dismantle systemic barriers and empower women, advancing workforce inclusion, and driving economic and social progress in Jordan.

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## Dedication

To all the women who tirelessly fight for a better tomorrow, in ways both bold and quiet, seen and unseen. Your courage, resilience, and unwavering hope light the way for us all.

To all the girls whose wings were broken before they ever had the chance to fly - you are not forgotten. May you find the strength to heal, rise, and soar beyond the limits imposed on you.

To all men who stand as guardians of the fragile, knowing that it is in fragility where true beauty, strength, and preciousness reside. Your compassion and understanding are the shields that protect the most delicate things in this world.

And to my daughter, through whom I am reminded every day that fragility is not weakness, but an art, a strength that teaches me patience, humility, and love in its purest form. You show me how to embrace the delicate parts of life with grace, and for that, I am endlessly grateful.

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## Chapter 1: Foundation of the Study

### **Introduction**

The positive correlation between higher education and consequent employment opportunities has already been explored in detail. Education is capable of transforming students into active learners by strengthening their critical and analytical skills (Shabbir Ali & Jalal, 2018). According to Pantea (2021), such skills make graduates more attractive on the job market since employers prefer hiring highly-educated people to increase the likelihood of growing their business in a rapidly-changing global economy. Gilani (2020) argued that a highly-educated population is better suited and prepared to meet the market's needs and therefore stimulate economic growth.

Higher education and employment do not follow direct cause-and-effect relationships (El Hassan et al., 2021). Variables such as economic structure, organizational and political situations, and geographical position act directly or indirectly on dynamics of a country's labor market and are among factors that influence its employment levels (Francis et al., 2020). According to Brand (2020), this paradigm is even more true for Arab countries, where the political class sees higher education as a fundamental means of integrating their workers into the global economy. Still, the economic structure in many Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) countries does not lead to fully realizing the potential that is offered by highly-educated societies, and Jordan is an example of this phenomenon (Haidar & Al-Salman, 2020).



## **Background**

The Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research launched in the early 1990s a series of public reforms that have benefited above all women (Waterbury, 2019). The Jordanian Department of Statistics (2022) highlighted that the high rate of women earning university degrees is in stark contrast to the low percentage of female participation in the Jordanian labor market. As of 2024, women in Jordan represent 56% of university graduates, demonstrating significant educational attainment. However, their participation in the labor market remains low, with the female labor force participation rate at approximately 15.5%. This marks a slight increase from 2022, when it stood at 14% (World Economic Forum, 2024). In the academic field, only 33% of assistant professors, 26% of associate professors, and 19% of full professors are women, indicating that while a significant number of women pursue postgraduate studies, their presence in advanced academic positions diminishes at higher levels (World Economic Forum, 2024). Jordan comes, therefore, second in the global ranking of countries with the lowest female participation in the labor market, preceded only by Syria, despite the school and university system having reached considerably higher participation levels than Arab countries on average (Krafft & Assaad, 2018).

Further, research regarding dynamics of the Jordanian labor market has been based on analyses of societies that are typically described as conservative and patriarchal (Assaad et al., 2018). Mehtap et al. (2019) argued attitudes towards women and the social restrictions that are imposed on them are factors capable of influencing their economic activity. Banihani (2020) claimed family responsibilities that weigh on women and their

exclusion from public life largely contribute to limiting their economic participation. Koburtay et al. (2020) attributed Islamic religious and cultural factors as a factor which hindered the achievement of gender equity in both public and private spheres. Moreover, Jordan is consistently among the most closed and reluctant MENA countries to ensure gender equality and women's participation in social and economic life (Koburtay et al., 2020). Moreover, Altarawneh (2020) investigated models of female employment and unemployment in Jordan from a gender point of view, thus assuming that these models are intrinsically dependent on social issues, and more precisely gender norms, always to the disadvantage of women.

### **Problem Statement**

Although analysis of the education system and participation of educated women in the Jordanian labor market has led to important findings, I found no previous research that included an examination of perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the significant lack of participation in the country's economic activities. Given such, further research is warranted that could understand the perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the significant lack of participation in the country's economic activities in an effort to address the macro-problems of the higher education system and functioning of the Jordanian labor market (Kasswna, 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

In this generic qualitative study, I explored the perceptions of selected educated Jordanian women regarding discrepancies between their high educational levels and access to the labor market. A generic approach was appropriate because I wanted to know

how highly-educated women in Jordan perceive these discrepancies in terms of social, cultural, gender, and familial challenges to investigate the most significant reasons for their struggles to find employment opportunities. The economic structure in many Middle Eastern countries does not fully realize the potential a highly educated society offers, and Jordan is an example of this phenomenon (Brand, 2020). The gap in literature stems from the lack of qualitative research exploring the significant lack of employment opportunities in Jordan from educated women's perspectives (Banihani & Syed, 2020). Information from the study included broad and updated points of view through understanding of macro-problems involving the higher education system in Jordan and functioning of the labor market.

### **Research Question**

What are the perceptions of Jordanian women regarding the discrepancy between their high education levels and lack of access to employment opportunities?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory that I used for this study was the feminist theory that first emerged in 1794 in Wollstonecraft's publications (Chodorow, 1989). There are several definitions of the feminist theory, and researchers dictate that its basic tenants revolve around understanding the nature of gender inequality and examining women's experiences in a variety of fields (Brabeck & Brown, 1997). Feminist theory is grounded in sociology, philosophy, humanities, and physiology, which have contributed to the practice of feminism and to finding multiple truths and realities (Johnson, 2002). In early iterations of the theory, Zwiech (2009) explained that Mill, who was the first to refer to equality

between the sexes while Simone de Beauvoir was the first to initiate gender studies, started the development of the feminist movement. Nevertheless, issues relating to pay discrimination or employment discrimination against women were addressed only in the 1960s. Additionally, Bierema and Cseh (2003) defined feminism as a way of looking at women's experiences from a perspective that includes their place and history in society, thus striving for equality regardless of race or sexual orientation (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). All of the aforementioned researchers explained that feminist theory applies to women's experiences in equal access to employment opportunities in many different ways since it is a social system. Most importantly, Hite (2004) concluded that the feminist theory includes examining social and power relationships, social justice, equity, and equal opportunities, including equal access and the ability to find and engage in positive work opportunities.

In applying a feminist lens proposed by Bierema and Cseh (2003), I focused on the three categories emphasized by Tisdell (1998). Tisdell substantiates that feminist pedagogy consists of three main categories: psychological, structural, and post-structural. I used all three types to uncover women's voices through themes of systems of oppression, relationships, and power structures (see Johnson, 2004). The semistructured interview questions were grounded in the feminist theory and I examined and identified equity and access issues in the workforce and the barriers that impact the access of Jordanian women to employment opportunities (see Brisolara, 2003). These questions uncovered unspoken rules, social, gender, and power relationships that guide the labor market in Jordan. Moreover, data analysis was grounded within the feminist theory, as

common themes, routines, and interventions were investigated through the lens of the feminist framework used to identify issues of gender inequalities. As such, the feminist theory was used to analyze the experiences of Jordanian women, particularly in the academic profession, because it is linked to the creation of value in work (see Bierema & Cseh, 2003). I identified social and political change issues and acknowledged truths and realities from the Jordanian labor market to affect policy, which is crucial to the feminist economic methodology (Power, 2004).

### **Nature of Study**

I conducted a generic qualitative study. This design was appropriate because participants framed the inquiry and answered straightforward questions without responding to an explicit philosophical or ontological tradition (see Kahlke, 2014). Bellami et al. (2016) explained that generic qualitative studies elicit understanding and meaning of people's world and experiences, which aligned with this study's purpose. According to Lim (2011), generic qualitative studies have enormous benefits, such as generating highly inductive methods and adding detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, generic qualitative studies are used by researchers to draw on one or more established methodologies and to build a research design from the ground up (Kahlke, 2014).

A generic qualitative study design can be used to obtain a qualitative description and answers to the different questions in the study (Bellami et al., 2016). I used a generic study in this research to provide a detailed description of the micro-voices of Jordanian women rather than collecting data from other quantitative research methods.

Furthermore, participants expressed their opinions and made necessary recommendations as to the reasons behind the lack of employment opportunities. In this study, the phenomenon in question was the discrepancy between education and access to the labor market. The selection criteria were based on a sample of female researchers from technical and scientific faculties only and excluded teachers from the humanities sector. This choice was not accidental since it is considered to be interesting to deepen the knowledge of environments such as engineering, medicine, pharmacy, and so on, thus trying to demonstrate that the female presence in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas is predominant to the male's one, at least in terms of enrolled faculty members.

Diverse opinions and multiple perspectives were gathered by means of semistructured interviews with selected female faculty members at a university in Jordan. I asked open-ended questions as these provided more revealing and honest responses than would be possible with more directed questioning. Participants were asked to share experiences about access to employment opportunities, gender roles and discrimination, and potential social issues through this primary data collection. Participants also self-interpreted the narratives by answering follow-up questions about the story provided. Since the narratives could lack the depth and richness found in qualitative interviews, opinions and multiple perspectives were gathered by means of additional semistructured interviews with the selected female faculty members at a university in Jordan. I asked open-ended questions as these might provide more revealing and honest responses than would be possible with more directed questioning (Neergaard et al., 2009). Through this

primary data collection, participants were asked to share experiences about access to employment opportunities, gender roles and discrimination, and potential social issues. I conducted the interviews remotely and developed the interview guide based on the review of the literature as well as my expertise in the gender area.

I used a purposive sampling strategy, in which a target population that fits the criteria for the study has been identified. Palinkas et al. (2015) accentuated that purposive sampling is best used to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest and achieve depth of understanding, which aligns with this study's purpose. More specifically, criterion sampling was used as a purposeful sampling strategy. Study participants were drawn from the scientific faculties at a university in Jordan and selected based on my assumption that they would be able to provide detailed information in relation to the phenomenon of the study (see Palinkas et al., 2015).

The sample for this study was purposely drawn from the university's database. It targeted four female professors or researchers aged between 30 and 45, employed on a full or part-time basis, and having performed scientific studies apart from their curriculum. Patton (2002) stated no specific parameters for selecting a sample size in qualitative approaches. However, Thorne (2008) suggested basing the decision on a transparent sampling logic. Therefore, the sample size for this study is four participants.

To assess the quality of qualitative research, Hennink and Kaiser (2019) suggested reaching saturation because it provides an indication of data validity. However, saturation is essential in grounded theory research and would not constitute a significant concern in generic qualitative studies (Caelli et al., 2003). The main goal of generic

qualitative studies is to produce thick descriptions of participants' experiences, supported by quotations. Therefore, I believed that data received from interviews were sufficient to develop the needed thick descriptions.

To collect and analyze the data, I used Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker, a research tool that is used for qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis in a short period of time (see Abdessamad, 2015). The experiences of Jordanian women were collected through the tablet-based data collection tool and relied on technology as part of the collection and analysis. Brief narratives were gathered through open-ended questions followed by a self-interpretation of these stories by participants themselves, who answered a series of follow-up questions related to the events in the story. Triads and dyads inserted by participants when self-interpreting the questions provided a more nuanced understanding of the complexities around gender discrimination (see Abdessamad, 2015).

SenseMaker is an efficient method of capturing self-interpreted narratives from participants because it eliminates the need to transcribe and code transcripts for the identification of emerging themes and patterns identified in the triads and dyads. The tool automatically generated visual data, thus reducing the labor- and time-intensive challenges.

Since participants' qualitative data is self-interpreted, SenseMaker constituted the perfect tool for reducing researcher bias. SenseMaker also removed expert reinterpretation and ethnographic coding through this self-signification. By assigning meaning to their micro-narratives, participants enabled large-scale explorations, reduced



researcher bias, and allowed for more objective analysis (see Milne, 2015). Rolfe (2006) stated that qualitative research is criticized for being subject to researcher bias which may influence findings. That said, to ensure the credibility of the study findings, I used prolonged contact and eliminate bias through the use of the SenseMaker tool, as described above. I also included thick and rich verbatim descriptions of participants' statements to support findings, which helped ensuring external validity (Slevin & Sines, 1999). Furthermore, Elo et al. (2014) stated that qualitative research would be reliable when the quality of the data collection process and its analysis are audited, triangulated, or recoded. Therefore, I ensured the dependability of data through the inquiry audit method consisting of scrutinizing data and relevant supporting documents by an external reviewer (see Morse, 2015). I used the SenseMaker tool to ensure confirmability of the study by basing the analysis on the participants' narratives rather than potential researcher biases. I created postinterview comment sheets for noting comments and feelings that occurred during the interview, and therefore, achieved reflexivity.

### **Operational Definitions**

Terms used in the study are provided for clarification:

*Access*: An individual's ability or opportunity to find employment and engage in positive work opportunities (Hite, 2004).

*Equity*: Fairness based on natural law or right, without bias or favoritism.

*MENA region*: Middle Eastern and Northern African countries consisting of Algeria, Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria,

Tunisia, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Yemen (World Bank, 2020).

*Woman:* A biologically adult human being who identifies herself as female.

### **Limitations and Ethical Considerations**

Generic qualitative studies come with several limitations and pitfalls. The first one being that generic qualitative research is a methodology that has a poorly articulated research framework that does not acknowledge the epistemological foundations of qualitative work (Atkinson & Delamont, 2006). Moreover, and particularly in higher education, Pasque et al. (2012) stated that generic qualitative methods lack complexity. Secondly, the SenseMaker application has a programming limitation: SenseMaker cannot perform skip logic, resulting in some participants having to answer questions unnecessarily by choosing the non-applicable option. Also, the narratives in the application could lack the depth and richness found in qualitative interviews. However, this is countered by having participants interpret their stories, adding additional layers of meaning. Future research may consider combining SenseMaker with more in-depth qualitative interviews with participants about particular topics of interest.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In qualitative studies, participants' interaction with the researcher and their personal involvement in different stages of the research can be ethically challenging. Therefore, specific ethical considerations should be regarded in this respect. Sanjari et al. (2014) stated that researchers should look at ways of addressing ethical challenges, particularly issues such as anonymity, confidentiality, informed consent, and researchers'

potential impact on the participants. As such, I took the necessary confidentiality measures whereby no personal information were revealed about the participants' identity and data. Throughout the data analysis process, I concealed any confidential information or identity of participants, stored the data on secure hardware, amended biographical details, and used pseudonyms. I obtained informed consent from participants and informed them of the different aspects of the research, particularly the nature and objective of the study, their potential role, and how the results will be published and used (see Orb et al., 2001).

### **Significance**

This study is significant in that it filled a gap in understanding how Jordanian women perceive the discrepancy between their education and lack of employment opportunities. Specifically, this study resulted in insight into the functioning of the labor market and focused on the micro-voices of these women, who are ignored or overlooked. Alsawalqa (2020) stated that improving women's economic outcomes is vital for them and their families and is crucial for extending economic growth. Therefore, this study has implications for social change as a result of creating employment policies that consider the roles of young women in the overall Jordanian economy on a national level. These policies consider individual well-being, including food provisions, child care, and care for the elderly. Key stakeholders who will benefit from the study results and analysis include professionals working on national gender issues or those generating policy dialogue on education and market policies. On an international level, civil society organizations advocating for economic empowerment in Jordan and organizations such as

the International Labor Organization, the World Bank, United Nations Women, United Nations Development Programme, the United States Agency for International Development, Care International, and Web Relief will benefit from the study results. Ultimately, the significance of this study is aligned with the researcher's mission to support a social change initiative that focuses on generating policies, initiatives, and tools to promote women's economic empowerment in the MENA region.

### **Summary**

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a state with a relatively recent political history, whose origins, however, date back to the very first civilizations born in the Middle East. Jordan is a country characterized by an unparalleled cultural richness, which finds its maximum expression in the people who inhabit its territory. The use of the adjective *Jordanian* to describe an inhabitant of the country can be improper at times since a large part of the population is actually of Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, or Egyptian origins. These considerations on the heterogeneity of the Jordanian environment make the country an interesting object for academic studies; the latter is further facilitated by the peaceful circumstances which characterize the Kingdom and which cannot be found elsewhere in the MENA region. Consequently, it is very easy to travel to the territory to conduct studies, just as it is not particularly burdensome to find and consult official institutional sources, often accessible online. Additionally, this study can be identified within the broad spectrum of topics covered by the economic policy of Arab countries, precisely the Jordanian university system and the dynamics of the labor market in the

country, enriched by questions of a more sociological nature, namely the role and contribution of the female figure in the areas mentioned above.

My goal in this study was to demonstrate that, although the literature still considers social norms and cultural traditions as an obstacle to the full realization of women in society, the reasons for explaining the low percentages of female participation and employment in the Jordanian labor market are also to be linked to the economic-political landscape of the country, especially in reference to the neoliberal reforms to which the Kingdom was subject from the 1980s to the early 2000s.

Chapter 2 includes an extensive review of the literature pertaining to higher education in Jordan, its reforms, and the related gender challenges while exploring the different employment dynamics in both the public and private sectors. The review of the existing literature is presented to critically evaluate the contributions made to date by the scientific literature on the subject.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **A Review of the Academic and Professional Literature**

The purpose of this chapter is three-fold. First, I identify original theoretical works that were used to develop a foundation for understanding the discrepancy between high-level education in Jordan and women's access to the labor market. I also synthesize previous literature on higher education in Jordan and the ways researchers have approached the problem. Lastly, in this literature review, I ground presented ideas in historical context to explain why women in Jordan, especially educated ones, have very low participation rates in the local job market. To understand the reasons behind high rates of educational enrollment that do not always translate into job opportunities for women, it is necessary to understand both the macro-economic reasons such as the mechanisms of supply and demand, the connection between the curricula and the needs of the labor market, as well as social norms and values of the Jordanian society. These themes are partially covered by the current literature, as much as the *micro-voices* of women themselves, who express needs and points of view - rarely considered in the literature on the subject. The latter exemplifies the complex relationship between economic and social factors, given the double role of women in both society and family life.

### **Analysis of the Feminist Theory**

In this comprehensive literature review, I analyze feminist theory, which I used to develop an understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The feminist theory looks at the reasons behind gender inequality by examining social roles and experiences

(Chodorow, 1989). It is present in a variety of fields, such as psychoanalysis, anthropology, literature, sociology, media studies, communication, education, and philosophy (Brabeck & Brown, 1997). Feminist theories include liberal, psychoanalytic, radical, socialist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist approaches that notably recognize the male dominance in social contexts and the desire to change these paradigms (Calás & Smircich, 1996). Despite the diversity between these theories, theoretical perspectives vary from reforming organizations to transforming societies and our understanding of the knowledge, theory, and practice (Calás et al., 1999). Various feminist approaches intersect with societal practices and the issues they address, including concerns about women's access to job opportunities, gendered practices within the workplace, and the stability of concepts such as *masculinity* and *femininity* within organizational settings. Each school of thought frames gender inequality differently and proposes different solutions as potential courses of action. Table 1 summarizes the different feminist approaches, including their origin and views on various conceptions.

**Table 1***Feminist Approaches and Schools of Thought*

Approach	Liberal	Radical	Psychoanalytic	Marxist	Socialist	Poststructural	Postcolonial
Origin	Emerged from the political theory of the 18 <sup>th</sup> and 19 <sup>th</sup> century	Based on the 1960s women's liberation movements	Evolved from object-relation theories, Freudian and other psychoanalytic theories	Emerged in the mid-19 <sup>th</sup> century and is based on Marxist capitalist theory	Based on women's liberation movements' attempts in the 1970s to blend radical, psychoanalytic and Marxist feminism	Emerged from the French critiques of "knowledge" and "identity"	Intersection of gendered critiques of Western epistemologies and western feminisms
Concept of gender	Socialization of gender onto sexed human beings for appropriate behavior	Women subordinated to men	Male domination is influenced by psychosexual development	Part of historical class relation. Oppressed system under capitalism	Experience of patriarchal and capitalist oppression	Practices of power and resistance	Goes beyond western conceptions of gender and focus on the processes of gendered globalization
Concept of "just society"	System of individual rights and autonomy for all	Matriarchy or gender-free society	Both parents upbringing children, and no gender structuring	Full development of human nature in a classless society	Elimination of all oppressions and transformation of social relations	Deconstruction and elimination of social discourses and practices	Colonial relationships based on Western ideology
Epistemological positions	Gender-neutral, positivism and gender-justice	Female-centered knowledge outside patriarchal structures	Different psychosexual development implies different ways of knowledge	Feminism to defend oppressed classes under capitalism	Feminism is more suitable for understanding emerging societies	Heterogeneity of social identities	Power relations deployed by the West

**Socialist and Liberal Feminism**

The challenge of inequality in organizational settings and access to job opportunities starts with how organizations provide opportunities and income to some and not to others (Fraser et al., 2019). According to Amis et al. (2020), feminist theories provide a framework for dealing with the functioning of social categories as the core principles of an organization. In contrast, organization theories advocate for rationality,



meritocracy, neutrality, and efficiency (Kumra et al., 2014; Bendl et al., 2015). As such, feminist work analyzes social inequalities and provides a rich theorization of how organizations deal with wages, jobs, and careers across sectors, countries, and cultures (Arruzza et al., 2018).

The socialist feminist theory looks at structural dimensions of inequalities and adverse effects of gendered divisions of labor in capitalist organizations (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). Kalleberg (2009) also pointed to how, historically, meritocracy and leadership at work represent the privilege of dominant groups while marginalized social groups and women workers are associated with precarious jobs and devalued competences. According to Van den Brink and Benschop (2012a), socialist feminism also theorizes the power, resilience, and micro-emancipation of marginalized women workers. In a recent study on hyper-exploited migrant women working in Central and Eastern Europe, Rydzik, and Anitha (2020) used the socialist feminist theory to conceptualize work as a practice of resistance against exploitation. Consequently, migrant women are recognized as active and resilient agents rather than powerless victims of discrimination. However, the authors (Europe et al., 2020) stated that combating structural inequalities requires trade unions' collective action to support the necessary redistribution of power beyond the individual agency.

Feminist theories also examine topics such as diversifying the workforce by increasing women's access to the labor market (Inman, 1998). Liberal feminism looked at issues of gender equality in employment and education and treated themes such as the lack of access to job opportunities and unequal pay between men and women (Zhang &

Rios, 2022). Liberal feminism evolved between the 18th and 19th centuries from the liberal political theory and considered female subordination as one of the constraints blocking women's success in the public world. According to Zhang and Rios (2022), this subordination is rooted in customs, attitudes, and legal constraints. Remedies sought are equal access to job opportunities, equal pay, reform of oppressive structures, training to eliminate gender stereotypes, and fight for affirmative action plans.

Tisdell (1998) proposed three main feminist frameworks related to the feminist pedagogy and addressing the working lives of employees: psychological, structural, and post-structural. The author of this study selected a combination of these three frameworks as it provides a critical theoretical lens for examining inequalities characterizing the lives of Jordanian women and their access to job opportunities. Mainly, this study built on a feminist research framework proposed by Bierema and Cseh (2003) that evaluated Human Resource and Organization Development proceedings using an adapted methodology based on Worell's framework (1996). According to the authors, using a feminist theoretical framework in research means seeking equality between genders by looking at the research problem from a perspective that includes women's place and history in society (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). The authors modified Worell's framework to reflect a feminist approach where women's voices and experiences, issues of sexism and racism, asymmetrical power arrangements, and promotion of societal change are reflected. The framework drew on psychological, structural, and post-structural feminism leading to the development of six categories of analysis that address inequalities targeting women and other minority groups. This includes: (a) focusing on women's lives and

experiences; (b) challenging traditional scientific inquiry through the proposed study; (c) recognizing gender as an essential criterion of assessment; (d) attending to asymmetrical power arrangements; (e) considering language and the ability to "name;" and (f) promoting social activism and social change (Bierema & Cseh, 2003).

### ***Focusing on Women's Lives and Experiences***

This first category tends to value women and marginalized populations by choosing them as a target of study and bringing their voices into a process of knowledge creation. The objective is to shed light on their competence, strengths, and resilience and reduce any oppressive practice (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). Another goal is to acknowledge that no unique category can represent all women. Researchers should explore the term *woman* or African American, or lesbian from a versatile perspective, based on their age, ethnic identity, sexual orientation, employment status, socioeconomic status, etc. Researchers should also ground their research questions in women's personal experiences, particularly when exploring employment segregation and discrimination issues.

### ***Challenging Traditional Scientific Inquiry***

The second criterion required that I acknowledge my subjectivity while ensuring participants collaborate in the research process rather than become manipulated objects. Additionally, challenging traditional scientific inquiry requires identifying and correcting potential bias by varying the target population and extending the samples to include women and other minorities from different ethnic identities, social classes, sexual orientations, and physical abilities.

### ***Recognizing Gender as an Essential Criterion of Assessment***

This perspective required the recognition of gender as a social construction that is viewed in the context of power asymmetries. This category also recognized gender as an active process that is based on power arrangements and that structures social interactions. Through this perspective, Bierema and Cseh (2003) challenge the use of gender and state that it should be viewed as an independent variable that defines the observed behavior.

### ***Attending to Asymmetrical Power Arrangements***

This category focuses on empowering oppressed classes in society, particularly girls, women, and other marginalized populations. Because it considers that subordinated social classes suffer from unequal power distribution, this criterion explores the influence of asymmetrical power on women's lives and how this could influence social opportunities. A connection between two people is said to have asymmetrical power when the powerful person has influence over the actions of the other, the subordinate. It also studies interpersonal relationships and the effects of patriarchal power arrangements on women's choices and opportunities. Finally, this category was extended to consider asymmetrical power relations in the workplace.

### ***Considering Language and the Ability to "Name"***

In previous research, women's voices have been ignored, forgotten, and silenced (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). Because naming proceeds change, it is important to create public awareness of social taboos and unspoken issues. This includes heterosexism, sexual abuse, and harassment. Therefore, the power of naming gives visibility to the

private lives of women or other oppressed individuals and reduces the invisibility of such issues by reporting practices that reinforce inequitable systems of power.

### ***Promoting Social Activism and Social Change***

The sixth category promotes social change by supporting gender justice, reducing power asymmetries, and charging researchers to reconsider and re-conceptualize their methods, theories, and goals. It is, therefore, critical to depict research knowledge in a way that benefits women rather than portraying them as deficient. It is also important to disseminate research to a wide and varied audience of women and make it accessible to marginalized populations. Lastly, social change requires the personal involvement of researchers and policymakers in initiating actions that could sustain change in practices, laws, and institutional aspects for the benefit of women and the correction of injustices.

### **Choice of the Feminist Theory: Rationale**

Based on the above, I used Bierema and Cseh's (2003) framework that mixes psychological, structural, and post-structural feminism to uncover women's voices through themes of systems of oppression, relationships, and power structures (Johnson, 2004). The feminist theory has contributed to the widespread practice of feminism and is grounded in sociology, economics, biology, philosophy, humanities, and many other practices that seek to acknowledge multiple truths and realities (Johnson, 2002). Brisolara (2003) stated that feminism allowed emerging elements of the theory to discuss and put into practice a well-developed and rich body of literature. Moreover, the feminist theory raises questions addressing the issues of access in the workforce, equity, and gender discrimination. To that end, feminism provides a unique viewpoint on the issues subject

of this study as it seeks to uncover unspoken rules, power relationships, and silenced experiences of women in the workforce (Brisolara, 2003). These aspects are of particular importance to the human services profession because it is a discipline that seeks to assist individuals and communities by improving accessibility and accountability (National Organization for Human Services, n.d.). Consequently, and to improve people's lives, human services professionals and practitioners need to examine issues related to gender, power relationships, and equal access to opportunities and be sensitive to social and political change issues.

Using a feminist approach allows a close critical look at this study's different dimensions, which, in turn, represents a change from a scientific tradition that has, for ages, overlooked women's perspectives (see Bierema & Cseh, 2003). That being said, the feminist approach and methodology go beyond just understanding injustice and social inequalities and become inclined towards addressing critical societal issues such as class, religion, race, sexual orientation, etc. (Adichie, 2015). According to Gherardi (2012), feminist methodologies are inclusive, and they strive for equality regardless of race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Also, poststructuralist feminist methods allow researchers to: (a) explore the relationship between knowledge and power; (b) analyze life experiences and how these have contributed to influencing and determining reproductive tendencies and distortions characterizing career expectations and professional paths; and (c) help participants develop awareness about their ability to change their realities (Tisdell, 1998).

Tisdell (1998) identified the need for a comprehensive review of the literature using feminist and gender theories in research topics treating equal opportunities and access of women to the labor market. The gender theory is part of the feminist theory and contains criticisms of the existing distribution of power in organizations, societies, and knowledge production (Benschop, 2021). Peer-reviewed articles were consulted through databases such as EBSCO Discovery Service, Google Scholar, Infotrac, and ABIInform. This search served as the initial locus for this endeavor. The search terms *feminist theory*, *feminist*, *feminism*, *equal opportunities*, *labor market*, *access*, were used in conjunction with *women*. Benschop (2021) examined each article to determine if it represented a solid study or review on the selected topic. The following themes emerged from the research-based analysis of how the feminist theory has been applied to the issues of inequalities in organizations and women's access to job opportunities.

### **Gender Identity and Work**

Bierema (2001) evaluated Human Resource Development (HRD) using the abovementioned feminist research framework. The author stated that gender shapes and influences a person's identity, which also depends on an individual's roles in society, how he defines himself, and whether he has high or low self-esteem. According to Gundersen and Kunst (2019), gender also affects equal opportunities and women's access to the labor market. In work situations, it was noted that there is a devaluation of certain gender identity elements that reinforce traditional power relations. Moreover, race and/or ethnicity constitute another element of a person's identity that affects women's access to job opportunities. In the late 70s, women from an ethnic minority background were

absent from corporate management positions (Bernier & Rocco, 2003), and more than fifty years later, the numbers grew to an average of 31% across continents (Edwards et al., 2020). However, in 2021, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region had the lowest share of women in top management positions. The global average was about 4.5 percent, while countries in conflict had smaller employment growth than the rest of the MENA region. Table 2 shows the global proportion of women in management positions across regions (Kersley et al., 2021).

**Table 2**

*Global Percentage of Women in Senior Positions in 2021*

Region	Percentage
Africa	39%
Latin America	36%
European Union	34%
Southeast Asia (ASEAN)	38%
North America	33%
Asia Pacific (APAC)	28%
Middle East & North Africa (MENA)	4.5%

Factors such as race influence access to employment opportunities, whereby workers of color continue to face discrimination in hiring and promotion (Yang, 2021). Another major component of a person's identity is sexual orientation affecting access to employment opportunities, particularly for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community. As a matter of fact, LGBTI individuals are subject to high levels of rejection and discrimination in their access to the labor market (Moya et al., 2020), making promotion and advancement nearly impossible in such circumstances. Therefore, barriers to equal access in the workforce are primarily influenced by an



individual's identity, and the challenges increase exponentially when belonging to a non-dominant group.

### **Factors of Career's Success**

Besides being dependent on education, performance, and experience, women's career development and success result from a combination of different factors, including social stereotypes, attitudes, behaviors, discrimination, roles expectations, and the choice of a career path (Xiao, 2021). There is a consensus that women have not ascended fast enough or high enough in organization ranks, and this delay may be due to organizational structures, technology, and internationalization (Bishu & Headley, 2020). Nevertheless, four recurrent themes were identified as playing a major role in influencing women's careers: family and relationships, the Glass Ceiling effect, a male-dominated culture, and the issue of power and politics (Choi, 2019).

### **Family and Relationships**

The number of women and minority groups entering the workforce is continuously increasing, and examining the extent to which the concept of family and relationships interact with the issues of equal opportunities and labor access becomes crucial. Jayachandran (2021) noted that family and childcare responsibilities challenge women's abilities to find and actively participate in career-building opportunities. The author considers that the interaction between work and family relationships is not a gender issue, rather, it is somewhat related to the impact of traditional roles and responsibilities on women's career. According to Segovia-Pérez et al. (2019), the working world puts pressure on the worlds of family and relationships, and these two worlds have

major interference for minority groups and women than for men. This is because men tend to separate the two roles as they occur at different times and locations while these happen simultaneously for women and minorities. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022), in 2021, 65.6% of mothers with children under age 6 participated in the labor force, yet getting married or having children has negative implications on a woman's career development (Yu, 2020). Another factor impacting women's careers is stress (Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020). A work environment where employees struggle to have a work-life balance and a lack of role models impact women's career development and retention. This may also lead to serious health concerns, decreased job performance, and increased absenteeism.

### **The Glass Ceiling Effect**

Historically, the 25 percent rise in women's labor force participation in 1940 increased to only 47% percent of women workers worldwide (Boehnke & Gay, 2020). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO, n.d.), the labor force participation rate for women in the Arab States reached only 18,9 percent in 2018 and was expected to worsen in 2021 (ILO, 2017). In 1991, the U.S. government passed the Glass Ceiling Act in an effort to promote workforce equality. The term *glass ceiling* is defined as a transparent barrier that prevents women from reaching a general manager level in an organization just because they are women (Hausknot, 2020). However, very little empirical evidence exists, and only few research has been conducted on the glass ceiling phenomenon, particularly in the case of the MENA countries (Ghorbani & Tung, 2007; Jamali et al., 2007; Kandil, 2015; Powell & Butterfield, 1994). Tisdell (1998)

considers the glass ceiling to be breakable for white women. In contrast, Black women and racial minorities continue to experience what is called the *Lucite ceiling*, an unbreakable ceiling that constitutes a major barrier to equal opportunities and access to the labor market.

### **A Male-Dominated Culture**

Another dominant theme in the feminist and gendered approach to equity and women's access to the labor market is the traditionally male-dominated culture. Recent literature published on the subject reflects the idea that restrictive and patriarchal laws abolish women's rights, particularly in the Arab countries and MENA region. According to Salem and Yount (2019), a patriarchal and resistant culture remains the main socio-cultural barrier to women's advancement, particularly in the Arab States. Nazneen et al. (2019) stated that gendered roles and patriarchal 'structures of constraint' push women to bear primary responsibility for reproductive labor, creating barriers to collective action on these concerns. Other studies showed that patriarchy affects women's access to the labor market and shapes their behavior by undermining their performance (Adisa et al., 2019). Abalkhail (2019) directs further attention to the effect of patriarchal attitudes at home, frequently transferred to organizational settings, and therefore leading to incessant men's domination over women. The above calls for more awareness of diversity and interest in making labor opportunities equally available and accessible to all.

### **The Issue of Power and Politics**

Power can be defined as a person's or group's ability to control another person or group; it controls and limits equal access to job opportunities (Hathaway, 1992). Power

relations are central features in organizational environments as they govern access and gender equality (Benschop, 2021). The issue of power in organizational settings leads to powerless groups lacking information and support, which is exacerbated by additional office politics and influences, causing frustration in organizations. According to Lien (2005), some societies treat minority groups and women differently, which leads to unclear company policies and structural barriers perpetuating official and unofficial job restrictions.

Recapitulating, the first section of this chapter has illustrated some of the main feminist theories focusing on gender inequalities in the workplace. The latter is characterized by marginalization, work segregation, and workers' oppression at multiple crossroads of gender, race, ethnicity, and class (Benschop, 2021). Theorized from feminist perspectives, the issues of inequality and women's access to the labor market are crucial for researchers, organizations, and societies who build on novel feminist theories and unorthodox approaches to change. The first section has also shown the importance of feminist work in acknowledging inequalities and making them visible while also siding with women and minorities bearing the burden of patriarchal systems. The following section focused on synthesizing previously published literature regarding higher education in Jordan and the ways researchers have approached the problem of the discrepancy between women's educational level and access to the Jordanian labor market.

## **Higher Education in Jordan**

### **A Close Look at the Current Literature**

In the light of what has been written so far regarding the correlation between higher education and employment in Jordan, it is considered necessary to investigate further the social, political, and economic reasons that can exhaustively explain this discrepancy. To this end, this section intends to offer a critical review of the literature produced to date and most relevant in this regard. First, the next paragraphs proposed a critical analysis of some publications which, with their hypotheses, bring the issue of low female participation in the Jordanian labor market back to almost exclusively social, cultural, and religious factors. This was followed by a review of an alternative line of literature that distances itself from what was written up to the early 2000s, to turn attention to economic and political factors to explain the phenomenon in question.

What emerged from the review phase is the fact that a substantial part of the academic literature published on this topic tends to explain the discrepancy between women's high level of education and the low percentages of female participation in the Jordanian labor market as a phenomenon to be attributed to the conservative and patriarchal structure of the society, the rigid cultural and religious norms, and the various restrictions imposed on women by their families. Before proceeding with the literature review, it is important to note that, in the Jordanian society, families represent the basic unit to which all individuals refer and to whom they swear absolute loyalty. In other words, the family is much more than a mere group (more or less numerous) of individuals: it is a source of mutual protection and economic cooperation, and the rights

and duties of its members derive from the belongingness to this nucleus (Al Ramahi, 2008). Many authors have explained the dynamics of the Jordanian labor market by basing their hypotheses on the analysis of the characteristics of society, typically described as conservative and patriarchal. Almakhamreh et al. (2022) argue that attitudes towards women and their social restrictions are factors capable of influencing their economic activity. While not limiting their considerations to the Jordanian case, Banihani and Syed (2017) refer to the fact that family responsibilities that weigh on women and their exclusion from public life largely contribute to limiting their economic participation. The literature published in more recent times seems to follow, in part, the same direction: Koburtay et al. (2020) attribute to the Muslim religious heritage the responsibility of having hindered the achievement of gender equity in both the public and private spheres. Moreover, according to El Kharouf and Daoud (2019), Jordan is among the most reluctant MENA countries to ensure gender equality and the participation of women in social and economic life, second only to Egypt. Alawad et al. (2020) have expressed their views roughly in the same way, as they investigated employment and unemployment models in Jordan from the gender system's perspective, thus assuming these models intrinsically depend on social issues, and more precisely on gender norms, always to the disadvantage of women. In this regard, Alawad et al. (2020) noted that mobility and cultural factors constitute major roadblocks that cause high youth female unemployment in Jordan.

The 2023 World Bank Jordan Country Gender Assessment (CGA) highlights significant gender disparities in Jordan, particularly in the areas of economic

participation, agency, and access to justice (World Bank, 2023). Despite women's notable achievements in education, where they make up the majority of university graduates, their participation in the labor market remains strikingly low, constrained by structural barriers such as restrictive social norms, limited childcare, and inadequate transportation. In terms of agency, while Jordan has made some progress, women's decision-making abilities remain restricted by both legal and social factors, with further reforms needed to strengthen their rights and freedoms. Access to justice also remains a challenge, with gaps in legal protections and enforcement, particularly in areas related to family law and gender-based violence. The report emphasizes the need for coordinated efforts between the government, civil society, and international organizations to address these gender gaps and promote greater economic and social inclusion for women in Jordan. The dominant literature published on this topic has, for years, paid little attention to specific economic and political factors that could explain the dynamics of female participation, employment and unemployment in Jordan. For this reason, a more complete line of alternative literature has emerged in recent times, including political, economic, and historical elements that offer a more advanced, critical, and in-depth overview of this discrepancy. Authors in the early 2000s, including Al Kharouf and Deir (2008), Allaf (2008), and Jansen (2006), have repeatedly stressed the need to investigate more deeply the role and experiences of women in higher education, including in relation to their employment at the end of their graduation. In this publication timeframe, Al Mahadin (2004) argued that the encouraging numbers regarding the progress of women in education should not be interpreted as a signal of progress at the economic and political

levels since these numbers have not been translated into concrete sources of empowerment for women in other fields of the public sphere. However, Mahadin (2004) limits themselves to asserting this without going into a more detailed analysis of the economic and political aspects of the problem. Although limited to interpretations relating to the dynamics of power in Jordan, it is believed that Mahadin (2004) point of view can offer an interesting perspective for the purposes of this study as it highlights how various international agencies and reports have praised the advancement of educational possibilities for women in Jordan without ever paying due attention to the problems that characterize the education sector in the country, which, secondly, become an integral part of the reasons why women have deficient access to job opportunities. A further significant starting point for reflection and discussion is offered by Reem Abu Hassan (2003) when they state that the structural adjustments implemented in the context of the neoliberal reforms since the 1990s have made it even more difficult for women to reconcile their multiple roles in the community; in fact, cuts in public spending and public sector employment have closed many doors in terms of job opportunities for women, especially educated ones, who tended to prefer this type of employment due to the flexibility and job security that offered. Furthermore, the privatization of many services which took place in those same years worsened the financial situation of families, making the position of women at home and outside even more complex and stressful. The following sections of this chapter offered a more in-depth discussion of neoliberal reforms, structural adjustments, and their macro and microeconomic consequences on women's participation in the Jordanian labor market.



Other authors, including Assaad et al. (2016), emphasized the role neoliberal reforms have played in limiting the concrete possibilities for women to find a stable and decent paid employment, given that the increases in female unemployment have been provoked by a contraction in public sector employment opportunities, which has not been made up by a commensurate increase in opportunities in the private sector. These same authors highlight another significant element: the market does not send the right signals to those who invest in education, causing a surplus of the highly educated workforce which, however, is unable to meet the needs of the ever-changing market. Al Kharouf (2008) has also questioned the dominant rhetoric that emphasizes the role of patriarchy in Jordan by attributing the low participation of women in the local labor force to social factors. Al Kharouf (2008) points out that, although the influence of the family is an important cultural element, the term *influence* should not always be read in its negative connotation and therefore be considered repressive. According to Al Kharouf's study, the family's influence in Jordan is more often translated into support and encouragement for women, which was also reflected in the data collection and analysis phase. The results of Haghghat's study (2005) contest previous literature by emphasizing the role of Islam as a cultural variable that limits women's participation in the labor force. Haghghat (2005) believes that the analysis of female employment patterns in Jordan should be approached from a more complex and comprehensive point of view. Although the Jordanian government plays a significant role in determining female employment, Islamic ideology also contributes significantly to the model. Haghghat (2005) further demonstrates that Muslim nations have lower levels of female labor force participation as opposed to non-

Muslim countries at the same level of economic development. Lastly, Moghadam (2004) fits seamlessly into this current of thought, underlining the extent to which women in the MENA region question their status quo, exercising resistance and opposition by independently increasing their educational attainment levels and postponing marriage until after university graduation. For this reason, Moghadam (2004) believes that the declining fertility and changes to the social structure are signs of the crisis of Middle Eastern patriarchy.

A substantial part of the literature mentioned above, particularly the one published up to the early 2000s, unanimously agrees on the importance of social and religious elements in preventing women in Jordan from actively participating in the local labor force. However, although valid, the opinions of these authors represent significant gaps that researchers have identified in more recent times and are only partially overcome for the reasons set out above. In order to proceed with an extensive literature review on the theme of this study, it becomes crucial to perform a detailed analysis of the Jordanian education system by offering (a) a general overview of the various Jordanian levels of education and relative peculiarities, (b) a more specific examination of the university sector in Jordan, and (c) an analysis of the effects of the neoliberal reforms on the Jordanian university system.

### **In-depth Examination of the Jordanian Educational System**

Jordan undoubtedly emerges as a positive example of the effectiveness and high-level educational system of all the MENA countries. The Kingdom's efforts to promote a more inclusive, structured, and quality education system have been recognized and

praised both by the governments of neighboring countries and by the literature published on the subject (Al-Hassan, 2019). Through reforms aimed at expanding educational opportunities for all its inhabitants, the Jordanian government has significantly reduced illiteracy rates since the 1950s, thus aiming to reach the four corners of the country, from the farthest rural areas to the very central capital Amman (Al Hawamdeh & Al Qatamin, 2021). Through large-scale mass literacy programs, implemented with the opening of schools and centers to recover lost years of education for adults in the most remote areas, illiteracy has been almost eliminated throughout the country. According to the most recent statistics, the total literacy rate in the country in 2021 corresponded to 98.22%, with a gender disaggregation as follows: 98.61% for men and 97.83% for women (World Bank, 2022). Literacy is only one aspect that defines a country's educational profile and cannot be elevated to a single indicator when assessing its compelling quality. However, it is important to note that Jordan has made, throughout the years, considerable efforts to guarantee free access to primary and secondary education. Given the rapid demographic growth and constant refugee flows over the last centuries and decades (Palestinians, Iraqis, and, more recently, Syrians), the need to expand the capacity of schools has become increasingly urgent. Adely et al. (2019) acknowledged the efforts made by the Hashemite Kingdom and the Comprehensive Educational Development Plan put in place from 1989 to 1995, which aimed at acquiring new buildings to house schools across the country, thus avoiding overcrowded classrooms and allowing higher enrollment rates. Nevertheless, Adely et al. (2019) shed light on the difficulties Jordanian families face today in guaranteeing access to education to their children because of the significant

changes made by increased costs, privatization, and market-driven logics. The effects of neoliberal economic policies on higher education and the Jordanian economy continue to limit students' educational and professional aspirations and affect the overall labor market access (Adley et al., 2019). According to Adley et al. (2019), the secondary education sector has also been expanded over the years by introducing increasingly diversified curricula to allow students to follow the path that best suits their interests. The secondary education path then ends with the General Exam for the Certification of Secondary Education, in Arabic *tawǧīhī*. It is precisely the score obtained in the *tawǧīhī* that determines, in a more or less binding way, the university or vocational path that the student must or can follow. The higher education sector, born between the fifties and sixties, has also developed widely to be distributed throughout the country and has today ten public universities and 18 private universities (McDonald, 2021). Enrollment rates at these universities are becoming more expensive with time, particularly for girls and young women. The reasons of such inequality were presented later in this chapter.

Undoubtedly, the higher education sector has been given increasing attention by the Jordanian authorities in terms of investments and incentives, given the fact that having a highly educated workforce is seen as a fundamental step in the path of creating a *knowledge economy*, especially for a country with poor natural resources like Jordan (Badran & Muwalla, 2019). However, despite the continuous improvements in this field, the Jordanian university system is not without criticalities that risk compromising the quality of services offered to students and the implications on their future employment opportunities. As we tried to demonstrate, this issue turns out to be particularly true for

women. It is precisely on this last section of the Jordanian education system, or the higher education sector that the analysis presented in this chapter focused most. In fact, it is necessary to deepen the developments and changes in the system, just as it is considered essential to critically investigate the reforms implemented and, jointly, the portions of public spending that have been allocated to the university system over the years, with particular attention to the period of neoliberal reforms and of the structural adjustments during which Jordan has seen a significant change in the structure of its economy. Data and reflections accompanied these considerations on the outcomes that the developments and changes in the higher education sector have had for the category in which this study is most interested: women.

### **General Data and Role of the Ministry of Education**

All decisions pertaining to the Jordanian educational system are the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Education, which includes numerous departments and directorates divided by geographical area (north, center, and south) in order to expand its presence nationwide, including in remote desert areas. As for higher education, the competent body is the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. The same Ministry of Education highlights on its website the importance of the *philosophy of education*, based on faith in God, trust in the Arab ideals, and Islamic precepts. These values stem from the importance of education, particularly in forming both the Jordanian individual and citizen (The Ministry of Education, n.d). Furthermore, the right to education for all is enshrined in Article 6, paragraph 2 of the Constitution of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which states that *the Government shall ensure work and*

*education within the limits of its possibilities, and it shall ensure a state of tranquility and equal opportunities to all Jordanians* (UN Women, n.d.). The compulsory nature of the primary school is also guaranteed by Article 20 of the Constitution, which states that *elementary education shall be compulsory for Jordanians and free of charge in Government schools* (UN Women, n.d.). Despite the high number of public schools, there are privately owned schools across all governorates of the Hashemite Kingdom and other type of institutions owned by UNRWA in support of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan (UNRWA, n.d.). According to the statistics available for the 2019/2020 academic year, the Ministry of Education owned only 51.5% of all schools, or 3893 schools out of a total of 7551 (The Ministry of Education, n.d.). The same statistics show that in Jordan 67,795, 8 male students enrolled in the government's schools for the 2019-2020 academic year, as opposed to 76,728, 2 female students. Table 3 shows the data disaggregated by type of school (UNWRA, public, and private) and gender in Jordan for the academic year 2019-2020 (The Ministry of Education, n.d.).

**Table 3**

*Distribution of Jordanian Students by Authority and Gender for the Year 2019-2020*

Gender	Ministry of Education	Private	Other	UNRWA	Grand Total
		Schools	Governmental		
Male	677958	334292	15295	59931	1087476
Female	767282	235212	3050	58650	1064194
Total	1445240	569504	18345	118581	2151670

With a total population of 11,186,209 inhabitants (Department of Statistics, 2022), Jordan is one of the countries where the *youth bulge* is reaching its height (Giordano, 2021). The literature describes this phenomenon as a demographic challenge according to which the younger segment of the population grows faster than all other sectors (Galal & Kanaan, 2010). Consequently, the above numbers relating to students should not be surprising, given that about 33% of the Jordanian population is under 14 (UNESCO, n.d.), which means that, in the years to come, school enrollment rates will also increase, especially if fertility rates remain at current levels. In fact, the total fertility rate in 2016 was 3.3 children per woman, which indicates a slight decline since 2010, when the value was 3.9 children per woman (Sieverding et al., 2018). In light of these considerations, it is natural to conclude that university enrollment rates will also increase, further exacerbating some structural problems that Jordanian university institutions already seem to suffer from.

### **Description of the School Path**

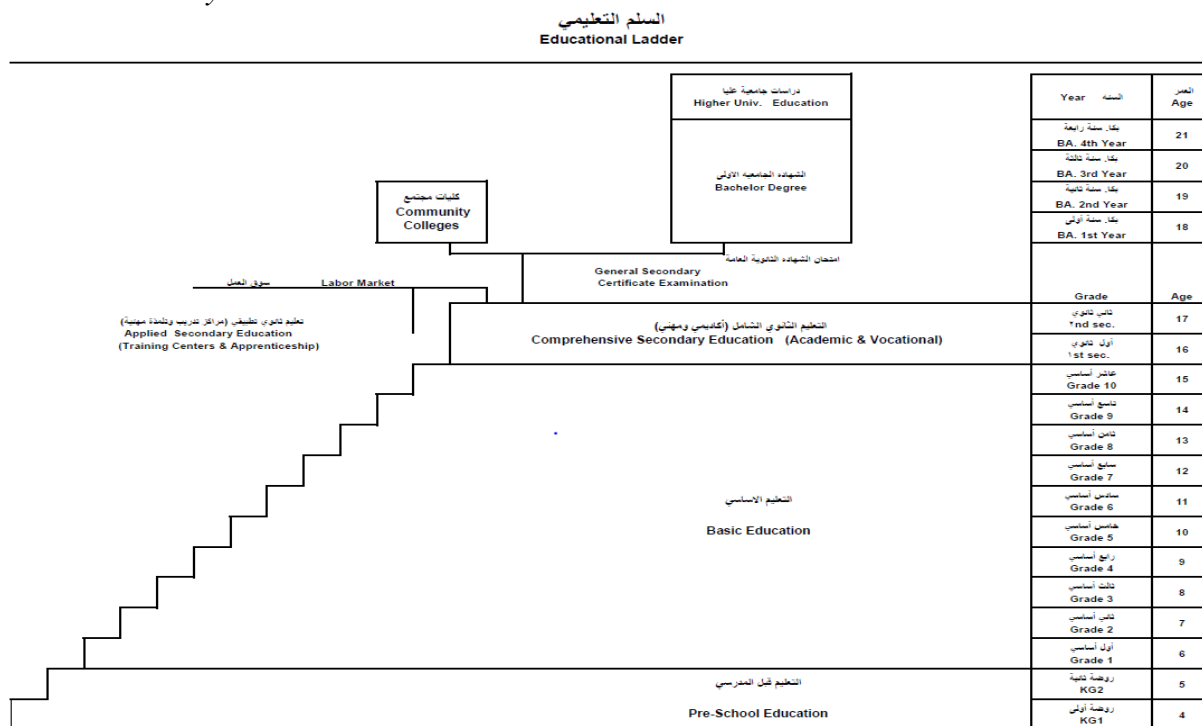
It is now useful to briefly describe the standard school path in Jordan with the help of the illustration below (Figure 1). Such track considers ten years of basic education (*al-ta'lim al-asāsī* in Arabic), which corresponds to the first and secondary school in Europe. Basic education is mandatory up to age 15 and is free in public schools, as established by the reform program implemented in 1988 in collaboration with UNESCO (Cohen, 2020). Students' grades are calculated at the end of the eighth, ninth, and tenth years of first education to determine which secondary education path suits best for them. As such, students can submit applications for the areas they are most interested in, and

the final decision rests with the Ministry of Education (Assaad et al., 2018). The latter is followed by two years of secondary education, corresponding to a non-compulsory continuation of schooling. In this case, students wishing to pursue their final graduation should choose between comprehensive secondary education (academic or vocational) or applied secondary education. While the second path offers more direct and immediate access to the labor market through practical preparation and an apprenticeship, the first path leads students to an almost obvious choice: university. However, access to university is allowed only to students who have passed the General Exam for the Certification of Secondary Education, also known in Arabic as *tawǧīhī*.



**Figure 1**

*The Education System in Jordan*



Note. Source: Ministry of Education (n.d.). Available at:

<http://www.moe.gov.jo/ar/node/60145>

As mentioned, the *tawǧīhī* determines the student's chances of enrolling at a chosen university. The range of choices that open up after taking the *tawǧīhī* is limited if the final grade does not meet the requirements imposed by the various faculties. The minimum requirement to pass the entry test is 60% of the final score. Still, access to the medical faculty, for example, requires a grade equal to or higher than 95% in public universities and slightly less in private universities. For engineering faculties, the required percentage is 85%, and other scientific faculties such as pharmacy, physics, chemistry, and so on follow the same logic. Grades required for access to the humanities

faculties are considerably lower. The tawǧīhī system has often been criticized because it is believed that, on the one hand, it limits the student's freedom of choice and, on the other hand, encourages a study method based only on mnemonic skills and not on critical analysis (see Jreisat, 2018). According to Malak and Khalifeh (2018), the content of the final exam and the methods of preparation have also been the subject of criticism; however, to date, they do not seem to have undergone particularly significant changes. The test consists of numerous sections that aim to assess students' knowledge of mathematics (20% of the test), Arabic language, English language, social sciences, and religion. The other disciplines, including those relating to natural sciences, are chosen by the students and are worth fewer points. On several occasions, the government and the Ministry of Education have committed to include a part of critical analysis in the tawǧīhī; however, all the changes made in this sense led to the same result, namely a dramatic decline in the percentage of students passing the exam. As such, the Ministry has taken steps backward to prevent dissent among students and their families, particularly around its image as a national entity and the reputational risk this may cause (Hawkins, 2018). Besides the criticism around the inadequacy of this exam in assessing students' knowledge and skills, the whole system revolving around tawǧīhī has also been criticized. The preparation and training provided in schools are believed to be too test-driven, causing a lack of focus on other educational goals, such as developing critical and analytical skills, which are essential in gearing students towards access to the labor market (Malak & Khalifeh, 2018). Therefore, the quality of teaching and the teachers' level of practice has been questioned and used to justify students' poor preparation

(Schnitzler, & Heise 2021). In this regard, there are severe gaps on several levels for young people wishing to enroll in a chosen university, as the then dean of the University of Jordan stated in 2015 after no students from 349 Jordanian schools had achieved the minimum grade to pass the *tawǧīhī* during the summer session that same year (Jordan times, 2015). Worth mentioning that the University of Jordan was the first university founded in the Kingdom in 1962 and has since been the most prestigious and important in the country. The competition to access it is exceptionally high for these and other reasons. Nonetheless, the time to take *tawǧīhī* remains an unparalleled event across the country and a cause for concern for parents encouraging their children to give their best, as a high grade in *tawǧīhī* will lead to a brilliant college path. Interestingly, young women obtain higher scores in *tawǧīhī* than their male colleagues, thus significantly increasing their chances of being admitted to a university in faculties that require a high percentage for the entry test (Niqresh, 2021). However, it is to note that girls with high *tawǧīhī* grades are not always interested in enrolling in the most coveted faculties, namely medicine, engineering, and the like. Often, families pressure their daughters to enroll in these faculties, even though they do not have a vocation or a passion for these disciplines (Adely et al., 2019). According to the authors, parents' expectations for their children's future employment often influence their choices, potentially directing them towards paths that are not entirely in line with their ambitions. In conclusion, although not without its criticalities, the *tawǧīhī* system remains almost unchanged. Even when confronted with the option of including alternative assessment criteria- such as individual student presentations and portfolios, the Ministry of Education insisted on keeping the

tawǧhī system, which is considered efficient in reducing nepotism and corruption. Consequently, the tawǧhī continues to impact the choice and possibilities of young students, and therefore it limits their employment opportunities, precluding them from accessing certain faculties based on a numerical score which, often, is not sufficiently objective to judge their abilities.

### **Birth and Early Developments of the Jordanian Higher Education Sector**

After describing the different ways of accessing Jordanian universities, it is important to present the university system right from the first years of its establishment to outline its most salient features. As mentioned, the Jordanian university system is considered one of the most efficient, best-financed, and highest quality in the MENA region. Nevertheless, various authors have highlighted some aspects that limit its potential, underlining how the overall performance is better compared to other countries (Al-Jaghoub et al., 2019). This does not mean such performance cannot be further enhanced. The higher education sector in the Hashemite Kingdom was born relatively recently, in the 1950s, with the establishment of a training college for teachers in 1951, which offered a one-year training program for tutors. Only eleven years later, in 1962, the first university in the country was founded: the University of Jordan, based in Amman, followed in 1976 by the University of Yarmouk, north of the country (Robins, 2019). To date, there are ten public and 19 private universities in Jordan. Still, the University of Jordan remains the most prestigious and competitive knowledge institute, as it offers 102 Bachelor's degree programs, 120 Master's degree programs, and 39 doctoral programs, including 22 higher specialization programs, including 16 for medical and dental faculties

(The University of Jordan, n.d.). In 1981, a further branch of the higher education sector was created: the community colleges. These institutions, about 40 across the country (half publicly owned and half privately owned), were affiliated with Al-Balqa Applied University. These offer a two-year program geared towards professionalizing the specialization in administration, science, agriculture, social sciences, tourism, etc. At the time, there were 50 community colleges in Jordan; however, since 2015, the country has witnessed a gradual closure of these institutes that could be attributed to students' preference for enrolling in a classic university path rather than a technical one (Zughoul, 2021). This trend is undoubtedly motivated by the fact that obtaining a university degree confers a prestigious status in Jordanian society. According to Adely et al. (2018), the expansion of universities in Jordan results from this perception, or that the value of education increases because it translates into the possession of culture, and being *cultured* is significantly important in Jordan. The latter was also confirmed by Shirazi (2020) in their latest article about the cruel optimism of higher education in Jordan.

The management and supervision of the university sector and community colleges fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. Although Jordanian universities enjoy some relative autonomy, in practice, the directives of the Ministry are binding and restrictive. Universities design curricula and manage their budget autonomously, but they still depend primarily on government funds since these vary and are allocated yearly. The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research also includes the Higher Education Council and the Accreditation Commission. The latter is crucial since it carries out due diligence to confer institutional and program

accreditations. While institutional accreditation allows the university to perform its activities as a teaching institution, the program accreditation evaluates the adequacy of each program proposed by individual faculties with the consequent possibility of exercising a profession in a given field based on the knowledge acquired in that program (Thondhlana et al., 2020).

### ***Analysis of Enrollment Statistics in the Years 1996, 2006 and 2016***

The quantitative analysis of the statistics related to the enrollment rates in universities and community colleges provides interesting insights into the distribution of female and male students in various higher education levels, subdivided into Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and Doctorate level degrees. In the following paragraphs, I reviewed the statistics for 2006 and 2016 (respectively, the oldest and most recent available) to comment and contextualize any differences. These statistics are provided by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and are available on their website (MHESR, n.d.). According to the figures provided by the Jordanian authorities, about 1.3 million Jordanians were enrolled in one of the national education systems in the 1996/1997 academic year (MHESR, n.d.). Of these 1.3 million, 7% were enrolled in a higher education program, 5% in a three-year degree program, about 1 or 2% in community colleges, and less than 1% in a Master's or Doctorate program. Numbers available for the above-mentioned academic years show that women were slightly under-represented in universities since they made up less than 45% of the total number of students. On the other hand, women constitute more than half of the total enrollments in community colleges. Khan (2019) attributed this preponderance to two main reasons:

First, to the fact that community colleges, at the time, were more widely distributed across the country. Second, Khan argued that since university fees are more expensive than community colleges, families gave priority to their male children when they could not afford to enroll their daughters as well.

Undoubtedly, Hanssen-Bauer's hypotheses have great relevance but must be better contextualized. The reasons that explain families' preferences to have their male children access universities must certainly be sought in the conception of hierarchies within Jordanian families, according to which roles and rights of women and men differ significantly. However, as I tried to explain in the following paragraphs, this social norm, apparently very rooted in Jordanian society, seems to waver in more recent years, leading several authors to question its rigidity. Indeed, the 2016 statistics show different and higher enrollment trends related to women's access to the higher education system. In light of these considerations, there must have been at the time other reasons preventing families from enrolling their sons and daughters, which may be explained by economic difficulties facing the country. International agencies such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) imposed on Jordan in the 1990s a series of structural adjustment packages in the context of broader neoliberal reforms. The latter may have significantly worsened living standards and increased poverty levels (Aljaloudi, 2021), causing short and long-term consequences, particularly in terms of university attainment and employment rates. These measures could have impacted access to higher education, given that taxes in public and private institutes are almost entirely borne by families and are not covered by state subsidies, except for students receiving aid funds. A comparative

look at the 2006 and 2016 figures reported in the Table below shows that in a decade time, the number of female students enrolled in Jordanian universities has increased significantly. However, there seems to be a trend reversal in community college enrollments, which witnessed in a ten-year timeframe a significant decrease in both gender's enrollment.

**Table 4**

*Number of Students Enrolled by Gender and Tertiary Education Level for 2006 and 2016*

Institution	2006			2016		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Community college	10.011	15.732	25.734	7.801	7.130	14.931
University (all levels, private & public)	16.773	6190	22.963	34.644	37.847	72.491
Bachelor degrees	15.258	57 96	21.054	30.393	33.698	64.091
Master's degree	1258	330	1615	3463	3318	6781
Doctorate level	230	64	294	647	542	1189

The progressive enrollment reduction in community colleges and simultaneous enrollment increase in public universities are two phenomena that need to be studied in parallel, as they are deeply interlinked. Historically, the 1990s demographic growth coupled with rapidly growing levels of unemployment caused an increase in the demand for university admissions in the first decade of 2000 (Zabalawi et al., 2020). The latter shows the extent to which young people perceived the importance of tertiary education by considering a university degree as the new essential requirement that increases the chances of being employed, particularly from a private sector point of view (Krafft et al.,



2021). This is because, since the early 2000s, the Jordanian public sector was no longer considered the primary source of employment due to the neoliberal reforms that have imposed significant cuts in public spending and blocked hiring on the national level. However, obtaining a university degree was still considered an essential prerequisite for vertical mobility, more career opportunities, and a recognized social status, even though the return on investment remained quite uncertain (Adely et. al., 2018). Furthermore, and as a direct consequence of the severe economic crisis in the country, few families could afford to send their children abroad to study. This is considered an additional element that has contributed to intensifying the pressure on Jordanian universities and securing availability to satisfy the high demand (Hausmann et al., 2019). As mentioned above, and as opposed to men, women seem to have significantly benefited from the expansion of the higher education sector. The number of female enrolments in 2016 was six times higher than the 2006 figures, rising from 6,190 to 37,847 in just a decade. This exponential increase demonstrates how the social norms discussed above, described by many authors as essential elements preventing women from participating in public life, have probably softened in recent times. More women accessing universities means increased spatial and social mobility since studying and immersing oneself in a dynamic and multicultural environment allows women to move away from the family sphere to become an integral part of the public sphere. As a matter of fact, broader access to education gives Jordanian girls and women more bargaining and negotiating power within the family and private circle and allows them to cultivate passions, have higher ambitions, and pursue goals that differ significantly from the ones followed by women of

previous generations. In support of this hypothesis, studies have shown that nowadays, girls get married later than in the nineties, and a series of factors explain this phenomenon (Banihani, 2020). Among these, particularly in Jordan, a significant role is attributed to higher education and broader access to universities, whereby many women postpone marriage to focus on their education or professional career (Krafft & Assaad, 2020).

However, as stated by Assaad et al. (2019), the period during which women study or look for a job results in a *waithood* period that keeps them economically dependent on their families, and during which they are not allowed to live outside the nucleus unless married. This fact could discourage some of them from embarking on long academic paths due to the compelling desire to find independence - or a different form of dependence resulting from marriage. This hypothesis would partly explain why the percentages of girls and women enrolled in a three-year degree are considerably higher than those enrolled in a Master's or doctoral degree.

### ***The Neoliberal Reforms and their Impact on the Jordanian Higher Education System***

Albeit indirectly, the neoliberal reforms implemented in the 90s have influenced some aspects of the Jordanian university system we know today. The most significant ones have undoubtedly been the creation of private universities and the changes in the financial structure of public universities. However, before proceeding to a more specific examination of these reforms, it is important to briefly present the main changes that have taken place since this contextualization will also help understand the issues related to the Jordanian labor market. Following the example of other Arab countries witnessing severe economic crises during the mid-80s (Elbargathi & Al-Assaf, 2019), Jordan had its share

of neoliberal reforms imposed on the Kingdom by the World Bank and the IMF. This was preceded by a period of relative political-economic stability that lasted from the 60s to the mid-80s and favored by the oil boom in the Gulf states. The external debt accumulated by the Jordanian government began to grow, and inflation increased due to the conspicuous presence of foreign currency originating from workers' remittances in oil-producing states, which made Jordan a non-oil-producing rentier state (Powers, 2020). According to the author, the latter led to a severe devaluation of the Jordanian dinar, which provoked an unsustainable international debt followed by the declaration of a state of insolvency (Powers, 2020). In 1989, after repeated pressures from international agencies, the Jordanian government signed its first agreement with the IMF to obtain a reduction of its debt and additional credits. The agreement with the IMF imposed on Jordan the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), including establishing austerity and trade liberalization policies (Khouri & Silcock, 2021). Khouri and Silcock (2021) stated that in the first phase (1989-1992), various measures of liberalization of the financial sector were implemented, followed by numerous reforms related to the privatization of public services, the elimination of customs duties, a freeze of public wages, and hiring in the public sector, as well as a partial suspension of subsidies for basic necessities, and a considerable cut in public spending on education and health. These measures, implemented between 1992 and 1999, hit the poorest population segments. Following the death of King Hussein in 1999 and the succession of his son Abdullah II to the throne, a new phase of reform began, aimed at further

increasing the liberalization and privatization measures imposed on the Hashemite Kingdom.

Following these reforms, the IMF and the WB have often commended Jordan's efforts to implement efficient processes that yielded positive results (Arabiyat et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the authors claimed that a more in-depth analysis of the growth recorded during the reform period showed how the latter has never lived up to the structural adjustment programs led by the IFM and the WB and the extent to which the results obtained differ significantly from the expected ones. Since the early 2000s, the economic growth in Jordan has been highly volatile: from 2000 to 2014, the GDP grew on average by only 5.2%; however, this growth is mainly attributable to external factors, such as the oil boom, workers' remittances in the Gulf countries and the international aid received (especially from the United States), and not to the effectiveness of the implemented neoliberal reforms (Al Quraan, 2020). According to Al Quraan (2020), some of these reforms' social implications are worth mentioning, including the fiscal austerity widely adopted in the context of the SAPs, which also included significant cuts in social spending. These cuts do not appear to have been drastic in Jordan, but they were large enough to raise the cost of living, in general, and the access to education and healthcare in particular. Education fees (especially tertiary education) increased significantly; in addition, many families could not afford medical insurance services, which prompted the state to create new welfare programs that provided monetary subsidies to needy families. However, these programs were judged insufficient or unable to reach all needy families (Abdo, 2019). The consequences on employment trends were

also disastrous, as the state could no longer afford to hire recent graduates in its extensive bureaucratic structure. The latter caused levels of unemployment that continue to worry until recent times. This phenomenon had and continues to have negative repercussions, especially on the levels of female employment, which I have extensively treated in this chapter's next section.

As a direct result of public services privatization and consequent cuts in public and social spending, the Jordanian higher education sector suffered from constraints that have forced the few existing state universities to raise tuition fees to ensure their survival. Consequently, this caused an increase in private spending for families with children enrolled in universities. Another direct consequence of the neoliberal reforms was the introduction of parallel programs imposed on students who do not qualify to enter the university by paying additional admission fees than what is officially permitted (Lacouture, 2021). Moreover, Lacouture (2021) states that privatization has influenced the structure of the public educational system by allowing a major expansion of private universities, generally for-profit and accessible only to students from wealthy families, thus excluding a significant portion of the Jordanian population.

In conclusion, the two most significant aspects to be considered when analyzing the consequences of the neoliberal reforms on the Jordanian educational system are the financing structure of state universities, on the one hand, and the birth of private universities, on the other hand. For this reason, the following sections of this chapter focused on these two elements to deepen the understanding of their evolution.

### ***Birth And Expansion of Private Universities***

The expansion of numerous private universities in Jordan is a phenomenon to be considered when analyzing the country's educational profile since the number of these academic institutions (19 in total) continues to exceed that of public universities (10). Furthermore, the massive intervention of the private sector in the higher education system indicates that demand is growing while the public sector cannot manage this growth. A historical look at the phenomenon shows that the Jordanian government granted a license for founding private universities in 1989 in the context of a comprehensive program of economic liberalization and privatization of public services mentioned above (İşleyen & Kreitmeyr, 2021). According to İşleyen and Kreitmeyr (2021), this concession was, in essence, the government's response to its own inability to provide sufficient funds to the higher education sector to meet the pressuring demand of young generations. At the same time, the establishment of private universities also came in response to parents' hopes for a brighter future for their children. However, given the cuts in public spending since the early 90s, the public sector could no longer finance the expansion of state universities as applications for admissions continued to rise. For this reason, the government accepted more students than it could host in the existing structures. Public universities launched the so-called parallel programs, which are still in force today, thus allowing fewer brilliant students (with a lower score of *tawğhīh* to access a specific faculty) to enroll in the desired faculty, paying matriculation and enrollment fees decidedly above the average.

Yom (2020) explained this phenomenon by stating that the Jordanian government allowed young people to study despite the labor market being unable to absorb them at

their own expense. At the same time, it is believed that parallel programs undermine the competitive structure of public universities and the objectivity of their admission system. The *tawǧīhī* grade is generally considered an impartial admission criterion, and by allowing wealthier students to enroll in public universities simply by paying more, the government indirectly supports a clientelist system based on privileges, not one of rights and merits. Furthermore, the overcrowding of universities caused significant deterioration in the quality of teaching (Adely et al., 2018), often at the expense of students who were admitted with a high *tawǧīhī* grade. According to the authors, starting in the early 2000s, public universities had to limit the availability of places by imposing stricter access requirements. This turnaround potentially reflects the desire not to compromise the overall quality of education and the financial inability to bear the costs for such a large number of students (Adely et al., 2018).

Therefore, private entrepreneurs have taken advantage of this shortage and relieved the pressure on the public sector by finding a profitable new industry for investment in tertiary education. This gave birth to private institutions that stood ready to absorb excluded students from public universities and parallel programs (because they were already complete) and, therefore, welcomed about one-third of Jordanian students, according to the latest available statistics (MHESR, n.d.). According to the statistics above, male students enrolled in the 2015/2016 academic year were 12,056, while female students made up about one-third of the total students, with 7430 enrollments. This trend is primarily due to females' success in secondary school and, above all, in *tawǧīhī*; with higher-than-average grades than their fellow males. Therefore, female students are much

more likely to be admitted to prestigious state universities, where they make up more than half of the total percentage of students.

Another interesting aspect of private universities is their financial structure. These institutions and their activities depend almost entirely on donations and on student taxes, which can be modulated according to the needs of each academic year. Moreover, even if formally maintaining the principle of competitiveness like public educational institutions, private universities very often lower the *tawǧīhī* grade required for admission in order to increase profits (Emerald Insight, n.d.). Additionally, less advantaged families do not seem to be discouraged by the high taxes required in private universities and are willing to make great sacrifices such as selling their properties to allow their children the opportunity of earning a university degree for the social value this represents (Badran et al., 2019). Although this examination is brief, it is clear that the construction of a knowledge economy is undoubtedly an ambitious project, and the country's efforts have been commendable. However, as I will highlight in the next section of this chapter, the labor market's current conditions do not allow all recent graduates to find employment opportunities, which makes the realization of the knowledge economy project even more challenging. Furthermore, it is clear from the above that students and families prefer public universities to private ones for obvious economic reasons. However, the literature on this subject shows that most private universities, even in terms of quality of education, do not compete with state universities. Their image in public opinion is often negatively connoted given the less stringent access requirements (Szromek & Wolniak, 2020). According to Szromek and Wolniak (2020), private institutions did not turn into centers



of academic excellence after their foundation, which is why a number of professors and researchers prefer working in public universities as these ensure more job stability (and, consequently, wages), flexible working modalities, and impartial promotion rules. Additionally, and as opposed to private universities, public universities' administrative structure is generally considered more functional, efficient, and transparent (Szromek & Wolniak, 2020). This is mainly due to the contribution of numerous bodies that assess whether quality standards required by the Ministry of Education and Research are implemented and working conditions are in line with national regulations. Existing regulations are provided by the Higher Education Council, a state body responsible for establishing admission criteria, approving funding and donations, and verifying the annual budget (Adely et al., 2018).

Based on what the literature mentioned on the subject, private universities were born as a *quick solution* to the Monarchy's inability to respond to high university admission demands (Zughoul, 2021). This has given the private sector a new area where investments would bring profit without improving the overall quality of education. As confirmed by Bint El Hassan et al. (2022), private academic institutions did not contribute to the enhancement of the educational curricula, nor did they bring academic innovations to an already outdated system rather, they remained substantially anchored to existing teaching methods and limited themselves to absorbing an exceeding number of students without offering better pathways to access the Jordanian labor market.

### ***Financing the Higher Education Sector: Public and Private Spending***

According to the latest statistics (MHESR, n.d.) and because of the demographic growth, Jordan is witnessing a significant increase in children and young people of school age. This condition, coupled with an increasing demand for education, has created new concerns for the public sector, which was forced over the years to readjust public spending allocations for the primary, secondary, and tertiary education sector. In this paragraph, a comparison was made between percentages of GDP and public spending allocated to various educational levels between 2007 and 2018. Based on these numbers, a discussion followed on the adequacy of public expenditure and the role of private household spending in financing education, especially the tertiary one. According to Galal and Kanaan (2010), the year 2007 witnessed a net increase in public spending for all educational levels compared to 2002. This was done at a lower rate compared to the overall increase in public expenditure. This is particularly relevant for the tertiary education sector, which received the lowest percentage of public spending among all levels of education. The World Bank data for 2007 clearly show this trend, whereby the share of total public expenditure reserved for higher education was 1.96%, thus constituting 0.77% of the total GDP, while the total public spending for other levels of education corresponded to approximately 4% of the total GDP (World Bank, n.d.).

The most updated figures related to 2022 show slightly different values. Recent data indicates that Jordan's public expenditure on education has experienced a slight decline. In 2022, the total public expenditure on education was approximately 3.16% of the country's GDP, a decrease from 3.56% in previous years. Additionally, education spending accounted for about 9.58% of total government expenditure in 2022, down from

9.95% in 2019. This trend reflects a reduction in the proportion of national resources allocated to education over recent years. The reason behind this difference must be sought in the structure of the education system as a whole. As previously mentioned, Jordan has almost completely eliminated illiteracy across the country, thus reaching a total literacy level of over 98%. According to the latest available figures, the government had to open different institutions across the country, resulting in a net enrollment rate of 80.9% in primary school and 62.6% in secondary school (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, n.d.). These efforts required continuous financial investments in the national education system, which would explain the increase in the numbers presented above. Furthermore, while the primary and secondary education sectors are primarily managed and financed by the government (except for some private schools and the ones owned by UNRWA), the university system has seen a net growth in private sector contribution. The latter established private universities, which, by nature, are not repositories of government subsidies. Consequently, percentages of public spending reserved for the two levels of *compulsory education* are more consistent than in the *optional* tertiary education sector. The latter is almost entirely self-financed and depends more on internal sources of funding than on external ones.

In the period ranging from 2009 to 2013, it is estimated that 77% of public universities' income was collected from taxes imposed on students, while only 13% of the income mentioned above constituted a contribution of public subsidies (Waterbury, 2019). However, the limited public aid to state universities undermines the provision of optimal services because financial resources vary yearly, becoming unstable and

unpredictable. This represents significant challenges to institutions, including funding research activities, ensuring high-quality teaching resources and staff, and maintaining a sustainable and affordable tuition system that does not heavily weigh on individuals and families. Therefore, Jordan's university sector's financing system is generally considered inadequate. Criticalities are mainly attributable to the neoliberal reforms mentioned above since the responsibility for an educational system profoundly modified by privatization and characterized by a declining quality is due to the decisions taken in those years (Waterbury, 2019).

As a result of the above, implementing cost-sharing policies to sustain universities and their continuity became crucial. Altbach et al. (2019) noted that these policies resulted in a considerable increase in Jordanian households' private spending on higher education, statistically more significant than the values in other MENA countries. For example, the latest available data shows that this expenditure constituted 4.9% of the total private spending in 2003, 6.6% in 2006, and 5.6% in 2014 (Jordanian Department of Statistics, n.d.). Furthermore, the lowest total household expenditure value on children's education is recorded within families whose head of household is between 30 and 39 years old (3, 2%), while the highest value (8.5%) is recorded within families whose head of household is between 50 and 59 years old (Jordanian Department of Statistics, n.d.). It could, therefore, be concluded that household spending is significantly higher in families whose breadwinner falls within the age group just mentioned, precisely because their children are at the age of attending university. From the available statistical data, it is clear that public expenditure allocated for tertiary education in Jordan is insufficient to

cover state universities' running costs, thus requiring the implementation of consistent cost-sharing policies that burden individuals and families (Jordanian Department of Statistics, n.d.). Despite high management costs and tuition fees, the quality of Jordanian universities (albeit generally praised in the context of the MENA countries) is not without serious gaps. I have exposed this topic in the next section so to present a complete overview of the educational system, including the challenges reported in the literature.

### ***Main Challenges of Jordanian Universities and the Gender Implications***

One of the common issues that tertiary education systems face in the MENA region lies in the quality of university services. Part of these criticalities is easily identifiable- at first glance since these represent challenges related to the physical structure of the academia and the availability of resources. Other problems do emerge, however, particularly when analyzing employment patterns in the various countries and especially levels of unemployment among educated young people, which exacerbate critical issues regarding the quality of teaching and adequacy of educational curricula (Badran & Muwalla, 2019). Jordan is not immune to these issues; therefore, it is considered necessary to discuss the different challenges Jordanian universities face, starting from the existing- although limited- literature on the subject. The first issue to be discussed is the traditional and substantially dated teaching approach adopted in most Jordanian universities. Efforts by teachers to modernize teaching methods are found to be very modest, and there is still a strong preference for the uncritical memorization of contents from books, together with a general tendency among teachers to give unsupported frontal lessons (Badran & Muwalla, 2019). These favorite mnemonic

learning techniques do not allow students to develop critical and analytical skills, primarily because teachers do not encourage individual research, group work, or support using technology to enrich educational experiences (Canals & Al-Rawashdeh, 2019).

Of course, this argument cannot be generalized to all Jordanian universities and faculties; however, the literature confirms that the characteristics described above are widespread in public universities, especially at the University of Jordan in Amman (Almuhaisen et al., 2020). The following section focused on the different teaching methods adopted by professors and their repercussions on students' ability to find employment opportunities. Indeed, researchers have proved that most Jordanian graduates do not possess the needed skills required by many employers when completing their academic studies, particularly when it comes to critical thinking, problem-solving, or teamwork (Badran et al., 2019). These results install doubt on the overall effectiveness of an educational system that is considered the starting point for creating a Jordanian knowledge economy. Secondly, and according to Badran et al. (2019), the overall infrastructure and availability of resources constitute a significant problem that is certainly more common among public institutions in the country. Many buildings are externally and internally decadent, and scientific faculties lack advanced laboratories and computer classrooms. Poor maintenance of these spaces also makes learning even more challenging, particularly for certain courses requiring specific scientific equipment. A third criticality lies in the limited educational curricula offered by universities, particularly for the doctoral level. The issue targets more private universities than public ones and seems to interest scientific faculties more particularly, considering that

postgraduate programs in scientific majors require significant funds for creating research laboratories, providing specific equipment, etc. (see Badran et al., 2019).

According to the literature, a reduced university curriculum entails more negative implications for female students than for their male counterparts. Mohammed (2021) stated that many women in Jordan are enrolled in the highest levels of tertiary education and are more interested in pursuing a career in academia than their male colleagues. Nevertheless, a shortage in doctoral programs and consequent scholarships means some women would be unable to pursue their degree in a particular research field in Jordan, for instance, a Ph.D. in dentistry, and would have no other choice than to enroll in doctoral programs abroad. This decision, however, is not within reach of all families, and several elements combine to make the situation even more complex. Women in Jordan may not have enough financial resources to cover their studies and live abroad (see Mohammed, 2021). Even with a partial or total scholarship, many are forced to refuse the opportunity because they are already married and, in many cases, have dependent children, which restricts their mobility without stable economic support. It is important to highlight this issue as many Jordanian universities offer full scholarships, including travel, accommodation, and health insurance coverage for the scholarship holder and three of his family members that if the scholarship winner is a male candidate (Al-Manasrah, 2021). While if the scholarship candidate is a woman, the rules and regulations change to cover only her expenses without additional support for other family members, which strongly discourages her from undertaking this path (International Labour Organization, n.d.). A final issue considered essential to highlight concerns the recruitment process in public

universities. An interesting element emerged from the literature: public universities tend to recruit, in most cases, researchers who obtained their doctorate abroad, as this is considered an indication of a higher educational level compared to candidates who pursued their degree in Jordan (Emerald Insight, n.d.). Given the gender implications and the scarcity of the offers within doctoral programs, the latter adds more complexity to women's access to the labor market in general and academia in particular. This is mainly because many female candidates- although competent- do not have the opportunity or the financial resources to complete their studies abroad.

The arguments above prove that the quality of Jordanian universities, although considered among the best in the MENA region, is highly questionable. The overall performance could be improved if funding schemes were more efficient and structured to implement quality assurance mechanisms that are more valid than the current ones (Kanaan, 2018). This would lead to a general improvement of the overall academic quality and more robust linkages between the preparation of graduates and the needs of the labor market.

### ***Attempts to Reform the Education System in Jordan***

As is clear from the above, the obsolete pedagogical approach and insufficient public funds have contributed to high levels of youth unemployment in Jordan, particularly among highly educated young people. This topic is explored in the following section of this chapter. However, it should be noted that this problem was undoubtedly one of the reform catalysts implemented by several Arab countries since the early 2000s, and Jordan is no exception. Nonetheless, Waterbury (2019) states that the attempts to



reform the education sector (not just tertiary) are also *inherently political* and carry implications that go well beyond the educational sphere. In fact, most of the reforms implemented in many Arab countries were pushed and primarily financed by third parties such as the World Bank Group, the United States through the Agency for International Development (USAID), and other international agencies. Key actors took advantage of the severe economic crisis hitting Arab countries in the 1980s to encourage neo-liberal reforms aimed at privatizing the educational system and transforming it into a sector from which to derive profits (Waterbury, 2019). That said, it is worth mentioning some of Jordan's most significant reform efforts and their consequences. Regardless of who is behind these reforms, the latter remains the most effective tool for creating change, fostering development, and stimulating quality improvement needed to innovate the labor market (Badran & Muwalla, 2019).

The most notable educational reform attempt was the Education Reform for a Knowledge Economy (ERfKE) project, implemented in July 2003. The government launched this five-year project in collaboration with the World Bank and USAID, which has allocated funds for a total of 380 million dollars, making the project one of the most ambitious ever carried out in the Middle East in the educational context (see Emerald Insight, n.d.). However, it is important to note that reforms targeted mainly the Jordanian primary and secondary education systems. In other words, the extensive measures (25 in total) did not focus on the university system since international agencies aimed to privatize it entirely and leave the so-called compulsory schools to the public (World Bank, 2008). However, it is crucial to mention this detail since it helps us fully

understand the mechanisms for implementing reforms in Jordan and recognize the country's efforts when engaging on this front. The objectives of the ERfKE are certainly ambitious and touch on various aspects of the educational path, including providing broader and more widespread access to technology. These attempts have partly materialized due to numerous public-private partnerships established with large companies such as Intel and Microsoft to enhance access to technology for educational purposes in all country areas. More than ten years after the implementation of this significant reform project, the tangible results are still uncertain and the improvements made are very limited (Almeqdadi & Al Zoubi, 2022). Furthermore Almeqdadi and Al Zoubi (2022) have questioned the adequacy of large-scale school reforms funded and designed almost exclusively by international agencies and external donors, which has imposed an educational model typical of other countries and not necessarily locally applicable to Jordan (see Almeqdadi & Al Zoubi, 2022). Indeed, the program was not inclusive of the local culture and traditions, particularly regarding the content of the newly proposed and developed curricula (see Almeqdadi & Al Zoubi, 2022).

As anticipated, the reform model for primary and secondary education levels is similar to those for the university system reform since the latter is, as a rule, heavily financed by international donors. This is the case of the reforms implemented between 2013 and 2018 in the context of the National Strategic Plan. Most of the measures adopted were financed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates for a 30 million dollars program (Chinnery, 2019). These reforms aimed to build spaces to host computer laboratories in universities that offer technical-computer study courses and went to fill a

significant gap related to the quality of laboratories and IT facilities in universities. Furthermore, some reform attempts have materialized in the form of projects to encourage communication between companies active in the area and students and/or recent graduates. Jordan launched the first of these projects in 2003 with a program called Faculty for Factory at the University of Jordan which was then scaled up and expanded to include nine other universities in the country (Elhaija, 2021). The objective was to engage academia and the local industry in assistance programs focusing on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating on the national territory. The program involved creating ad hoc projects that would solve technical problems within a particular enterprise. These projects were then submitted to students who would find viable solutions, also thanks to the guidance of their professors and the company representatives. However ambitious, according to Waterbury (2019), this project did not bring the expected results: companies were not always willing to hire graduates who participated in the program, and professors' contribution was not always solid enough. Additionally, many professors joined the program to obtain a salary increase or double their chances of publishing new academic articles and securing a certain job promotion.

To summarize, it is clear that reform efforts in the compulsory education sectors have been more consistent, structured, and commensurate with the needs of a constantly evolving school system such as the Jordanian one. Conversely, large-scale reforms have never been implemented in the tertiary education sector. The Jordanian government and universities have limited themselves to offering a series of isolated programs that, while valid, have never realized their full potential for the reasons mentioned above. The

approach of the Jordanian government towards university education is therefore considered questionable. This is also supported by the fact that tertiary education is not part of the Education Strategic Plan 2018-2022 recently implemented by the Ministry of Education to counter the decline in the quality of education (The Ministry of Education & Scientific Research, n.d.). The decision to exclude the university system is linked to the neoliberal logic that entrusts university education to the private sector, leaving only the so-called compulsory school in the hands of the public sector. In conclusion, if a knowledge economy is to be created in Jordan, the university sector deserves more attention and reform efforts to develop a workforce that can adequately respond to the demands of the labor market, particularly within the private sector.

### **Women's Participation in the Jordanian Labor Market**

Very high unemployment rates characterize the labor market in Jordan. According to the Jordanian Department of Statistics (2021), unemployment stood in the last quarter of 2021 at 23.3% and 22.8% in the first quarter of 2022. The COVID-19 crisis has added more challenges to an already complex situation, and despite progress in certain areas, Jordan is still lagging in the global ranking. According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum (2024), Jordan currently ranks 122nd out of 146 countries, showing slight progress since previous years but still reflecting significant gender gaps, especially in economic participation. This places Jordan fifth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, where overall gender parity remains among the lowest globally. Despite women making up 56% of university graduates, their labor force participation remains low at around 15%, indicating that educational achievements have

not yet translated into substantial economic inclusion. The country has been implementing various initiatives to address these disparities, such as the Gender Parity Accelerator, which aims to close gaps in workforce participation, pay, and leadership through collaborative efforts between the public and private sector. Relatedly, women and men are affected by ongoing conflict in diverse ways, jeopardizing the advancement of human development indicators. Women and men are impacted differently by ongoing hostilities in Syria, Libya, the West Bank and Gaza, Iraq, and Yemen. In contrast to men and boys, who are more likely to die in war or while playing outside, women and girls experience heightened risks to their maternal and reproductive health, are exposed to gender-based violence, and may experience an increase in child marriage. Other conflicts in their particular countries, such as those between neighbors (the case of Lebanon and Jordan) and civil instability, can also affect women differently than men. On the political level, Jordan has been and remains especially vulnerable to external shocks and geopolitical changes brought on by instability in the area. Jordan was reclassified from a high middle-income country to a low middle-income country as recently as 2017 due to declines in the human development index (HDI) and other development indices (World Bank, 2021). Additionally, Jordan's demographics have been significantly impacted by the influx of refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Palestinian Territories, which added more complexity to the an already challenging situation. The Arab Spring, the financial crisis, and the accompanying wars in neighboring nations, particularly Syria, have made it harder to recover economically and socially.

The fragility in Jordan is also a result of internal pressures that lead to greater feelings of exclusion, unequal access to opportunities, poor accountability, restrained freedoms of speech, and the consequences of quick demographic changes.

Unemployment is particularly evident among educated young people, whose number has increased due to the expansion of the university system throughout the country. As of 2024, youth unemployment in Jordan remains critically high, with a staggering 46.1% unemployment rate for individuals aged 15-24. This reflects ongoing structural challenges in the Jordanian economy, including mismatches between education and labor market needs, as well as insufficient job creation to absorb the growing youth population (World Bank, 2024). Indeed, unemployment had always affected Jordan's economy but has undergone a further deterioration since the 2000s, in conjunction with the 2008 global financial crisis. At the time, the Jordanian economy also suffered from slowdowns in GDP growth. The 2009 annual growth reached 2 % against 8.5 % in 2007 (AlAzzawi & Hlasny, 2020). As of 2024, Jordan's annual GDP growth is projected to reach 2.7%, reflecting modest progress despite challenging regional and global economic conditions.

The growth is supported by sectors such as manufacturing and tourism, though structural challenges, including high public debt and unemployment, remain significant obstacles to achieving faster economic expansion (World Bank, 2024). According to AlAzzawi and Hlasny (2020), the low annual growth seriously influenced employment patterns, particularly educated workers who found themselves unemployed or exposed to precarious working conditions. In point of fact, current graduates are confronted with an economy that continues to create informal jobs requiring unskilled labor in the service

and construction sectors (see AlAzzawi & Hlasny, 2020). Further, the demand of the Jordanian job market is satisfied by unskilled foreign workers, especially Asians, who are willing to work for significantly lower wages than the local population (Krafft & Assaad, 2019). Krafft and Assaad (2019) state that these dynamics, among others, encompassed additional repercussions on women's employment rate, thus placing the country third to Yemen (6,08%) and Iraq (11,8%) in the global ranking of countries with the lowest female participation rates. Countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt have slightly higher rates, and the UAE and Tunisia lead the region with much higher participation rates, around 52% and 25%, respectively (see World Bank, 2024). These figures are even more alarming compared to the school enrollment statistics of women up to the highest levels of education, detailed in the previous section. Relatedly, the rates of women attaining university degrees exceed those recorded for men since the 1990s. While, generally, a higher level of education among women leads to an increase in female participation and employment values, this is not the case in Jordan, where these values remain extremely low by international standards, even for the most educated women (AlAzzaw et al., 2018). Furthermore, unlike other Arab countries, Jordan had not recorded significant increases in female participation in the labor market, even during the 70s when the first oil boom hit the Gulf countries. The literature on the subject showed that workers from Egypt and Syria temporarily replaced the local male workforce, which moved to the Gulf, where opportunities and wages were better. The latter resulted in a modest increase in female participation, particularly in the manufacturing sector (Galal & Said, 2018).

On a parallel track, the country has considerably expanded learning opportunities for women, with the limits set out above, to create a knowledge economy thanks to a highly educated workforce. According to the latest statistics, 57.3% of employed Jordanian women had a professional qualification equivalent to a three-year degree when entering the labor force (DOS, 2020). This indicates that, undoubtedly, the higher the level of education, the more likely women are to be employed. However, the worrying figure is that, of all unemployed women in the Kingdom, 74.9% had a three-year degree in 2018, and almost eight out of ten women are still unemployed, even after graduating (DOS, 2020). These percentages indicate that the Jordanian labor market is not hospitable towards women, particularly the educated ones. In many cases, educated women also seem to be overqualified for the available job opportunities (Kaasolu et al., 2019). This aspect exacerbates the challenges within the Jordanian labor market and will be explored in detail in the following sections. Nevertheless, it is to note that even the levels of participation and employment among educated and uneducated Jordanian men are low both for the global average and the average of Arab countries. The rates have dropped further from 2010 to 2016, passing from 70% to 63%, against a worldwide average of 81% and an average of 78 % in Arab countries (Krafft & Assaad, 2019). These trends bring considerable light to the challenges affecting the structure of the Jordanian labor market, which targets both men and women but has a more severe impact on female labor participation.

Stemming from the above, the literature review conducted in this chapter focused on how the dynamics of women's employment have profoundly changed after the



implementation of neoliberal reforms since the end of the 1980s and the impact on female unemployment, particularly among educated women. The discussion was not limited to examining these dynamics but included an analysis of the social policies in place, presenting some state initiatives aiming to eliminate workplace discrimination in terms of opportunities and wages. Furthermore, the analysis reviewed the laws regulating women's employment policies in the country. The overall objective was to provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of female employment in Jordan in all sectors (public and private), with a particular focus on the category of educated women who face challenges in recruitment and access to job opportunities.

### **Dynamics of Women's Employment, from the Neoliberal Reforms to Date:**

#### **The Public Sector**

Implementing numerous neoliberal reforms since the late 80s has had deleterious consequences for the Jordanian economy, both in the education sector and the local labor market. Particular attention is paid to the dynamics of the public sector's employment of educated women starting from those years to identify the reasons behind the low percentages of participation observed today in the country. Before the implementation of the neoliberal reforms, a development model called *statist* was in force in most Arab countries. After the independence, many countries expanded their state apparatus, and the public sector acquired a fundamental role in this development strategy (Watanabe, 2019). In particular, the State became the primary source of employment, and this fact greatly interested women. Indeed, Jordanian most recent state university graduates could count on a stable job at one of the many branches of the government's entities. However, the

public sector has committed to recruiting more educated women since the early 2000s, but in much lower percentages than in the previous years. According to UN Women (2024), around 73% of Jordanian female civil servants hold a university degree. This figure contrasts significantly with women in public employment who do not hold such qualifications, emphasizing the educational attainment gap within the civil service. Women with higher education qualifications are more likely to hold public sector positions, as the public sector remains a more accessible employment avenue for educated women in Jordan. The latter shows the extent to which a higher education qualification is a preferential requirement for securing employment in the public sector.

Nonetheless, public sector employment was considered and continues to be very appealing for women who need a job to ensure continuity in their motherhood (Assaad & Salemi, 2019). Indeed, the authors state that the public sector generally offers working conditions more suited to a woman's needs (wife and mother, in most cases) than the private sector (see Assaad & Salemi, 2019). Undeniably, a job in the public sector guarantees shorter and more flexible working hours for women. This is coupled with numerous benefits, including free health insurance for herself and the rest of the family in case of a female-headed household, ninety days of maternity leave compared to seventy days in the private sector, and other similar benefits (Amer, 2014). Furthermore, the working environment in the public sector is generally perceived as safer for women, with less risk of being exposed to harassment, as this is frequently the case in other work environments (World Bank, 2015). According to Jordanian social norms, the social value and importance of the family in Jordanian society is an element that must be taken into

consideration when considering employment in the public sphere. To that extent, the education and health sectors are traditionally considered the most suitable working categories for women (Gauri et al., 2019). In a recent study on women's empowerment in Jordan et al. (2021) stated that occupational segregation, or the phenomenon by which some categories of individuals are more represented than others in specific working environments, broadly characterizes the Jordanian labor market. Jordan et al (2021) argue that women mostly occupy teaching positions in primary or secondary schools and work in gender-segregated environments. In these jobs, working hours tend to be reduced, and women teachers have more flexibility in terms of holidays as their job allows them to be with their children during academic vacations. In short, being a teacher allows women to perfectly reconcile the two roles they and society want them to fulfill, that being a salaried worker who also manages the motherhood function (see Barnett et al., 2021). To that end, the public sector generally allows women to enjoy some benefits; as will be seen, the private sector does not. It is useful to underline that the importance of the family in Jordanian society is not to be interpreted as a constraint, a restriction, or an obstacle to a woman's professional development. According to Al-Kharouf (2018), women tend to be attracted by an occupation that allows them to achieve specific professional and personal goals to seeking a job opportunity that offers an excellent work-life balance. The author stated that a woman's *domestic* role is not (always) an imposition on her husband or father (see Al-Kharouf, 2018). Often, Jordanian women have more decision-making and negotiating power within the family than literature wants to admit.

However, following the neoliberal reforms discussed in the previous section, employment dynamics in the public sector have undergone profound changes due to the austerity measures adopted in the context of the Structural Adjustment Programs. As has already been explained, starting in the nineties, significant cuts in public spending downsized the State's primary source of employment, thus strengthening the private sector's role. Consequently, the state apparatus could no longer absorb all the new graduates as it did in the past<sup>191</sup>. Figures show that before the reforms, the Jordanian State employed more than 60 % of the recent graduates, which had halved to less than 30 % by the time reforms were implemented (Assaad, 2014). All these conditions are among the factors that undermined the broader social contract (or pact) existing between the State and citizens (Lacouture, 2021). Even today, this implicit pact holds as long as the State continues to be the primary source of all welfare services (such as health, education, food subsidies, and employment). According to Robins (2019), with the dismantling of a large part of social policies in the 1990s, the Jordanian monarchy found itself deprived of a stable social base of support, as the population no longer received the economic benefits it had enjoyed up to that moment<sup>195</sup>. The consequences of these economic policies have been particularly severe for educated women and continue to influence their career choices. Many are unwilling to seek work in the private sector and prefer to wait for positions opening in the public sector, even if this entails several months of unemployment. Alternatively, and for the same reasons, educated women feel increasingly forced to join the ranks of unemployed women or, in many other cases, to leave the workforce altogether and give up seeking employment (Robins, 2019).

Therefore, employers should consider all of these elements to create equal opportunities for women, especially the educated ones, who are essential to the country's economic growth. As mentioned, the problem with employment dynamics in the public sector has been the rapid decline in labor supply following the neoliberal reforms. The desired outcomes for these reforms also included a substantial enlargement of the private sector to make up for the supply shortage in the public sector. However, this did not happen. The public sector ceased to be a potential engine of economic growth and blocked hiring. In parallel, there has not been a noticeable increase in private sector hiring, which has never turned into the catalyst for economic growth as the proponents of the reforms hoped. Aspects of employment dynamics in the private sector will be the subject of the next section, aiming to explain the implications of employing educated women in such a sterile environment.

### **The Private Sector**

The restriction of employment opportunities for educated women in the public sector has not been fairly compensated for by a commensurate expansion of opportunities in the private sector. The latter has caused high levels of female unemployment across the country, especially in the early years following the implementation of the neoliberal reforms. Over the decades, the private sector has expanded without becoming an engine of economic growth. The literature on the subject showed that between the 1980s and 1990s, the private sector employed only 10-12% of recent graduates of the total workforce (Adely et al., 2021; Buckner, 2021). This value has tripled according to statistics for 2010, reaching 36-38%, and recent graduates who were supposed to be

employed by the public sector considered migrating to the private sector if profitable opportunities arose (see Assaad, 2014). With the sudden shrinking of opportunities in the public sector, there has been an apparent reversed trend. At the time, it became more frequent for young workers to seek employment in the private sector initially, then move to the public sector if any opportunity arises. This phenomenon did not interest and still does not affect so widely women who, as said, preferred to withdraw from the workforce rather than undergo working conditions that were not considered very welcoming (Assaad et al., 2014). However, despite the modest increase in the private sector opportunities, working conditions are considerably lower in terms of quality and stability compared to the public sector. The private sector remains precarious, especially in terms of temporary employment contracts. According to recent statistics, if 97% of state workers can now boast a permanent contract, less than 70% of private sector workers can say the same (DOS, 2021). Another factor hindering women's expansion in the private sector is the difficulty reconciling work and domestic responsibilities (Gauri et al., 2019). The labor market should facilitate, rather than hinder, this possibility for women, especially those who have taken paths of long studies and delayed having a family with the hope of finding a job worthy of their intellectual preparation. The need to fill both roles becomes more pressuring for these women, although the private sector cannot respond adequately to this urgency. Precarious contracts, low wages, harassment, and discrimination in the workplace are just some of the elements that explain why female unemployment rates are so high, especially among women with a high level of education (see Banihani & Syed, 2020). In fact, according to official statistics (UN Women, 2024),

women with a three-year university degree represented almost 73% of the total unemployed women across the Kingdom.

In the MENA region, another common problem that characterizes the Jordanian labor market is the importance of connections and relations to seek and find employment. Although these dynamics are mainly related to the public sector, the private sector is not immune to them. The family background and other favoritism mechanisms push employers to recruit staff who have been directly recommended to them (Koburtay et al., 2020). Women are at a clear disadvantage in this as well. According to Afiouni (2014), it is more challenging for women to be recruited through direct recommendation than for men, which does not mean that employment is to be sought through connections. On the contrary, the critical implication of the latter is the lack of transparency and fairness in the job selection process. However, thanks to their interpersonal knowledge, it is easier for men to be hired in certain positions. This entails indirectly excluding women from the selection process, even if their qualifications could have become more suitable for the profile sought than those of their male counterparts.

It seems clear from the analysis that neoliberal reforms have generated a chain of serious problems related to employment patterns in the country. These have severely limited public sector hiring without providing real incentives to the private sector to absorb the workforce, especially the educated ones. These dynamics have hit women harder, as they often had to resign because working conditions offered by the private sector do not respond adequately to their needs or, in any case, not as adequately as the public sector does. In other words, if the private sector wants to become the country's

engine of economic growth, it should downsize, review its hiring policies, and expand the benefits offered to female workers where possible. Women's priorities are to reconcile their productive roles with their reproductive one. The latter would allow many more educated women to enter (or re-enter) the labor market and participate in the country's economic activity, ultimately enhancing its productive capacity and financial stability.

### **The Informal Economy**

Although this study focuses mainly on educated women, it is worth discussing employment models in the so-called *informal economy* or *grey economy*, where educated women are less likely to work. According to the International Labour Organization (2014), an informal economy or sector is not subject to government regulation or taxation and contributes significantly to emerging nations' economies. It is occasionally labeled as problematic and out of control; however, since the 1960s, the informal sector has been increasing quickly and offers significant economic prospects for the most disadvantaged social groups. In fact, this sector often concerns economic activities requiring unskilled labor. As such, an informal economy is a set of activities or services carried out illegally that escape the statistical survey. These generally represent low-paid workers who are excluded from any social security package. The informal economy involves many domestic workers, often foreign women, particularly ethnic minorities. It also includes self-employed workers, family-business workers, and low-labor workers (services such as catering, hotel industry, sales, manufacturing industry, etc.). Informality continues to characterize Jordan's economy and some studies believe it is the second largest source of



employment in the country after the public sector and ahead of the formal private sector (El-Mekkaoui & Chaker, 2020). For this reason, it is valuable to outline its peculiarities.

The extremely varied panorama which, precisely because of this heterogeneity, is challenging to approach and analyze with specific data. Any discussion on the informal economy of a country has certain limitations, particularly the lack of reliable figures. Consequently, the available data are more often the result of studies that are limited to providing more or less approximate estimates of the indicators in question. This is mainly done in cooperation with the official bodies appointed to carry out statistical surveys on the national territory, such as the Jordanian Department of Statistics of the Jordanian. An important example of these attempts to collect and systematize data on the informal economy in Jordan is given by the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey (JLMPS), conducted by the Economic Research Forum in 2010 and 2016 with the support of the Department of Statistics. According to the JLMPS, informal employment represented, in 2010, 44% of the total employment in Jordan (see Krafft, & Assaad, 2021). This figure is in stark contrast to what is generally recognized by the Employment and Unemployment Survey (EUS) conducted annually by the Department of Statistics, which argues that the informal economy's contribution to the overall Jordanian economy is only 12% (DOS, 2020). Furthermore, employment in the informal private sector accounted for 26% of total workers (compared to 22% in the formal private sector), followed by informal self-employed workers (17%) and, ultimately, non-salaried informal workers employed in family-run businesses (1%) (DOS, 2020). More precisely, the JLMPS estimated that 71% of salaried workers in the informal economy had not even taken the General Exam for the

Certification of Secondary Education (tawǧīhī), which denotes a low level of education in the workforce involved in the informal economy (Krafft, & Assaad, 2021).

However, the Jordan Labor Market Panel Survey does not differentiate between men and women when it presents percentages of educated informal workers (Economic Research Forum, 2017). Consequently, it is possible to make inferences relating to the category of women based on the available data, only with caution. Therefore, we can assume that university-level students' chances of working in the informal economy are considerably reduced. The latter may be justified by the fact that many recent graduates, especially women, would not accept poorer working conditions and protections offered by the informal economy, particularly medical insurance coverage and social protection in general. Assaad et al. (2014) state that women, especially educated ones, are generally less likely to be employed in the informal economy, particularly after the first neoliberal reforms, in conjunction with narrowing job opportunities in the public sector (precisely between 1985 and 1993). In those years there was, in fact, an increase in the participation of women in the informal economy: this phenomenon is undoubtedly attributable to women's need to find any employment that would cover the cost of basic necessities, considering the inflation and cuts envisaged by the PAS. However, despite this trend in the years just mentioned, the authors state that women employed in the informal economy tend to leave early, often within ten years of starting employment (see Assaad et al., 2014). This is the case, for example, of women who began working in the informal economy in 2000. More than five years later, in 2005, less than 15% of these women were still occupied. Nevertheless, women leaving the informal economy do not

necessarily migrate to other working environments - i.e., the formal sector - rather, they withdraw from the workforce since the mobility from informal to formal economy is very limited.

During the same years (1985-1993), Jordan avoided the informalization of occupation that took place, for example, in Egypt, after implementing similar neoliberal reforms (see Assaad et al., 2014). This was made possible through incentives to the formal private sector, which offered temporary and precarious employment contracts but included a certain level of social security for workers. Over time, this has allowed Jordanian small and medium-sized businesses to grow gradually, maintaining flexible employment models without resorting to the informalization of the entire private sector. In many cases, companies have then guaranteed permanent contracts to workers who initially had temporary contracts.

Ultimately, it is important to briefly mention the case of *informal entrepreneurs* who operate in the most conservative areas and contexts. Even if educated women do not generally fall into this category, it is interesting to complete the overview of the informal economy sector in Jordan (Al-Dajani et al., 2016; Mehtap et al., 2018). The latter includes women, mostly of Palestinian or Iraqi origin, who invent their own home business, have unstable and meager incomes, and are not supported by any type of social protection. These women create small handmade objects such as embroidery works or artisanal food products, resell them within the local community or neighborhood to secure an income and, in many cases, alleviate the family's destitution (see Mehtap et al., 2018). According to the authors, it is undoubtedly remarkable how the experiences of

these women contribute to increasing their degree of autonomy while continuing to live under the strict control of their husbands. Most of these informal businesses are exclusively run by women who deal with the stages of production and sale without the support of any other family member. Although these are not particularly ambitious projects in commercial terms, creating and managing business independently gives more freedom to these businesswomen (see Mehtap et al., 2018). However, even in these cases, mobility from the informal to the formal economy is rare, if not non-existent. The experience of these women differs from that of other women who were born as independent entrepreneurs in the formal sector and have created, over time, small empires in the field of education, tourism, or technology. Examples of some of these women will be explored later in this chapter.

### **The Legal Aspect: Examination of the Regulatory Texts**

This section briefly reviews the primary sources of labor laws in Jordan, including the Jordanian National Constitution (1952), the National Labour Law (1996 version), and the Civil Service Law (2007 version). These texts, to a greater or lesser extent, contribute to defining and sometimes limiting the contribution Jordanian women can make through their participation in the labor market. It is worth clarifying that today's body of law in Jordan has its roots in multiple sources and has been largely influenced by regulatory texts from other countries. The Kingdom's National Law can be considered a fusion of the Islamic Sharia Law, the Tribal Law (the so-called 'urf), and modern European codes, particularly the French codes (Sonbol, 2022). Worth also mentioning that the laws of each country reflect social norms and cultural values, and Jordan is no exception to that

(Bush, 2019). Some laws potentially have a double function: on the one hand, they want to concretely regulate a particular aspect of a woman's life in order to protect her; on the other hand, in a less obvious way, they aim to preserve specific social structures that have always existed, to contribute to the ability of the state to present itself as *culturally authentic* and, consequently, legitimate entity (Warrick, 2016). This could therefore justify, if not explain, that some laws relating to women's work in Jordan intentionally seek to limit or at least discourage their participation.

The first law source to be considered is the Jordanian Constitution of the Hashemite Kingdom, which generally guarantees equal rights and duties for all citizens. There is no evident gender discrimination in its articles (Rath, 2014). For example, it is enshrined in Article 6, paragraph 1, that: "Jordanians shall be equal before the law. There shall be no discrimination between them as regards to their rights and duties on the grounds of race, language or religion ". Full equalization of rights is, therefore, ensured regardless of race, language, or religious orientation. Curiously, however, no provision explicitly contemplates gender equality before the law and exercising rights and duties. The term *Jordanian* can be interpreted in its broadest meaning, which includes both men and women, because the English translation does not differentiate between masculine and feminine in the adjective, and a clarification on a linguistic level would be necessary. This correction seems necessary when consulting the document's original Arabic version, which, unlike English, has different grammatical forms for masculine and feminine (مجلس الأمة, n.d.). The term used in the original version is only in the masculine plural (al-ʿurduniyyūn). In Arabic, it is common to use the masculine plural to indicate many

objects and/or people of different genders. However, in Article 6 of the Constitution, mentioning the female adjective (*al-'urduniyyāt*) provides fair treatment of citizens without explicit gender discrimination. Similar reasoning could be applied to Article 22, which states that all Jordanian citizens enjoy the right to be appointed to public office based on merit and qualifications. That said, very recently, in 2022, Jordan took a significant step towards amending its Constitution by adding *Jordanian women* to the title of Chapter 2, *Rights and Duties of Jordanians*. Additionally, Article 6 was amended to “The state undertakes to empower and support women to perform an effective role in society building, while ensuring equity of opportunity, and to protect them from all forms of violence and discrimination”.

The Jordanian Constitution does not express itself at length on work-related issues. Still, article 23 limits itself to providing some primary conditions to guarantee the dignity and respect of both men and women workers. These provisions listed in paragraph 2 provided that working hours are equally rewarded, workers can benefit from annual leaves, *special compensation* is given to workers in support of families in difficulty, and special conditions shall apply for the employment of women and juveniles. However, the latter is not explored in detail, and no further mentions how and when these conditions will be applied.

More specific provisions that regulate the work of Jordanian citizens are included in two dedicated regulations. The first is the Jordanian National Labour Law, which governs private sector employment, and the second is the Civil Service Law, which regulates work in the public sector (Ministry of Labour, n.d.). The National Labour Law

was first published in the Official Gazette in 1960, but with all the amendments brought to the text, the last version was replaced by a more recent one in 1996. To date, the Law has 142 articles and is still subject to review by jurists who continue to amend the text to favor more social and legal protection for workers. It is undeniable that numerous signs of progress have been observed in this regard, whereby all workers' fundamental rights are guaranteed. This is particularly true concerning wages, working hours, annual leaves, sick leaves, the right to form an association, and rightful compensations in case of contract termination. Nevertheless, some provisions remain ambiguous, incomplete, or inadequate. Firstly, Article 3 of the Jordanian National Labour Law specifies that some of the conditions mentioned above do not apply to public sector workers, family business workers, domestic workers, and agricultural workers unless specified otherwise by the law (see Ministry of Labour, n.d.). Except for public sector workers subject to ad hoc regulations, the categories excluded from the National Labour Law often include many female workers. For instance, a series of articles regulate women's rights concerning maternity leave, including Article 27, which prohibits an employer from terminating a pregnant woman's contract only if she is in her second trimester of pregnancy or on maternity leave. This article is highly discriminatory since there are no restrictions on the employer if willing to terminate a woman's contract or force her to resign before entering her sixth month of pregnancy.

As for maternity leave, Article 70 of the National Labour Law states that women have the right to ten consecutive weeks of fully paid maternity leave. During this period, asking women to carry out any work is strictly forbidden. Article 71 grants women the

right to take one hour of paid leave daily to nurse their newborn for the whole year following the birth. A similar right is set out in Article 67: women working in a company of at least ten employees are entitled to 12 months of unpaid leave to care for their children without the risk of losing their job. Article 72 is particularly ambiguous and is central to numerous feminist debates in Jordan. Below is a full citation of the article before the 2010 amendment:

Employers with at least twenty married women workers in their employment shall provide an adequate facility under the care of a trained nurse for the women workers' children under four years of age, if at least ten of them are in such an age group (Ministry of Labour, n.d., p. 7).

Interestingly, with the 2010 amendment, the term "married" was deleted. This undoubtedly represents a step forward for women's rights by eliminating conditions that impose particular regulations based on a woman's marital status. Nonetheless, some Jordanian feminist associations highlighted the mechanism by which many employers purposefully hire fewer than 20 women to avoid granting nursery services since this inevitably represents high costs for the employer (see Sonbol, 2022). However, there were some limitations on women's employment and mobility imposed by the labor law. Some of these limitations include restrictions from nightshifts and specific industries. Given that they make it harder for women to compete with males for available employment, these restrictions likely have a role in the low female labor force participation. Overall, the limitations are not particularly stifling. For instance, nursing, tourism, restaurants, and retail industries that generally employ women are not excluded



from night shifts (ILO, 2014). Women are mostly restricted from working in particular manufacturing, mining, and quarrying sectors, the majority of which account for a very small portion of Jordanian labor (see ILO, 2014). This is obviously not meant to minimize the sexism of these laws or the outdated gender norms on which they are founded, but rather to highlight the fact that they are not overly restrictive to result in such low female labor force participation.

To conclude, Article 69 of the National Labour Law gives the Ministry of Labour the competence to specify industries and occupations where hiring women is forbidden and hours during which women are not allowed to work. Although the article, like many others, was designed to protect women's rights, these provisions do nothing but limit women's freedom to choose their profession independently. Talking about gender equality means also granting adequate paternal leaves to male workers. Jordan's National Committee for Pay Equity (NCPE) proposed in 2013 specific amendments to the Civil Service Law by introducing a two-day paternity leave. The National Labour Law also endorsed in 2019 a three-day paternity leave for private sector workers. Nevertheless, the labor law supports the idea that marriage is a means to welfare access and financial security. It also subtly enforces gender norms by making the husband the family's primary provider and, as a result, putting the wife in charge of taking care of the home. Meanwhile, all of the law's publicly stated provisions only slightly limit a woman's capacity to work.

The Civil Service Law (or Regulation), equivalent to the National Labour Law for public sector employees, consists of 190 articles (Jordanian Civil Service Bureau, 2007).

Formulated with great detail in every aspect, the law addresses more cases than the National Labour Law and clarifies the rights and duties of public sector workers. It is therefore easy to understand why the public sector has always been the most coveted sphere of employment for women. First, it is interesting to note that Article 4 guarantees fair opportunities for all workers and claims to work according to the principle of non-discrimination based on any difference in gender, race, religion, or social status. Neither the Jordanian Constitution nor the National Labour Law explicitly mentions gender equality, which seems to be a fundamental pillar of the Civil Service Law. However, as will be seen, this principle is not always fully reflected in the laws of the normative text. Similar to the National Labour Law, Article 105 of the Civil Service Law specifies the conditions of maternity leaves. The public sector guarantees ninety days of maternity leave to be used either before or after childbirth, thus granting twenty additional leave days than what is allowed in the private sector. The article also specifies that the latter does not affect a woman's right to ask for annual leaves beyond what is given during maternity leaves. Subsequently, Article 108 states that women are entitled to two years of unpaid leave to care for their newborns. Finally, Article 183 requires that pregnant women avoid heavy-duty work or perform any activity that may harm or negatively affect their pregnancy. Article 25 explores the financial concessions guaranteed to the families of civil servants. Specifically, Article 25 grants a married employee a monthly family allowance of 20 Jordanian dinars (US \$28.21), even if he is a widower, divorced, or still has dependent children under 18. However, the article specifies in its second part that this allowance is paid to women only if their husband is deceased, disabled or if she

is the official caretaker. The precise meaning of the latter is not clarified. This exception arises from the assumption that women do not need financial support because their husband's income should cover family expenses - this, however, is not the case with all Jordanian families and is already clear gender discrimination. Therefore, this law reinforces gender stereotypes that men are the sole breadwinners in a family or within a group of individuals. The Committee of Experts at the National Steering Committee on Pay Equity conducted in 2013 an analysis of the regulatory text and proposed specific amendments to the government (ILO, 2013). To date, none of the proposals put forward by the Committee have yet been materialized.

To conclude, legal and structural barriers still limit women's participation in the Jordanian labor market. In various ways, all three fundamental legislative texts contribute to laying the foundations for guaranteeing a decent work environment, both in the private and public sectors. Nevertheless, the specific laws relating to the treatment of women are limited to administering few issues, such as maternity, without going into detailed explanations of the conditions for applying specific rules. Furthermore, as we will see in the following sections, many articles are still a source of heated debate between the authorities and feminist organizations, which are fighting for a fairer treatment of women in the workplace.

### **Factors Limiting Female Participation in the Jordanian Labor Market**

Before going into a detailed analysis of women's low participation in the Jordanian labor market, it is essential to dwelling on some important premises. Although this study deals specifically with the employment situation of educated Jordanian women,

it now seems clear that these conditions do not differ from that of women with a lower level of education. By this, we mean that the reasons that push educated women to refrain from looking for job opportunities in Jordan are sometimes similar to those given by uneducated women, with some variables that were considered further and addressed in this section, thus providing an in-depth analysis of the problem. Also, any justification for Jordan's low female labor force participation rate must be grounded in the MENA region as a whole, while also highlighting the particularities of the country's situation. In general, Jordan exhibits a lot of the traits common to the MENA region. Nevertheless, Jordan differs from other nations in the region in a few specific ways, most notably because it is both labor-sending and labor-receiving country, and has low agricultural resources. These characteristics, among others, affect female labor force participation.

Despite the efforts of several international and local organizations in pushing for reforms and supporting public sector entities, particularly the Jordan Chamber of Industry (JCI), the Jordanian National Committee for Women (JNCW), the Jordan Chamber of Commerce (JCC), civil society organizations (CSOs), and General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU), gender and decent work conditions are still challenging, particularly among women and youth. The National Strategy for Women in Jordan (2020-2025) puts among its primary objectives the need to increase decent work opportunities for women, ensure a work environment free from gender-based discrimination, work on legal reforms, ensure a gender quota in public and private sector recruitment, etc. Nevertheless, the reasons behind the low percentages of women's participation in the Jordanian labor market are more of a social, economic, and political

nature - not necessarily in this order of importance. None of these three aspects is negligible; therefore, an analysis of employment trends that considers only the social determinants is incomplete, as was the case with much literature published up to the early 2000s. Therefore, the following paragraphs provide a complete and exhaustive synthesis of all the variables that influence women's work in the Kingdom. The analysis relied on elements exposed so far, particularly in relation to the Jordanian university system and, in equal measure, to the neoliberal reforms explained above.

### **The Cultural Element: Does Neo-Patriarchy Remain?**

Al-Kharouf and Weir (2008) offer an interesting discussion on the alleged existence of a renewed form of patriarchy in the Arab world in their publication on women and employment in Jordan. Building on the hypotheses of Sharabi (1998), Al-Kharouf and Weir (2008) demonstrated the extent to which a neo-patriarchy in the twenty-first century is outdated and unsuitable for the Jordanian context. Both researchers approached the question from a feminist perspective and argued that the rhetoric of a subordinate role of women in Arab-Islamic societies, as well as the need for literature to continue studying the supposed *inferiority* of women in the Arab world, is the tangible expression of *western-centered* preconceptions not relying enough on the most up-to-date and detailed research conducted in the field. The latter is of fundamental importance concerning the themes dealt with in this study. In particular, Al-Kharouf and Weir (2008) admire the ability to identify the *critical* points of the Jordanian society, undeniably linked to the tradition but equally leaning towards a bottom-up process of vast social modernization. At the same time, it is interesting to see how Al-Kharouf and Weir

discerned the cases in which it may be acceptable to speak of inferiority, subordination, and patriarchy from the situations in which these terms are compared to the Jordanian society without any valid foundation.

The Jordanian cultural heritage has inevitable and irrefutable repercussions on women's lives today. However, this influence is not always to be interpreted as a constraint on women's freedoms or as a denial of their rights. Except for some remote and underdeveloped areas of the Hashemite Kingdom, the role of women in large cities such as Amman, Aqaba, Al-Karak, and Al-Tafilah is constantly changing. This phenomenon has been remarkable during the past decade, whereby women have shown more decision-making and operational autonomy, more power to bargain and negotiate with their male counterparts, and more opportunities for fulfillment outside the family context (Majcher-Teleon, 2009). Several studies have also investigated the experiences of educated women who have reached managerial positions in the private sector, pointing to the support of the family as one of the factors that helped them thrive (Al-Manasra, 2013; Koburtay et al., 2020). Therefore, families continue to represent any woman's fundamental point of reference, particularly in Jordanian society. In a similar vein, Glas et al. (2018) showed that women's opinions toward gender equality are improved by the prominence of religion in daily life. According to this study, religious indoctrination is complex and gendered, and certain men and women are predisposed nowadays to deviate from the predominately patriarchal religious views (Glas et al., 2018). In order to understand the unique characteristics of the MENA economies, Moghadam (2004) looked into the role of oil revenues in maintaining conservative patriarchal norms. The author discovered that

income from these revenues typically goes to the male heads of households, supporting the male breadwinner/female homemaker model (Moghadam, 2004). This patriarchal culture is also crucial in determining gender outcomes in Jordan, such as labor market behavior (see Moghadam 2004). Similar to this, Ross (2008) supported the thesis that the low female labor force participation in the oil-producing nations is primarily due to oil rather than Islam. Similar to this, Esfahani and Bahramitash (2015) indicated that conventions and traditions rather than Islam cause low female labor force participation.

Based on the above, it is possible to critically consider some factors towards which the literature has often pointed the finger, looking for a rationale to the question this study tries to answer. Namely, why do women study, obtain high educational qualifications, and not be able to find a job opportunity? Some authors have often presented the responsibility for this phenomenon to social norms (Kaasalou et al., 2019). Furthermore, considering the figures analyzed in the previous chapter regarding university enrollment and employment/ unemployment rates, it is easy to understand the extent to which cultural factors alone cannot explain why educated women cannot find employment opportunities. This implies the existence of other elements that heavily affect female labor force participation in Jordan. As mentioned, a substantial part of the literature claims that many women pursue educational paths because culture symbolizes prestige for Jordanian women and their families. According to Banihani and Syed (2020), the rhetoric of education is compared to a golden bracelet, a precious accessory to show off without any use or pragmatic implication. According to this theory, Jordanian women do not consider educational attainment as directly linked to an economic return by

finding a suitable job, but rather their academic level demonstrates the value of their social status and makes them worthy of a wealthy husband. Similarly, the supporters of this hypothesis believe that many families consider the degree a sort of financial reserve: education is temporarily set aside and, possibly, dusted off when imperative economic needs arise (see Sonbol, 2022). In this case, a woman's educational qualification could also constitute a source of income for her family and herself, for example, in case of divorce. In other words, higher education may guarantee Jordanian women more employment opportunities only if they need financial income or support. However, as statistics and figures have demonstrated, having one or more degrees does not necessarily mean women will be able to find a job. Nevertheless, these preconceptions do not consider professional fulfillment part of a woman's journey but always point to economic independence from husbands or family. According to Sonbol (2022), the interpretations of the value of education are difficult to generalize to the whole Jordanian society. Rhetoric of this type are slightly more widespread among the most disadvantaged segments of the population and the most affluent, depending on the case. However, this interpretation is undoubtedly far from corresponding to the reality of facts. It seems clear that the literature has devoted few works to analyzing society's consideration of Jordanian women and their goals. This is demonstrated by the fact that the rhetoric of women's *domestic* role is reiterated in most of the academic literature consulted during the review phase of this study. Interpretations of this magnitude do nothing but confirm ideas that are no longer current, poorly adapted, and flatten the complex dynamics that instead characterize the life of Jordanian women today. Therefore, it is necessary to consider



other reasons behind women's lack of participation in the labor force or the urge to do so because the offered possibilities are extremely limited.

### **University and the Labor Market: Missing Inputs**

When reviewing women's labor force participation, a criticality in communication emerged between higher education institutions and the leading players in the Jordanian labor market. One of Jordan's most critical market distortions is precisely the discrepancy between the university system's outputs and the ever-changing labor market requirements, which continues to hinder women's active participation in the labor force. Much of the existing literature on this subject has attempted to justify the non-participation of educated women in the labor market by explaining how girls were more inclined to choose to study at specific faculties, such as foreign languages, educational sciences, and nursing (Assaad et al., 2020). This is because this type of education allowed them to work in gender-segregated environments, therefore dominated by a female workforce, representing a sort of extension of women's domestic role outside the home. Therefore, Assaad et al. (2020) hypothesized that there were not enough job offers in these sectors to absorb all the recent graduates of the above-mentioned faculties. Their findings support the hypothesis that the drop in educated women's likelihood of finding a job in the public sector is related to either rising unemployment or falling participation. Assaad et al. (2020) contend that adverse changes in the structure of employment options on the demand side constrain labor force participation among educated women in Jordan. Particularly, the loss in employment chances in the formal private sector has not been

offset by an equivalent rise in employment opportunities in the public sector, which has resulted in rising female unemployment or declining participation.

Consulting the enrollment statistics in scientific faculties of the most recent academic years provides a clear view of the change in the latest trends. Let's take the University of Jordan as a model. We see that the number of men enrolled in scientific faculties in 2015 roughly coincided with that of women (The Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, n.d.). This indicates that women's academic specialization is not limited to humanities but includes scientific studies in large percentages. As such, I may conclude that the lack of employment opportunities may not mainly lie in the overcrowding of some sectors but rather in the inability of the university system to communicate effectively with the labor market, grasp its needs, and adequately prepare students for their insertion in the workplace.

The basic assumption is that universities should receive signals from the labor market regarding its evolution, requirements, and the professional figures they feel the need for. In turn, it is in the interest of universities to respond to these signals by creating new curricula and updating existing ones to provide high-quality education that can guarantee employment, ideally, for all students. Unfortunately, the situation of Jordanian universities and universities in the Arab world, in general, differs significantly from this conceptual framework. Most universities in Jordan, especially public ones, were born when the public sector could still afford to guarantee direct recruitment of most of the recent graduates within its bureaucratic structure. Consequently, the preparation provided in universities was mainly aimed at training public officials and not professional figures

for other sectors of the economy (Shaban, 2021). The limited reforms of the university system in the Hashemite Kingdom meant that this standard of training remained unchanged. Nevertheless, the advantage of studying in a scientific faculty at the University of Jordan lies in having the university hospital available to conduct training and practical academic formation. According to Shaban (2021), this was made possible through a public-private partnership that offers essential medical services to the university's staff, thus allowing the use of its spaces for student internships. The latter undoubtedly allows students to enrich their curricula, making them more attractive on the job market thanks to the gained skills through direct mentoring and on-the-job training. However, it should be noted that the inadequacy of the university system to train future workers is also a problem for men looking for employment opportunities. Nevertheless, as shown above, mechanisms of favoritism and exploitation of knowledge play in favor of men who are more likely to be employed through interpersonal connections (Shannak et al., 2017). Also, the literature has shown that the family background in Jordan is still extremely predominant compared to the traditional methods of selecting professional figures, which undermines women's opportunities, particularly for those lacking a vast social network of acquaintances (Assaad & Salemi, 2019).

### **The Low Wages**

A further factor that discourages educated and uneducated women from looking for or keeping a job is the issue of wages, which tend to be very low for all professional figures unless they are in managerial positions. Generally speaking, the adequacy of a salary must be commensurate with the average living cost in a country. Jordan is

estimated to be one of the Middle East's most expensive states, with an average annual per capita income of around US\$ 4,300 only (Sweidan, 2013). The latter is a meager figure compared to the cost of food, rent, health care, and education that every family has to bear. Moghadam (2005) investigated the wage issue and identified some main reasons behind such a challenge. First, neoliberal reforms implemented in the nineties have had a substantial impact on salaries, especially public sector ones, temporarily frozen without the possibility of promotions and/or increases throughout the implementation of the reforms. Secondly, both public and private sectors' wages have not been commensurate with the evolution of the cost of living in the country. Indeed, Jordan is a so-called *non-oil rentier state*, and remittances from Jordanian workers in the Gulf have always constituted and still constitute an essential part of household income (Boustati, 2020). However, considerable income from remittances causes a phenomenon known in economics as the *Dutch disease*: This theory explains the relationship between the intensive exploitation of a natural resource and the decline of the manufacturing sector or other productive activities in the economy of a country (see Sweidan, 2013). This is because such exploitation usually generates considerable profits for the economy, making the national currency stronger and exports more expensive. According to the same reasoning, the consistent flow of remittances from the Gulf countries to Jordan represents the exploitation, albeit indirect, of the natural resource in question - Gulf crude oil. The literature has therefore concluded that remittances cause a significant increase in aggregate demand from Jordanian citizens who receive such revenues (see Boustati,

2020). The latter consequently reduces the competitiveness of exports and increases the country's cost of living.

Health and education are Jordanian women's favorite sectors due to the flexibility of working hours, among other factors. However, when a woman teacher is offered a negligible salary, she evaluates her career choice, particularly from an economic standpoint. Regardless of the guaranteed flexibility, a working woman and mother also considers childcare services while working. Since enrollment in a nursery can cost between 150 and 300 Jordanian dinars per month (US\$211 to US\$420), this option is not feasible when salaries are not sufficiently high. It seems evident that, in purely economic terms, women would refrain from working and prefer taking care of their children, at least during the toddler's first years, since their salary would hardly cover babysitting or nursery expenses. Another interesting phenomenon mainly concerns uneducated women, which is useful to mention despite being slightly outside this study's main focus. As previously shown, the literature on the subject cited the reluctance of specific local social categories to accept jobs that require unskilled labor skills. As a result, these positions are often filled by workers from the Indian subcontinent willing to accept low wages that locals would refuse (Fallah et al., 2019). Furthermore, some professions are still stigmatized today, and the World Bank study defines this phenomenon as the culture of shame (Adely et al., 2021). According to the latter, some occupations are incompatible with the background and expectations of the workforce, which seems to prefer the "white collar" professions. However, Adely et al. (2021) showed that if wages increased in sectors considered *inferior*, such as tourism and construction, with the guarantee of more

satisfactory working conditions, the percentage of Jordanians who still refuse such job opportunities would decrease.

### **The Gender Pay Gap**

A gender pay gap is the percentage difference between women's average hourly earnings compared to men with the same educational level or professional experience. The pay gap issue seems to be highly felt in Jordan. However, only a small number of research have looked at the gender wage gap and the glass ceiling for MENA countries. These studies are Doruk and Pastore (2020); Ghorbani and Tung (2007); Jamali et al., (2006); and Kandil (2015). Nevertheless, social campaigns conducted by local feminist organizations and the commitment of the Regional Office for Arab Countries (ROAS) and the United Nations International Labor Organization tried to contain the issue. According to official estimates released by the ILO (2024), in the private sector, men earn on average 41% more than women, while in the public sector, men earn about 28% more than women. Statistics show significant gender disparities in pay in Jordan, whereby women have an average monthly wage amounting to 314 Jordanian dinars (US\$443), compared to 364 Jordanian dinars (US\$514) for men (ILO, 2024). Also, half of the employed and highly educated women in Jordan earn 33 % less than their male counterparts (ILO, 2024). In addition, specific sectors like private education experience particularly large gaps, with men earning 41.6% more in private schools and 23.1% more in universities. Significant pay gaps are also evident in the social work and health sectors, where men earn 30 % more than women (DOS, 2020). Worth mentioning that, in terms of wage equality, the Jordanian legislation is somewhat favorable toward men rather than

women. The legal review conducted by the ILO (2024) identified several loopholes in the regulatory framework currently in force. In fact, neither the Constitution nor the National Labour Law explicitly contemplates gender equality and equal gender rights.

Consequently, to date, there is no provision for sanctions if an employer fails to respect the principle of pay equity. Additionally, gender-based discrimination is legally justified under the Jordanian Civil Service Regulation, n.30 of 2007. The wage structure of the public sector gives men employees more advantage over women employees, whereby male counterparts are automatically entitled to family allowances when getting married. In contrast, women employees are subject to specific criteria if and when qualified for this allowance. This includes having a disabled husband, being a widow, and proving they are the family's primary breadwinner. These conditions imposed on women create serious wage and gender-based discrimination, thus placing women civil servants in a disadvantaged position with respect to family allowances and work for equal value.

The country has undoubtedly understood the seriousness of the problem, and some organizations have been working for years to encourage legal reforms. An example is the National Steering Committee on Pay Equity (NSCPE). Created in 2011, it is chaired by the Ministry of Labor and the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW). It consists of two subcommittees: one legal, responsible for proposing legislative recommendations, and the other research, committed to conducting in-depth studies on wage discrimination in the education sector. The NSCPE works in close coordination with the ILO to promote the idea of *equal pay for work of equal value* and improve the condition of occupational marginalization to which women are subject in

Jordan (ILO, 2013). The National Committee has also provided capacity development activities to members of the NSCPE, thus aiming to deepen their understanding of the principle mentioned above and gender-neutral job evaluation methods. Furthermore, Jordan has ratified two significant ILO conventions in this regard: the Equal Remuneration Convention (no.100), signed in 1966, and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (no.111), signed in 1963. In light of this, it may be surprising to note that no legislative and governmental measures have been taken after more than forty years to regulate the wage gap problem.

The concrete implications on women's daily life are not indifferent. The social campaign promoted by the ILO entitled *People's voices*. Campaigning for pay equity and childcare in Jordan reports the experiences of selected women who have suffered discrimination in terms of pay equity, as well as the opinions on the subject of some experts and observers (ILO, 2017). This campaign highlighted the existence of a rather worrying dynamic, particularly in the private sector. Women teachers had denounced employers' discrimination regarding equal pay, whereby a specific salary was mentioned in the contract while the actual payment included a much lower sum. According to the National Committee for Pay Equity (NCPE, n.d.), the problem lies primarily in the discriminatory interpretation of the value of female work among most employers. The Committee explains that employers consider acceptable to pay women less than their male counterparts because they are not considered a family's primary breadwinner. The latter constitutes a common misconception in Jordanian society, although women contribute as much as men to support their children and families. This phenomenon has



also led to labor inspections in various governorates across the country. The NCPE (n.d.) highlighted women's reluctance to report wage discrimination in the workplace for fear of losing their jobs. This inevitably makes the inspectorate's work even more challenging, particularly when the company's official registers do not show discrepancies concerning wage pay and wage equity.

Concluding, this section's objective was to present the wage gap issue in the country, identifying the leading causes and direct consequences on women's access to the labor market. However, it is also crucial to underline Jordan's efforts, with more success than other Arab countries. An example is the ongoing commitment to implement a more widespread digitalization of salary payments. This method allows for transparent processes in women's remuneration, avoiding discriminatory situations like those described above (ILO, 2017).

### **Harassment and Unfavorable Social Policies**

Discrimination at work is pervasive and can be seen in every area of an organization. It makes people more hostile toward one another, makes it harder for a business to hire outstanding workers, and causes a lot of employee difficulties that hinder an organization's productivity (Triana et al., 2015). Workplace discrimination is regarded as a source of societal issues that have an impact on people's lives all over the world (Allport, 1954). According to Bowen, Edwards, and Lingard (2013), workplace discrimination prevents members of minority groups from gaining parity with members of majority groups by erecting social, physical, and psychological barriers.

Besides the legal gender discrimination, wage gaps, and discriminating regulations, additional elements potentially discourage Jordanian women from seeking job opportunities or maintaining their current positions. This is the case of frequent harassment in the workplace, as well as specific social policies that refrain from guaranteeing women a peaceful and safe work environment. The forms of harassment that employers or male colleagues generally perpetrate are of different nature, ranging from psychological abuse, sexual abuse, or events attributable to intimidating practices typical of workplace bullying. The literature investigating the phenomenon has confirmed its incidence in both the public and private sectors: in a recent study by Al-Manasrah (2021), findings showed that Jordanian working women experience various forms of discrimination, primarily based on age, race, gender, social status, and sexual harassment. This is especially true for women who are older, married, more educated, come from a different race, or who are in higher age categories and who may have been exposed to sexual harassment behaviors. The findings also demonstrated that discrimination against working women in Jordan is unrelated to religion and can be addressed by examining several Jordanian legal, social, and historical factors. There aren't many studies on workplace bullying in Jordan, and those that exist tend to focus on the healthcare industry. As such, precise estimates or statistics on the frequency of such harassment are not available. Indeed, the majority of research on workplace bullying has so far been carried out in Western nations like North America and Europe, which share comparable values. Research on violent behaviors in the workplace began in Arab countries in the past ten years, but there hasn't been much focus on workplace bullying. It is probable that

this divergent attitude may impact workplace bullying because Arab countries have different value systems than Western cultures. As mentioned for the pay gap issue, many women are still reluctant to report harassment or discrimination for fear of the workplace's consequences and tarnishing the family's reputation and honor.

Current labor regulations in Jordan do not explicitly or implicitly prohibit abuses against women in the workplace; consequently, there are no financial or criminal sanctions to punish the guilty party, be it the employer or a colleague. For this reason, the ILO, in collaboration with the JNCW, has proposed legal amendments and recommendations in order to broaden the scope of the National Labour Law to include cases of female harassment. Specifically, the ILO proposed to modify Article 29 of the National Labour Law, which clarifies the circumstances for which a worker is entitled to leave his job without notifying the employer. Harassment is proposed as a valid reason to quit a job and receive, in return, adequate financial compensation. Nonetheless, this would represent a first step in improving the law: the real change could only occur by inserting specific rules to prohibit harassment and adequately sanction it. By way of example, it is interesting to report the case of a category of educated women who are often subject to discrimination and abuse in the workplace. Research by The West East Institute (Al Muala & Ali, 2016) highlighted the extent to which nurses in public hospitals are subject to continuous abuse. Based on a sample of 562 nurses, the study was conducted through questionnaires and interviews at various hospitals in the North and South of the country. The results showed that about 70 % of the interviewed nurses experienced harassment and physical or verbal abuse. Of the interviewed sample, 73 %

stated that other colleagues witnessed such harassment without intervening. The type of reported harassment varied from unwanted sexual advances, insults, and offensive remarks about the work performed and threats of violence or abuse in the workplace. Relatedly, Jordan's laws against sexual harassment are inadequate, and there is a general perception that the workplace is unsafe or even constitutes a hostile environment (World Bank, 2020). The Jordanian National Commission for Women concluded in 2017 that more than three out of every four women in Jordan had experienced sexual harassment in some way (JNCW, n.d.). According to a UN Women report (2020) on enhancing livelihood opportunities for women in Jordan, figures showed that more than 40% of respondents think women risk being harassed while traveling to or from work. Al-Khatib (2020) has also demonstrated that one of the main obstacles to Jordan's low rates of female economic participation is exposure to or fear of exposure to sexual harassment. In a more recent study, the World Bank (2018) stated that almost 95% of men and women in Jordan support the idea of women working, and two-thirds of Jordanian women who are not currently employed say they would like to find a job if the conditions were right. These conditions include an enabling environment that provides policies to prevent sexual harassment at work and accessible, affordable, and high-quality child care. According to UNDP (2015), harassment is more commonly accepted because of ingrained gender assumptions and standards. This is not unique to Jordan but is prevalent throughout the region and the world, where women are advised to avoid situations where it may occur. Offenders, who are typically men, are not sought after in these situations (for example, in mixed work environments). In addition, women who are identified as

harassed may experience retaliation and be held accountable for encouraging the behavior (Bergenfeld et al., 2021). When harassed, working women become less productive since they are waiting for their first opportunity to leave the workforce. Lower productivity comes at a cost to the company and society. There is also a chance that a woman would quit her employment, which would significantly impact her capacity to sustain herself. As a result, both the employer and the exiting woman are losing out (see Bergenfeld et al., 2021). In 2020, the Jordanian Ministry of Labor announced a new obligation for businesses to adopt sexual harassment policies as part of their internal bylaws, using funding from the World Bank (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, the World Bank is helping the Jordanian Ministry of Transport implement a Code of Conduct that includes guidelines for preventing and responding to cases of sexual harassment. Drivers, service providers, the public police department, and other parties have signed the code of conduct. These two new advancements may reduce harassment obstacles preventing women from participating in the economy if properly implemented (World Bank, 2020). However, in order to increase the adoption of legislative change among Jordanian citizens, businesses, and employees, shifting mindsets and encouraging positive behavior are also crucial components that must go hand in side with it.

Another element that deserves to be explored concerns the need to create structures for infancy and childcare within the workplace. SADAQA, a Jordanian non-governmental organization founded in 2011, has been committed to mobilizing groups of activists to see the implementation of article 72 of the Labor Law, and, more generally, to promote women's economic participation in the country (ILO, 2016). Also, according to

Al-Manasrah (2013), all employees in the company are responsible for preventing discrimination against working women, but leaders are particularly important in preventing prejudice inside their businesses. Therefore, senior management needs to avoid downplaying workplace discrimination against women and endeavor to create an organizational culture and structure that values women and treats them fairly. This begins with valuing Jordanian working women and evaluating them based on their performance, degree of experience, trustworthiness, and effectiveness. In order to bring about the cultural changes required to end discrimination against working women, Phomphakdy and Kleiner (1999) recommended the deployment of a top-down strategy where leadership modeling starts from senior management to lower-level management and employees.

### **Social Norms and Women's Employment**

Building on Bicchieri, et al. (2014) and Eriksson's (2015) theoretical framework, societal norms regarding women's labor force participation are distinct from *culture*. They specify various actions, attitudes, and even emotions acceptable for men and women to have and display. Interpersonal behaviors, such as when and how many children to have, social practices, such as attire, speech, dominance, and child-rearing, political activities, such as holding and exercising public office, voting, and economic decisions are some examples. Societal expectations around women's role in the household play an important part in keeping the percentage of their labor participation low. According to the World Bank (2018), the Jordanian government and aid organizations have made significant investments to encourage women's economic

engagement. However, social norms continue to impose rigid restrictions that prevent excluded groups, such as women and youth, from having an equal opportunity to improve their quality of life. The study assessed the degree to which gender-related societal norms and beliefs affect women's involvement in and access to the labor force (World Bank, 2018). Even though social norms have been recognized as a barrier to female labor market participation in Jordan, most of the studies do not dive into the processes by which norms influence behavior or measure intra-household dynamics. Numerous studies have also indicated that cultural barriers to female employment had existed since 2009 when governments in the area started to step up their efforts to encourage more women to enter the workforce (Al-Manasrah, 2013; Mehtap et al., 2017; Koburtay et al., 2022). In the MENA region, Lundvall et. al. (2017) stated that following the traditions and conventions when making judgments concerning personal or professional affairs is commonplace. The latter is further supported by the fact that virtually all family and personal status laws are based on religion. Laws governing one's personal status are based on affiliation in Jordan (see Lundvall et al., 2017). However, they continue to be ignored by policy solutions that focus on removing the more observable barriers to employment, such as daycare facilities and transportation (Oxford Analytica, 2018). As a result, Jordan's female labor force participation statistics have remained appalling. In addition, young women prioritize their families while making decisions about the workplace. According to statistics, some families place great pressure on young professional women, discouraging them from taking on additional duties and moving up the management ladder by preventing them from working long hours or evening shifts,

among other things (DOS, 2020). Professional women who advance to middle management may occasionally be forced to resign due to social or familial pressure (UN Women, 2017). Therefore, the major barrier preventing women from participating in the workforce in Jordan may be societal norms and cultural restrictions placed on women. According to the UN Women report (2017), two-thirds to more than three-quarters of Jordanian men agree that a woman's primary responsibility is to care for the home, based on data from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES). Additionally, most men in Jordan think it is their responsibility to watch over and restrict women's movement. Relatedly, the majority of Jordanian women seem to accept male guardianship. Given that women are often viewed as housewives and mothers than as workers, it is understandable why few women are working in the MENA region. As such, understanding social norms to identify the major stumbling block to realizing gender equality in Jordan is crucial. The latter is also highlighted in the World Bank Development Report on Gender and Development (2012) and the subsequent Gender Equality and Development in MENA reports (2013), particularly when limiting women's economic participation in communities in and around the capital Amman.

Going back to the latest World Bank study (2018), and according to the study's sample, 60 % of unemployed women desire to be employed, and most Jordanians support women working outside the home. As such, women's preferences and personal beliefs are not significant barriers to their participation in the local workforce. Therefore, Jordanian women would likely support policies that ease some of their legally binding restrictions. The study likewise confirmed some of the most critical limitations for women (World



Bank, 2018). These include childcare, flexibility, part-time employment, hiring and wage discrimination, limited job growth, inadequate public transportation, especially in rural areas, a lack of appealing employment possibilities, and a shortage of positions in the public sector, as confirmed in the previous sections. Therefore, it is evident that intra-household expectations influence female labor market participation decisions. According to men and women, men ultimately decide what happens in the home, including whether or not a woman should accept a work offer (World Bank, 2018). The opinions of male household members, primarily husbands, are important or extremely important, according to more than 90% of the women polled. Only 25% of respondents believed that a woman had the right to work even if this decision upsets their husband. Also, according to the 2020 Arab Youth Survey (ASDA'A BCW, 2021), men believe working women should not be allowed to return after 5 pm, suggesting that this restriction may be unavoidable. Regardless of women's employment position, men make a minimal contribution to domestic tasks, except when it comes to feeding children.

To conclude, intra-household barriers, pressure from the family, or the perception of a conflict between personal and professional responsibilities due to unequal power relations to the detriment of women within the household further aggravates the lack of access and involvement of Jordanian women in public life. Also, teenage marriage, masculinity and the roles of men and women after marriage, women's duties to their husbands, childcare, home chores, and other normative restrictions lower women's participation in the labor force. The hurdles mentioned above are also affected by the absence of constructive social norms. For instance, there would be greater chances for

child care services, less discrimination, the establishment of new private sector positions, etc., without constraining societal norms on work-related concerns.

### **Other Barriers to Women's Participation in the Labor Force**

Women in Jordan experience low labor force participation and high unemployment rates due to various institutional, structural, legal, social, and behavioral reasons. Women face a variety of interconnected and multidimensional employment barriers. Among the major contributing factors that were not exposed so far are:

- a) **Lack of safe transportation:** Many women avoid using unsafe public transportation, which is sometimes dangerous when traveling alone in rural areas. Women often travel significantly less than men do. Only 5% of women drive more than 60 minutes to work, compared to 15% of males (World Bank, 2013).
- b) **Discriminating practices:** Hiring a woman would require taking into account the time off for maternity leave, maternal benefits, and the availability of child care. Despite efforts to address some employer-related problems (such as social security reform), there is proof of discriminatory practices among businesses (see Koburtay et al., 2020).
- c) **Other important factors hindering women's participation in the labor force are:** access to micro-finance and credit for women business owners, education and training to develop competencies required to launch a new business or enter the workforce, and incentives to build the necessary skills and qualifications for high-productivity occupations (Thaher et al., 2021).

- d) The lack of women-friendly business regulatory environments, the poor quality of women's current occupations (either wage employment or small business), and long-term support measures for entrepreneurs such as coaching and mentorship assistance after initial training add to the complexity of the issue (see Oxford Analytica, 2018).
- e) Institutional and policy gaps: The Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW) oversees the National Strategy on Women and develops broad gender policy. Instead of being government-sponsored, donors have predominantly dictated the agenda, undermining government commitment and sustainability. Although there are *Gender Units* in several of the line ministries, including the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation (MoPIC), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Health (MoH), and others, coordination and a distinct vision are lacking, which prevents the key actors from making a difference (World Bank, 2013). For instance, the public sector entities largely lack fundamental gender data.
- f) Conflict and displacement also exacerbate gender gaps in host communities or among refugees, particularly women. Conflicts also impact gender dynamics and relationships within the household. To remove obstacles standing in the way of women and girls pursuing quality education and respectable employment, it is crucial to examine behavior and how power structures during times of crisis affect decision-making (Krafft et al., 2018).

- g) Many social and practical restrictions on women in Jordan may have been lessened by the rise in remote employment alternatives brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic, which also eliminated worries about transportation, physical harassment, and evening returns. The COVID-19 pandemic's early stages saw women's potential in ruins. Jordanian women were more likely than males to lose their jobs in several areas as a result of the ensuing economic downturn. Additionally, home-based enterprises suffered from lockdown limitations (Abufaraj et al., 2021). The COVID-19 likely raised the pressure on women regarding unpaid care work at home, particularly in childcare and education. Nevertheless, as the pandemic continues, businesses are getting better at handling remote work and meeting employee needs, although it can also be more challenging for Jordanian women without a degree to take advantage of flexible employment options (Akour et al., 2020).
- h) Lastly, Jordan's economy is still struggling as a result of the ongoing humanitarian issues along its borders. Although not within the scope of this study, it is important to note that low labor force participation among foreign women employees is also a result of disrupted schooling, poverty, difficulties obtaining work permits, and other factors among Syrian refugees in the nation (Hattar-Pollara, 2019). The number of child marriages among Syrians has also recently increased due to parents' efforts to marry off their young daughters to support their families. The Jordanian government must prioritize resolving this critical humanitarian situation and building out the country's digital infrastructure since

child marriage and poverty negatively influence girls' and women's capacity to pursue an education and engage in the local economy.

### **Jordanian Women Entrepreneurs: Challenges and Success Stories**

According to Brunton et al., (2013) and Ramadani et al., (2013), entrepreneurship is often regarded as one of the fundamental forces behind societal and economic progress. In the U.S., women start firms twice as often as males and stay in business longer (GEM, 2014). In fact, 224 million women were running or beginning businesses in 67 different economies in 2012 (GEM, 2012). One oddity is that women are more likely than males to start a business venture out of necessity (see GEM, 2014). Particularly in emerging nations, women have been acknowledged as important contributors to eradicating poverty and improving living conditions. As their participation in SMEs generates employment and economic growth, women's empowerment is essential for developing entrepreneurship in these nations (Poggesi et al., 2016). Expanding women's access to microfinance also empowers them to contribute more to home income, which, when combined with other interventions, enhances household well-being, women's well-being, and the prospect of broader changes in gender inequality (Biswas et al., 2017). According to Abdullah et al. (2021), financial and non-financial services significantly impact all three aspects of socioeconomic performance- social wellbeing, economic well-being, and entrepreneurial success- through the mediation of household financial management and entrepreneurial competencies.

One of the Middle East's liveliest and most vibrant ecosystems for promoting entrepreneurship is found in Jordan. One of the reasons professional financial experts

refer to Jordan's capital, Amman, as the Silicon Valley of the Middle East is the exponential growth of the country's information and communication technologies (ITCs) sector over the past ten years (Caputo et al., 2016). According to GEM (2009), the low participation rate of women in the labor force is a contributing factor to the gender gap in entrepreneurial activity in the MENA area. Although women in this region have higher literacy levels than men, it has one of the lowest percentages of labor force participation globally. In Jordan, as of the most recent data, only 15.7% of companies are co-owned by women, and only 5.9% of companies have a woman in the top management position (World Bank, 2024). In addition, fewer women than men operate their own enterprises; in 2018, only 4% of working women and 13% of working males were employers or self-employed (DOS, 2018). Additionally, women-run enterprises are more likely to become uncommon, seasonal, informal, home-based, restricted to low-productivity activities, and have limited market access (Dornel et al., 2020). According to UN Women (2024), approximately 76% of rural Jordanian women are engaged in agricultural activities, often in roles that encompass both crop and livestock production. These women participate in various forms of agriculture, with a significant portion involved in home-based farming for household consumption. Most of these women working in agriculture are underage, married, have children, have only a high school diploma or less, and typically work 22 days and 7 hours per week, earning an average of JD 105 (US\$ 148.10) to JD 142 (US\$ 200.28) every month.

According to Itani et al. (2011), women cannot take advantage of the majority of job opportunities, resulting in lower levels of confidence in their abilities to launch a

business. Verme (2014) argued that the decline in employment in industries like manufacturing and services weakens the demand for labor and enhances the influence of institutions like marriage, law, and gender norms that may deter women from participating in the local labor force. Women in the MENA region appear to stop working at age 25, which roughly corresponds with the region's typical marriage age (see Verme, 2014). In this situation, promoting entrepreneurship would aid in changing the perception of women's roles from job seekers to independent contractors or even employment producers. Women would then be able to earn separate personal income, contributing to their further personal and social advancement. This circumstance would result in a better quality of life for their families, communities, and local places. Hattab (2012) conducted a comparative study of women business owners in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Yemen. The findings revealed that most female business owners in these nations were between 25 and 44, generally educated, typically married, and primarily urban residents.

### **Entrepreneurial Challenges for Jordanian Women**

Women generally face several obstacles and social hurdles that prohibit them from succeeding as business owners. These obstacles, though, are particularly severe in the MENA region. The three key components of this set are access to funding, having family members participate in the enterprise, and having the required authorizations to launch their business. Securing funding is a problem that affects both male and female business owners (Smith-Hunter & Boyd, 2004), with female business owners having more difficulty getting loans from financial institutions than their male counterparts.

However, Jordan suffers from additional distinct financial challenges (Welsh et al., 2014). For instance, obtaining bank funding for female business owners frequently requires the co-signatures of male family members, which deters many from applying. According to Itani et al. (2011), most women were obliged to use their personal savings as launch money due to complex financing application processes. Jordanian women also experience challenges brought on by societal expectations and cultural norms. Women frequently choose to join the family firm rather than run a sole proprietorship in order to achieve social approval for their role as entrepreneurs. This gives women more support from other family members, who are typically men, and gives them more legitimacy to work. Having a *single* woman run a business can be interpreted socially as a sign that the husband (or other male family members) is unable to support the family (Zeidan & Bahrami, 2011). Due to this circumstance, the family now controls the majority of women-owned businesses in this area (De Vita et al., 2014). Last but not least, even if women desire to launch a business independently, they may need approval from their spouse, father, or uncles (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010). Since Jordanian civilization is mainly patriarchal, support from male family members is essential for developing female entrepreneurs and is typically geared toward facilitating access to funding and expanding networking opportunities (see Itani et al., 2011). Nevertheless, women business owners are also expected to pursue their careers without jeopardizing their obligations as wives and mothers (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010).



## **Initiatives and Success Stories**

One of the most important strategies for overcoming the difficulties Jordanian society and rising nations face is empowering women to contribute to sustainable economic development. A number of creative programs have been established to assist new businesses and enhance women's business success. However, many of these programs' primary users, in this case Jordanian women, are either unaware of them or use them seldom (Mehtap et al., 2018). The Queen Noor Foundation and the King Hussein Foundation both prioritize female entrepreneurship. The WAGE (Women and Girls Empowerment) initiative has built, under their guidance, business incubators that serve women in the nation's north and south. Through these facilities, women, particularly those from rural areas, are introduced to the advantages of being an entrepreneur and get various levels of training in business-related topics. Opportunities for assisting female businesses are not just found locally. Programs developed by international organizations or foreign governments, like MEPI and USAID, assist Jordanian women. In particular, the U.S. government's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI, 2015) focuses on women in the region. A MEPI project, the Women in Technology (WIT) program, increases women's engagement in the workforce in order to give them more autonomy and empowerment. The initiative offers professional development and IT training to women in nearby regions. It also offers managerial training in *Business Planning for Sustainability*. In order to support the professional and personal progress of women, WIT also created Professional Development Networks (PDN) with implementing partners (see MEPI, 2015).

In an entrepreneurial environment that prevents Jordanian women from striving, some key figures challenged the existing status quo and not only joined the local labor force but also founded their own enterprises. They are pioneers in e-commerce, hotel tycoons, and digital media entrepreneurs. These Jordanian women entrepreneurs have set out to upset the business landscape of their nation, starting with an Arabic social network for book lovers and educational and scientific programs for schools. Below a brief on each figure:

- a) Following her graduation from the New York Film Academy in 2014, Darine Al-Ashy launched a company influenced by technology and film. A Minute Marvel, a brilliant firm that showcases success stories in one-minute videos, is the brainchild of the entrepreneur. Al-Ashy is not a tech expert, but she works with technology to improve people's lives, particularly in social work and projects that impact society.
- b) The necessity for a significant amount of content to be translated and the absence of high-quality translation led Nour Al Hassan to create Tarjama, a translation company, in 2008. Ninety percent of the 73 full-time employees at Tajama today are women. By the end of 2018, the founder promised to improve the skills of 300 women in order to increase their employment chances. Many educated stay-at-home mothers are attracted to the organization since it also offers flexible hours and the opportunity to work from home. Al Hassan recently established an online marketplace for all Arab translators, editors, and interpreters in Jordan called

Ureed. This platform aims to expand the economic impact of women's work around the world.

- c) Mary Nazzal, one of Forbes' 200 most powerful Arab women, was appointed chairman of the Landmark Amman Hotel in 2009 after working in nearly every area of the establishment. Nazzal sees the Landmark Amman Hotel as a forum to highlight societal issues as someone who supports the regional movement. She works hard to promote gender equality, gender diversity, and a family-friendly atmosphere within that environment. The hotel is the first in the area to establish a complimentary on-site daycare for male and female staff members to motivate women who face challenges of this type.
- d) Lastly, Engineer Afnan Ali, passionate about business, technology, and education, started Eureka's scientific program, focusing on teaching kids about engineering and innovation. In Eureka, Afnan had a brilliant idea: educate kids on the fundamentals of engineering and innovation so they can turn their ideas into goods and services that boost the local economy. At the Arab Robotics Competition, Afnan received first place for the research award and other entrepreneurship and technology awards. The entrepreneur represented Jordan at several national and international conferences, including the fifth World Youth Congress in Turkey, TechWomen in California, the Arab Turkish Youth Summit in Turkey, and She Program in Sweden.

### **Methodology**

The feminist pedagogy adopted in this study influenced the interview questions, data coding, and analytical procedures. The feminist pedagogy focused on psychological, structural, and post-structural aspects to uncover women's voices through themes of systems of oppression, relationships, and power structures (Johnson, 2004). The semistructured interview questions were rooted in the above feminist framework to examine and identify equity and access issues in the workforce and the barriers that impact the access of Jordanian women to employment opportunities (Brisolara, 2003). These questions also tried to uncover unspoken rules, social, gender, and power relationships that guide the labor market in Jordan.

### **Conclusion**

Do Jordanian women want to work? What are men's opinions on working women in their families? How much do personal opinions and cultural expectations affect a woman's decision to work? The Jordanian government and aid organizations have made significant investments to encourage women's economic engagement. However, the world's lowest female labor force participation (FLFP) is still evident in Jordan. As such, this chapter reviewed the literature on the subject to understand the challenges that prevent women and youth from enhancing their quality of life equally. It also outlined the characteristics of the Jordanian labor market, particularly concerning the employment dynamics of educated women in public, private, and informal sectors. The analysis of regulatory texts such as the Jordan National Constitution, the National Labour Law, and the Civil Service Law was fundamental to understanding the extent to which laws protect

and encourage women's work in the country. Ultimately, some reasons explained the low female participation rates in the Jordanian Labor Force. These include legal, economic, and social aspects, in equal measure. The review also validated some of the most significant binding limitations for women. These include childcare, flexibility, part-time employment, hiring and wage discrimination, limited job growth, inadequate public transportation, especially in rural areas, lack of appealing employment opportunities, and a shortage of positions in the public sector. Evidently, decisions concerning female labor force participation are also influenced by intra-household expectations. When it comes to major areas of decision-making, including the general acceptability of women working and gender roles of married women, social norms, particularly expectations of what others do, have significant influences on FLFP.

Finally, the Arab world is undergoing an extraordinary period of transition, and while Jordan has survived the political storm that has wreaked havoc on its neighbors, it is still facing many difficulties on the domestic front. Encouraging women to participate in the workforce actively could solve many structural issues. Among the needed legal and political reforms supporting women's participation in the labor force, Jordanian women's entrepreneurship has to be encouraged from a variety of angles. First and foremost, significant institutional work would be needed to transform how society generally views women, their participation in the labor force, and the potential economic role they might play as entrepreneurs (The World Bank, 2024). Social taboos must be broken down, and concerns about women's full participation in entrepreneurship must be addressed (see Zeidan & Bahrami, 2011). A robust entrepreneurial ecosystem is also required to enable

and encourage women to start their own businesses. For a woman, her family, and the society at large, having access to seed funding and promoting the establishment of incubators and accelerators in urban and rural areas might make all the difference. Boot camps, mentoring programs, training facilities, and networking opportunities need to be more accessible to women. Lastly, utilizing the support of the media to promote opportunities for women entrepreneurs will help to have a lasting impact.

Although the aforementioned research regarding the analysis of the education system and the participation of educated women in the Jordanian labor market illuminate important findings, I have found no research that has examined the perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the significant lack of participation in the country's economic activities. Indeed, the review of the literature showed a gap that stems from the lack of qualitative research exploring the significant lack of employment opportunities in Jordan from the educated women's viewpoint (Banihani & Syed, 2020). This study is significant in that it filled a gap in understanding how Jordanian women perceive the discrepancy between their education and lack of employment opportunities. Specifically, this study provided insights into the functioning of the labor market. Additionally, it focused on the micro-voices of these women, who are ignored or overlooked (Özalp, 2021). Women have the capacity to play a significant role in the Kingdom's economic growth and prosperity when given the right encouragement and support. If women are to succeed in starting their businesses, they must also be inspired to manage the funding and the profit they make from their entrepreneurial endeavors (Al-Alak & Al-Haddad, 2010). Then and only will Jordanian women achieve emancipation and personal development.

The next chapter focused on discussing the research tradition and how it influenced the formulation of the research questions. In establishing the researcher's position, I pointed out potential conflicts of interest and biases, such as ties with participants on a personal or professional level and power imbalances, and I described how these interactions will be handled. I also presented the methodology for the study, including participant selection, recruiting, participation, data collecting techniques, and a strategy for data analysis. Finally, I discussed ethical issues and trustworthiness in terms of the deliberate and accidental behavior that affects trust relationships in research.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The status of women in the academy has been subject to various studies published to date. However, little attention has been paid to the challenges, frustrations, and successes of women in academia in developing countries, particularly in Arab countries, as Karam and Afiouni (2014) have pointed out. Ensour et al., (2017), whose work particularly focused on Jordan, also highlighted the need to carry out more extensive research in the country's academic context to empirically investigate the factors that potentially influence or hinder the career advancement of female researchers.

In this study, I focused on women's perceptions regarding their limited participation in the Jordanian labor market, thus filling the literature gap in this regard. To that extent, and as mentioned in Chapter 2, it should be remembered that the academic environment is traditionally one of the favorite work environments for Jordanian women, necessarily educated, due to its flexibility of schedules, tasks, and workload. The latter makes the academic sector relatively easier to investigate, by virtue of the abundance of women within it and the ease with which it is possible to establish contacts. Therefore, I targeted the university environment and particularly a Jordanian public institution.

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to delineate the methodology that I followed. The chapter includes four sections. In the Research Design and Rationale section, I state and define the study's central concept(s) and phenomenon and identify the research tradition. In the second section, I define the role of the researcher, stating any researcher biases, power relationships, ethical issues, and how I addressed these issues. In the third section,



I discuss the study's methodology, namely the participant selection logic, the sampling strategy, participants' identification, contact, and recruitment procedures, as well as the relationship between saturation and sample size. I also identify data collection instruments and sources and establishing content validity. In the final section, I address recruitment, participation, and data collection procedures. I also present the data analysis plan and the procedures for coding, software that I used for analysis, and manner of treatment of discrepant cases, as well as issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the perceptions of selected educated Jordanian women regarding the discrepancy between their high educational attainment and access to the labor market. A generic approach was appropriately aligned because I examined how highly educated women in Jordan perceive this discrepancy through the social, cultural, gender, and familial challenges to investigate the most significant reasons behind their struggle to find employment opportunities. Researchers have found that the economic structure in many Middle Eastern countries does not fully realize the potential a highly educated society offers, and Jordan is an example of this phenomenon (Brand, 2020). The gap in the literature stems from the lack of qualitative research exploring the significant lack of employment opportunities in Jordan from the perspective of educated women (Banihani & Syed, 2020). The information from the study provided a broad and updated point of view through the understanding of macro-problems of the higher education system in Jordan and the functioning of the labor market.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the discrepancy between their high educational level and lack of access to employment opportunities? The main concept that I investigated in this generic qualitative study was incorporated into both the purpose statement and the research question. I explored the perceptions of selected educated Jordanian women regarding the discrepancy between their high educational level and limited access to the labor market.

### **Research Tradition**

According to Lim (2011), there are several established qualitative research traditions, which can be broadly divided into interpretive (grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology) or critical approaches (action research, feminist research). Basic qualitative study is the best form of qualitative research for this study out of the six categories listed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is knowledge expansion, whereby the researcher concentrates on exploring how participants make meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The chosen research tradition depends on the emphasis placed on the critical or interpretive approaches. Critical approaches place a focus on change or emancipation as part of the research process, and interpretive approaches focus on describing and understanding (Lim, 2011).

In this study, I followed a feminist research tradition empowering women and raising awareness of issues pertaining to their rights. According to feminist qualitative research, all knowledge is located in people's bodies and subjectivities, especially those

of women and historically oppressed groups (Levinson, 1998). Levinson (1998) stated that a feminist research tradition aims to describe and analyze the gendered construction and representation of women's experiences. It is informed by a political and intellectual commitment to the empowerment of women and the creation of more equitable relationships between and among specific, culturally defined genders.

### **Why Feminist Qualitative Research Tradition?**

In applying a feminist lens proposed by Bierema and Cseh (2003), I focused on three categories emphasized by Tisdell (1998): psychological, structural, and post-structural. All three types uncovered women's voices through themes of systems of oppression, relationships, and power structures (Johnson, 2004). It is important to note that it is not because I examined access to job opportunities from a gender perspective that it is feminist. Gender analysis is a starting point for researchers interested in how gender is constructed and how it functions in equal access to resources (Crenshaw, 1991). However, using gender as a category of analysis does not imply that the research project is informed by the feminist theory, ethics, or methods. According to St. Pierre (2000), knowledge, subjectivity, truth, and realities are formed through language and discourse, including cultural practices and power relations. Truth is, therefore, local and heterogeneous rather than a universal experience. As such, structural inequalities in access to job opportunities can be questioned through predominant discourse using the feminist theory. Moreover, Evans and Spivak (2016) stated that tackling issues from within is the only valid and effective way to bring change. As a scholar, uncovering women's voices within the working sector, academia in particular, is crucial to

comprehend how engaging with affirmative change might create a more just and equitable world. Lastly, the foundation of engaging in feminist research is the ambition to build new worlds that are fluid and inclusive and that question power structures.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My goal for this study was to understand how Jordanian women experience their world in relation to equal access to job opportunities. As a researcher observer, this study offered me the chance to put myself in the participants' shoes and understand their subjective experiences (Smith et al., 1999). As a researcher, my role is to establish a secure setting where participants can freely share their experiences and express their feelings on the research issue (Harvey, 2015). Manderscheild and Harrower (2016) asserted that a qualitative researcher needs to understand how to gather and communicate information from participants. Additionally, I divided the research process into seven stages: thematizing the study, designing the overall intervention, interviewing participants, transcribing and analyzing the interviews, verifying results, and reporting findings (see McCusker & Gunadin, 2015).

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

As mentioned in the literature review, the academic world is one of the most hospitable and open working contexts for female researchers because it offers almost optimal working conditions (Smith, 2023). Nevertheless, this environment is not entirely free from challenges, particularly regarding social policies. The latter affects the female component to a greater extent; therefore, the objective is to dig deeper to understand,

interpret, and present the difficulties women face today when they choose to undertake an academic career.

In this study, I focused on a sample of participants from faculties in the technical and scientific fields only and excluded researchers from the humanities sector. This choice is more theoretical, whereby Jordanian women prefer enrolling in the humanities faculties because they are traditionally linked to working roles in more gender-segregated and 'protected environments (Jansen, 2006; World Bank, 2005). However, as mentioned previously, the official statistics of various universities indicate a somewhat different trend, whereby the number of males and females enrolled in the STEM fields, particularly the technical and scientific faculties, is higher than that of males and females in humanities faculties. In light of these considerations, it is crucial to deepen the knowledge of environments such as engineering, medicine, pharmacy, and so on, to try to demonstrate that the female presence in these areas is relatively active and significant.

My selection of participants was based on Jordanian female academicians with the most knowledge to address the research question and deepen comprehension of the phenomenon being studied (see Jansen, 2015). This general qualitative study's intended audience was female teachers and researchers within the academic context of a Jordanian university, particularly the technical and scientific faculties mentioned above. The participants' eligibility criteria included (a) female researchers aged between 30 and 45, (b) having completed their doctoral degree, (c) teaching part-time or full-time at a scientific department of a Jordanian academic institution, (d) a minimum of 5 years of experience in the academic sector, and (e) fluent in English.

Purposive sampling was used as it focuses on individuals who have experience with the phenomenon being studied and supports the relevant research (Etikan et al., 2016). A sample of 10-15 participants was intended to be selected, thus fulfilling the eligibility requirements. According to Cunliffe and Alcadipani (2016), gaining access to participants is described as passing through the gatekeepers until reaching the qualified elements and getting their permission to participate in the study.

### **Participants Recruitment**

Using the database of Jordanian public institution, I was able to contact participants while also checking the individuals' LinkedIn profiles to match the proposed selection criteria. The latter was supported by an email invitation and consent form. Successful research requires a good working relationship between participants and researchers (Raheim et al., 2016). In order to build trust and maximize positive working rapport with participants, I used emails, phone calls and Microsoft Teams to make solid connections aimed at establishing strong communication networks with the study's participants. According to Wang and Geale (2015), a researcher can build trust by educating participants about the study's objectives, purpose, methodology, location, and needed time to complete the interviews. As such, participants were briefed on the research process, giving them the possibility to withdraw at any time. Moreover, data security and confidentiality were clarified to all participants, ensuring data and study materials were kept safe and private.

## **Instrumentation**

The software program SenseMaker, accessible as a browser-based application and as an app for smartphones and tablets, enabled the quick capture of massive amounts of data. Brief narratives were recorded as text and used to gather qualitative data.

Participants used a tablet or smartphone to tell a personal story in response to five open-ended prompting questions. After sharing their experience, participants self-interpreted the stories by responding to a series of questions that relate to the events. The self-interpreted narratives were collected using SenseMaker to produce findings through a wealth of contextual information.

Diverse opinions and multiple perspectives were gathered by means of semistructured interviews with selected female faculty members at a university in Jordan. The researcher asked open-ended questions as these might provide more revealing and honest responses than would be possible with more directed questioning (Neergaard et al., 2009). Through this primary data collection, participants shared their experiences about access to employment opportunities, gender roles and discrimination, and potential social issues. Participants also self-interpreted the narratives by answering follow-up questions about the story provided. The interviews were conducted remotely through Microsoft Teams, considering the conflict taking place in the Middle East at the time of the data collection. I developed the interview protocol (see Appendix A) based on the review of the literature as well as her expertise in the gender area.

Because this study is grounded in feminist theory, three main categories of the feminist pedagogy were used: psychological, structural, and post-structural to uncover

women's voices through themes of systems of oppression, relationships, and power structures (Johnson, 2004). The semistructured interview questions were used to examine and identify equity and access issues in the workforce and the barriers that impact the access of Jordanian women to employment opportunities (Brisolara, 2003). I used these questions to try to uncover unspoken rules, social, gender, and power relationships that guide the labor market in Jordan. The interview included "why" and "how" questions to urge participants to describe significant facts and work experiences in the context of life history linked to the phenomena of this study. This study made use of Seidman's (2006) three-stage interviewing technique, which entailed three formal interviews condensed into one: (a) the first stage, called *focused life history*, probed participants' views on how their life experiences related to the research topic; (b) the second stage, called *details of experiences*, allowed participants to reconstruct experiences in detail; and (c) the third stage, called *reflection on the meaning*, directed participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences.

### **Data Collection and Analysis Plan**

To collect and analyze the data, the study used Cognitive Edge's SenseMaker, a research tool that allows qualitative data collection and analysis in a short period of time (Abdessamad, 2015). The experiences of Jordanian women were collected through the tablet-based data collection tool and relied on technology as part of the collection and analysis. Brief narratives were gathered through open-ended questions followed by a self-interpretation of these stories by participants themselves, who answered a series of follow-up questions related to the events in the story. Triads and dyads inserted by



participants when self-interpreting the questions provided a more nuanced understanding of the complexities around gender discrimination (Abdessamad, 2015). After capturing self-interpreted narratives from participants, the researcher handled, analyzed, and interpreted the data gathered through the transcripts of the follow-up questions. The latter allowed the identification of emerging themes and patterns identified in the narratives. The SenseMaker tool also generated visual data related to the triads and dyads, thus reducing the labor- and time-intensive challenges. Since participants' qualitative data is self-interpreted, SenseMaker constituted the perfect tool for reducing researcher bias. SenseMaker also removed expert re-interpretation and ethnographic coding through this self-signification. By assigning meaning to their micro-narratives, participants enabled large-scale explorations, reduced researcher bias, and allowed for more objective analysis (Milne, 2015). All information were stored in a password-protected folder on an external hard drive, including informed consent forms, audio recordings, transcripts, participant feedback, and field notes.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The researcher's interaction with participants - happening throughout the interview - influences how data are collected, documented, and coded. Rolfe (2006) states that qualitative research is criticized for being subject to researcher bias which may influence findings. Patton (2015) states that qualitative research must be judged by its trustworthiness, a term that encompasses a variety of concepts, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

In qualitative studies, both participants and researchers have an impact on the data and results (Shah & Corley, 2006). Each researcher performing a study will view the data from a different angle and may interpret the findings differently (Labianca et al., 2000). As a result, the analyses of the data cannot be evaluated on the basis of the study's repeatability and replicability, as in quantitative research, but rather on their capacity to offer plausible insight from a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, which is only possible through the interpretation of phenomena through data gathered from those experiencing them (Shah & Corley, 2006). Credibility is a way of examining if the findings accurately depict reality and properly convey participants' viewpoints. To ensure the credibility of the study findings, I eliminated bias through the use of the SenseMaker tool, as described above.

**Transferability**

Although many critics find it difficult to accept the reliability of qualitative research, there are established procedures for assuring its rigor. Investigators try to show that an accurate image of the phenomenon being studied is presented to readers in order to gain credibility. To enable transferability, they include enough information about the fieldwork's context that a reader can decide whether the current environment is comparable to another setting they are familiar with and whether the findings can legitimately be transferred to the other setting. Transferability is comparable to the idea of external validity in quantitative research. The researcher looks at transferability to see if the findings from the study may be applied in other situations (Patton, 2015). As such, I

included thick and rich verbatim descriptions of participants' statements to support findings, which helped ensure transferability (Slevin & Sines, 1999).

### **Dependability**

Although qualitative research makes it challenging to achieve the dependability requirement, researchers should strive to make it possible for a subsequent researcher to replicate the study. Elo et al. (2014) state that qualitative research would be reliable when the quality of the data collection process and its analysis are audited, triangulated, or recoded. Therefore, I ensured the dependability of data through the inquiry audit method consisting of scrutinizing data and relevant supporting documents by an external reviewer (Morse, 2015).

### **Confirmability**

To achieve confirmability, researchers must ensure that their findings are grounded in the data and not influenced by personal biases. In this study, the use of the SenseMaker tool supported confirmability by focusing the analysis on the participants' narratives, minimizing the potential impact of researcher biases. Additionally, post-interview comment sheets were created to document observations and feelings immediately after each interview, fostering reflexivity and allowing for a transparent examination of the researcher's own perspectives during the data collection process.

### **Ethical Procedures**

To ensure that research conducted at Walden University aligns with the institution's ethical standards and any applicable federal regulations, researchers are required to submit a research study protocol to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for

Ethical Standards in Research. I obtained the IRB's approval before initiating any data collection. The protocol for the research project was reviewed with all emails and letters inviting participants to partake in this study. It included a review of the survey instrument - in this case, the interview protocol - and a commitment to uphold the confidentiality of study participants. In terms of data protection and privacy, each participant received an informed consent form, written in clear and straightforward language, outlining the types of data to be collected and how they would be used in the study. Confidentiality was emphasized both in the recruitment materials and again before the interviews began. Each participant had the opportunity to review the informed consent and ask any questions they had prior to participation. To further protect privacy, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants when reporting the study's findings.

### **Ethical Issues and Considerations**

The researcher is committed to respecting the dignity of participants and adhering to ethical standards in the publication of the study's findings. To safeguard participant privacy, pseudonyms were used throughout this qualitative study. Each participant received a \$20 cash incentive as a gesture of appreciation for their involvement. All data was securely stored in a password-protected folder, accessible only through my personal computer's hard disk and an external hard drive. To mitigate the risk of data loss due to technical failures, data was synchronously backed up on both the external hard drive and the computer's hard disk, ensuring its integrity and security throughout the research process.

In every research project, it is crucial to protect human participants by using the right ethical standards (Orb et al., 2001). Due to the extensive length of the research process, ethical considerations have a special resonance in qualitative studies. When conducting face-to-face interviews with a set of participants, ethical concerns become more prominent. Participants may experience stress while expressing their emotions during the interview process. To address this, written informed consent was obtained from each participant. I scheduled an online meeting with each participant individually to thoroughly explain the study's objectives and data collection procedures, ensuring clarity. Voluntary participation was emphasized, making it clear that choosing not to participate or deciding to withdraw at any stage would have no consequences on their personal or professional lives. To provide additional details, a participant information sheet was distributed, giving prospective participants a period of 24 hours to one week to review the material and make an informed decision about their involvement. In addition to maintaining anonymity and confidentiality, as previously described, I completed the necessary training in Human Subjects Protection as required by Walden University. These principles were rigorously applied throughout the research process to ensure ethical compliance and participant well-being.

### **Treatment of Data**

Privacy and data protection were key considerations throughout this study. To ensure confidentiality, all audio recordings were encrypted using a password-protected system. This paperless approach was chosen to provide the highest level of security, recognizing the challenges associated with managing personal data in research. By

utilizing password protection and data encryption, access to sensitive information was effectively restricted. Once the study concludes, all data was securely stored in electronic format. After a retention period of five years, all study-related information will be permanently deleted from both the computer's hard drive and any external storage devices, ensuring complete data disposal.

### **Summary**

This generic qualitative study aims to explore the perceptions of educated Jordanian women regarding the gap between their high educational achievements and their access to the labor market. After carefully considering various qualitative research methodologies, I determined that the three-stage interviewing methodology (Seidman, 2006) would be the most suitable approach, given the study's strong descriptive and naturalistic focus. Beyond ensuring reliability, ethical considerations were recognized as fundamental to the study's integrity. Consequently, I developed a comprehensive plan to maintain and manage data security and control access. Chapter 4 presented the study's findings, detailing the data collected during participant recruitment and selection. To reinforce the study's conceptual framework, I incorporated representative statements from participants, drawn from transcript analysis, and select emotionally resonant quotes to vividly capture the participants' experiences and insights.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I present the results of the study, focusing on the perceptions of Jordanian women regarding the discrepancy between their high educational attainment and their limited access to the labor market. The data were analyzed in response to the central research question and sub-questions, followed by a detailed thematic breakdown of the findings. To ensure a clear understanding of how the study's data contributes to the existing body of knowledge, this chapter starts by briefly restating the purpose and research question, along with a preview of the chapter's organization.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of educated Jordanian women about the significant gap between their advanced education levels and their ability to find employment in Jordan's labor market. Despite high participation in tertiary education, these women face multiple barriers that limit their participation in the workforce. I sought to understand how social, cultural, and gender-related factors influence their employment opportunities, which are largely governed by Jordan's socio-economic and patriarchal structures. By exploring these perceptions, I provided insight into the reasons behind the disconnect between education and employment, which could inform future policies aimed at improving female labor participation in Jordan.

This qualitative inquiry is significant as it fills a gap in the literature by focusing on women's voices regarding employment barriers in Jordan. It contributes to understanding the broader macroeconomic problems within the Jordanian labor market,

as well as the micro-level experiences of highly educated women facing gendered obstacles.

I designed the research question guiding this study to delve into women's experiences and their views on the underlying causes of the employment gap. Additionally, sub-questions were used to explore more specific areas of interest, such as: How do cultural and societal norms impact Jordanian women's ability to translate educational success into professional employment? What roles do family responsibilities and gender roles play in limiting female participation in the labor market? I used each sub-question to guide the semistructured interviews, ensuring that the data collected was comprehensive and focused on the core themes of education, labor market access, and gender inequality.

The results presented in this chapter are organized into several sections to maintain a clear, logical flow and ensure that the findings are thoroughly addressed. The data collection overview provides a detailed description of the data collection process. It outlines the participant recruitment criteria, the interview process, and how the data was managed. It also gives an overview of the sample, including the number of participants, their demographic characteristics (such as age, educational background, and employment status), and any relevant details that could influence their perspectives. The core of the chapter is devoted to analyzing the themes that emerged from the qualitative data. These themes reflect the key areas where Jordanian women identified barriers to their employment. This section is organized into major categories, including social and cultural barriers, family responsibilities and work-life balance, gender-based



discrimination in the workplace, and direct participant quotations. A visual representation of the data collected summarized the main findings through themes and prevalence of certain patterns that helped clarify and emphasize the results. These visuals are designed to provide an at-a-glance understanding of the major trends identified in the data. The chapter concluded with a synthesis of the key findings, summarizing the major barriers that highly educated Jordanian women face when trying to enter the labor market. The summary also served as a bridge to the next chapter, which focused on interpreting the results, drawing conclusions, and providing recommendations for future research and policy development.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study was heavily influenced by several personal, organizational, and regional factors that shaped the experiences of the participants and the research process. These external conditions not only affected the recruitment and engagement of participants but also influenced how women perceived and expressed their views on the discrepancies between their educational attainment and access to the labor market in Jordan.

At the time of data collection, the Middle East, including Jordan and Lebanon, was facing significant political and social challenges that created a difficult context for conducting the research. The ongoing conflicts in neighboring countries, such as Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, had already placed significant economic and social pressures on Jordan, which hosts a large population of refugees. The strain on the country's infrastructure, job market, and resources was substantial, leading to a precarious socio-

economic environment that influenced both the labor market and the lived experiences of Jordanian women (Barakat & Mneimneh, 2021; Faour, 2018).

More directly, the war that erupted in Lebanon during the data collection period further compounded these challenges. This conflict not only heightened regional instability but also had an emotional impact on many women in Jordan, particularly those who had personal or familial ties to Lebanon or the broader Levant region. Witnessing the conflict in a neighboring country, coupled with the existing pressures in Jordan, created a tense and uncertain atmosphere (Haddad, 2022). These external stressors may have affected the participants' emotional engagement with the study, as many were navigating personal concerns related to safety and regional security.

### **Recruitment Challenges**

The war in the Middle East and the heightened regional instability posed significant challenges to participant recruitment. Originally, I aimed to include a sample of 10 Jordanian women. However, due to the ongoing conflict and the difficulties it created, the final sample size was reduced to four participants, in agreement with the dissertation chair. This reduction was necessary due to several factors, including participant disengagement, emotional distress, and logistical constraints such as the inability to travel for interviews (Al-Mousa & Saleh, 2021). Many potential participants expressed reluctance to engage in the study due to other priorities. The war in the Middle East and the resulting instability led to a sense of disengagement from academic or professional pursuits for some women, as their immediate priorities shifted towards personal and familial concerns. This disengagement affected their willingness to

participate in interviews, and for those who did participate, it may have influenced the depth and openness of their responses (El-Masri et al., 2020). Additionally, logistical issues further complicated recruitment. The war in Lebanon and the precarious situation in Jordan made it difficult to travel safely or arrange in-person meetings. Interviews that were initially intended to be conducted face-to-face had to be moved online, which limited my ability to build rapport with participants (see Graham et al., 2020). These conditions likely affected the depth and quality of the data, as the remote nature of the interviews may have inhibited some participants from sharing sensitive or deeply personal information.

### **Impact on Participants**

The participants who did engage with the study were undoubtedly affected by the broader regional context. This emotional distress may have shaped their perceptions and responses during the interviews, as the instability in their surrounding environment influenced their outlook on both their personal futures and broader societal trends. Several participants alluded to the uncertainty of the job market and the limitations on opportunities for women as being exacerbated by the ongoing regional conflicts (Saleh, 2021). The pervasive sense of instability created by the war and economic downturn in neighboring Palestine and Lebanon likely colored the participants' views on their employability and the long-term prospects of women's participation in the labor market (El-Kharouf & Daoud, 2019). Moreover, the stress associated with the war may have led some participants to shift priorities and focus less on their professional aspirations. The study results must, therefore, be interpreted with this contextual backdrop in mind. The

emotional toll of the conflict and its impact on Jordanian women may have limited the scope of their responses or shifted their priorities away from discussions about career aspirations and the labor market to more immediate concerns of safety and security (Al-Khateeb, 2021).

### **Achieving Data Saturation**

Despite the reduced sample size, data saturation was achieved with the four participants, largely due to the in-depth nature of the interviews and the consistency of the themes that emerged. Although the original plan aimed to include 10 participants, the reduced sample still provided rich, meaningful data that aligned with the study's research objectives. The interviews conducted were sufficient to uncover recurring themes and patterns, particularly around the barriers to employment and the impact of societal expectations on women's professional lives (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The reduction in the sample size did not significantly hinder my ability to achieve my goals, as the participants offered detailed insights into the core issues being investigated. The emotional intensity of their responses, shaped by the regional context, provided valuable perspectives on how external factors such as instability influence women's views on the labor market. The saturation of data was confirmed through the repetition of key themes, such as the role of family responsibilities, societal expectations, and the systemic barriers women face in the Jordanian labor market (see Morse, 2015). Additionally, I used the semistructured interview approach for in-depth exploration of themes, giving each participant the opportunity to provide nuanced insights and personal experiences. This

depth compensated for the smaller number of participants, as their responses were detailed enough to cover multiple dimensions of the research question.

### **Demographics**

This section includes an overview of the participant demographics and characteristics that are relevant to the study. The data were collected from the narratives gathered through the SenseMaker application, and supplemented by responses from the four key informant interviews (KIIs) which provided additional insights into the professional journeys, challenges, and perspectives of the participants. All participants are women who have pursued advanced education and careers, primarily in the academic and STEM fields. The participants' ages ranged from 30 to 45, with each holding a Ph.D. in their respective fields. Despite their high levels of education, they each faced distinct challenges related to gender, societal expectations, and regional instability, all of which have influenced their professional journeys.

Participant 1, aged 39, is an assistant professor in the field of experimental nuclear physics. After earning her Ph.D. from McGill University in Canada, she returned to Jordan, where she has spent the past 6 years in academia. She balances her professional responsibilities with her role as a mother, navigating the dual pressures of family obligations and a demanding career. Her experiences reflect the ongoing challenges that women in Jordan face in accessing leadership roles in traditionally male-dominated fields like physics, despite their qualifications and commitment. Participant 2 is 43 years old and holds a Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Jordan. Currently working as a postdoctoral researcher, she is actively involved in mentoring graduate

students and contributing to academic research in mathematics. She has a passion for promoting diversity in STEM and is a strong advocate for gender equality in academia. Despite her accomplishments, she has faced systemic barriers in advancing to leadership positions, which she attributes to a lack of female representation and mentorship opportunities within the academic community. Participant 3, aged 42, is a practicing gynecologist with a specialization in reproductive endocrinology. In addition to her medical practice, she is involved in teaching and research at a local university.

Throughout her career, she has encountered gender stereotypes that have hindered her progression to leadership roles in her field. While she is highly respected in her clinical work, she has experienced institutional resistance to women in leadership, particularly in healthcare, which she perceives as being deeply influenced by cultural and societal norms. Participant 4, at 45, is a lecturer and researcher in mathematics at a university in Jordan. With 6 years of academic experience, she has worked on several research projects and collaborated with international scholars. Despite her qualifications, she has found that the current instability in the Middle East has made it increasingly difficult to secure new research opportunities or collaborations. The ongoing conflicts in the region have limited professional opportunities for women like her, particularly in the STEM fields, where competition for resources and positions is already fierce.

The participants' demographic characteristics, including advanced education, professional experience, and age, illustrate a group of highly qualified women striving to advance in their fields, despite the numerous systemic challenges they face in Jordan's labor market. These challenges were further illustrated in the following sections,

therefore highlighting the reasons behind women's limited access to opportunities and professional growth.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process for this study involved gathering qualitative data through two key methods: semistructured interviews and self-interpreted narratives using the SenseMaker tool. My aim was to explore the perceptions of highly educated Jordanian women regarding the barriers to accessing the labor market despite their advanced education. This section includes a discussion of the participants involved, the locations, frequency, and duration of data collection, as well as how the data were recorded. Additionally, any variations from the original data collection plan presented in Chapter 3 are discussed, along with any unusual circumstances encountered during the process.

### **Participants and Data Collection**

The study involved four participants, reduced from the original target of 10 due to regional instability in the Middle East, specifically the war in Gaza and Lebanon and the disengagement of potential participants. These four participants were women between the ages of 30 and 45, each with a doctoral degree in a STEM or related field and employed in Jordan's academic sector. Two primary data collection methods were employed: (a) SenseMaker narratives where participants shared personal stories and self-interpreted them using SenseMaker software, which allowed them to reflect on their experiences in their own words, and (b) semistructured interviews conducted to supplement the narrative data, providing further detail on participants' personal and professional experiences (see

Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final sample consisted of women who were actively engaged in academia and shared their lived experiences of navigating gender and societal barriers in the workforce.

### **Location, Frequency, and Duration of Data Collection**

Data collection occurred remotely due to logistical constraints and the ongoing conflict in Lebanon, which hindered the possibility of in-person meetings. The SenseMaker narratives were collected via mobile app, where participants responded to prompts designed to capture their educational and professional journeys. Participants could submit their narratives at any time, providing flexibility given the regional instability. The semistructured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Each interview lasted between 20 and 40 minutes, to gather additional data or clarify participant responses. Interviews were held once per participant, and none of the participants required a second session for clarification.

### **Data Recording**

Data from SenseMaker were captured directly within the app, allowing participants to interpret their own stories through tools such as triads and dyads (Snowden & Boone, 2007). These digital narratives were securely stored in a password-protected database. The interviews conducted through Microsoft Teams were digitally recorded and transcribed manually. The transcriptions were subsequently reviewed for accuracy by the researcher. Both the transcripts and the raw interview recordings were stored in a secure, password-protected cloud storage system (Bazeley, 2013).



### **Variations in Data Collection Plan**

There were significant variations from the original plan, as previously outlined. The initial plan called for 10 participants, but the final sample size was reduced to four due to recruitment difficulties caused by the war in the Middle East and the associated disengagement affecting potential participants. In agreement with the research supervisor, data saturation was reached with the smaller sample size (Guest et al., 2006). Additionally, the interviews were planned as face-to-face sessions. However, due to safety concerns and travel restrictions caused by the regional conflict, all interviews were conducted remotely via Microsoft Teams. This shift in methodology likely impacted the depth of participant engagement, as remote interviews can create a barrier to rapport-building (Opdenakker, 2006). Despite these challenges, the data collected provided rich insights into the barriers faced by highly educated Jordanian women as they seek to enter or advance in the labor market. The shift to remote data collection and the regional conflict introduced complexities, but the study's core objectives were met through the flexibility and resilience of both the researcher and participants.

### **Data Analysis and Framework**

In this study, a comprehensive data analysis framework was employed to systematically examine the qualitative data obtained through participant interviews. This framework integrated discourse analysis and thematic coding through MAXQDA, an advanced qualitative data management tool. These methods were chosen to ensure a rigorous, in-depth exploration of the barriers and opportunities related to Jordanian women's participation in the labor market, particularly in traditionally male-dominated

fields. Thematic coding was one of the primary techniques used for data analysis, allowing for the identification of key themes related to gender barriers, societal expectations, and institutional limitations. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic coding as a process of identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data, and this approach was applied across all interview transcripts. The data analysis began with coding the interview transcripts and SenseMaker narratives. Initially, a line-by-line open coding method was employed to capture specific concepts mentioned by the participants. Examples of initial codes included gendered roles, education-employment disconnect, patriarchal society, and work-life balance. As coding progressed, these initial codes were grouped into larger categories. For example, gendered roles and patriarchal society were grouped under the broader category of cultural and societal norms, which reflected the overarching societal expectations that influence women's career opportunities in Jordan. Similarly, work-life balance and family responsibilities were categorized under personal obligations, addressing the challenges women face in balancing professional ambitions with family duties. Through constant comparison, these categories were then consolidated into overarching themes, such as:

- 1) **Societal and Cultural Barriers:** Reflecting the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles on women's access to the labor market.
- 2) **Institutional and Structural Barriers:** Highlighting how policies and practices within organizations hinder women's career progression.
- 3) **Impact of Regional Instability:** Describing how ongoing conflicts in the Middle East exacerbate challenges for women seeking employment.

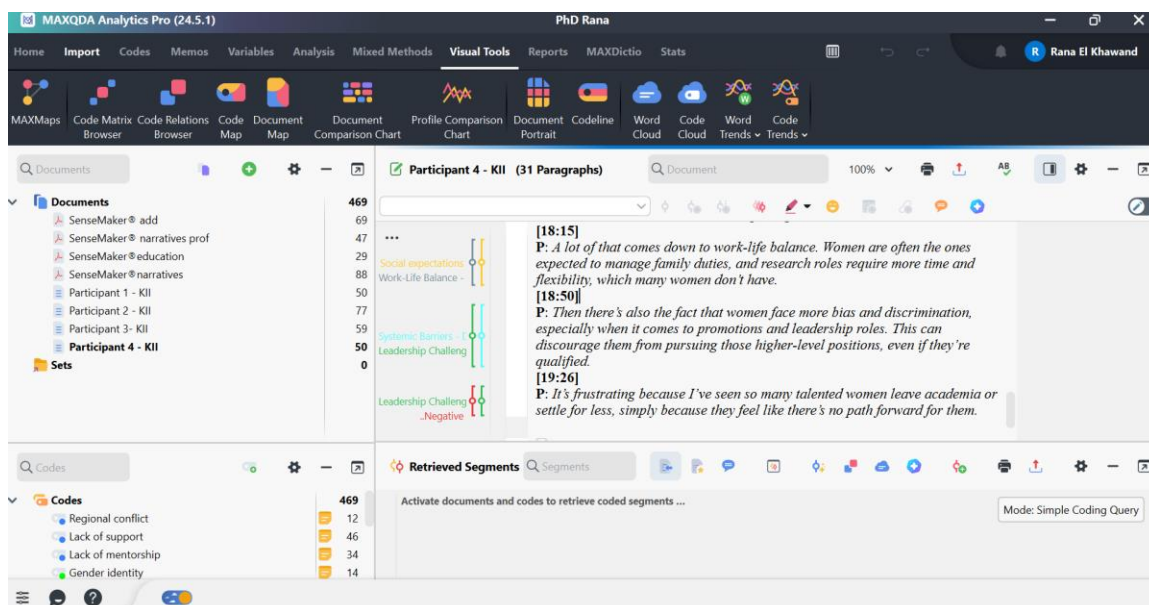
These themes represent the core challenges that Jordanian women face in their professional lives, with cultural norms playing a significant role in shaping their access to opportunities (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To complement thematic coding, discourse and sentiment analysis were employed to explore how language shaped participants' perceptions of gender roles, labor market opportunities, and societal expectations. Discourse analysis, as described by Fairclough (2013), looks beyond what is said to how it is said, examining the power dynamics and social structures embedded in language. In this study, discourse analysis helped reveal how participants internalized patriarchal beliefs and how these beliefs influenced their narratives about labor market participation. For example, participants spoke of needing to prove themselves in male-dominated environments or expressed guilt over balancing work and family responsibilities, reflecting the deep influence of societal norms on their career decisions (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2015). This method provided a deeper understanding of the cultural and social narratives that underlie the explicit themes identified through coding. Sentiment analysis, a method for detecting and classifying emotional tone in text, is increasingly used in qualitative research to analyze attitudes and opinions expressed in data. MAXQDA incorporated sentiment analysis features that allowed to code text based on positive, negative, or neutral sentiments (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). By integrating sentiment analysis within the broader framework of qualitative coding, this study systematically analyzed emotional content across the dataset, providing insights into how participants express their feelings on various topics. This functionality enhanced the

depth of the findings (Humble & Radcliffe, 2021) and the ability to visualize sentiment trends across the identified themes.

MAXQDA was also used to efficiently manage and organize the qualitative data. This software facilitated the systematic coding of interview transcripts, making it possible to analyze complex patterns across multiple interviews (Verbi Software, 2021). Using MAXQDA helped visualize the data through code matrices and track the frequency of themes across interviews, adding a layer of quantitative insight to the qualitative analysis (Guest et al., 2012).

## Figure 2

### MAXQDA Interface



Additionally, MAXQDA enabled cross-case analysis, revealing relationships between different codes. For instance, the software made it easier to identify how gender discrimination intersected with family responsibilities across participants, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the barriers women face in the labor market. Therefore, by

combining thematic coding, discourse analysis, and the advanced functionalities of MAXQDA, the data analysis process was made more rigorous and nuanced. This multi-layered approach allowed for the identification of not only the explicit barriers women face but also more subtle challenges, such as the internalization of societal expectations and emotional labor related to balancing professional and family responsibilities. These insights were critical in revealing the full scope of the obstacles and opportunities for women in the Jordanian labor market.

### **Specific Codes and Related Sub-Codes**

During the analysis, several key themes emerged that were critical to understanding the study's research questions. These were identified based on the following code system and related sub-codes:

**Table 5**

*Codes and Sub-codes*

Code	Sub-codes
Regional Conflict	<p>1. Barriers to Professional Advancement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Instability in the region affecting access to new projects, collaborations, and promotions</li> <li>- Employers perceiving women as "riskier" hires due to potential family duties or relocation needs</li> </ul> <p>2. Funding and Collaboration Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty securing research funding and international collaborations</li> <li>- Conferences and events being postponed or canceled due to travel restrictions and safety concerns</li> </ul> <p>3. Competitive Job Market</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slowdown in hiring within the region, with universities tightening budgets and fewer positions available</li> <li>- Women facing disadvantages in the competitive job market, with male candidates being prioritized</li> </ul> <p>4. Emotional Disengagement and Trauma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sense of emotional disengagement due to the personal and</li> </ul>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>organizational conditions during this period</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Broader regional context of trauma and instability profoundly impacting experiences and perspectives</li> </ul> <p>5. Determination and Resilience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individuals becoming more determined to fight for gender equality and finding alternative ways to lead and support women</li> <li>- Overcoming specific setbacks and making a significant difference in their respective fields</li> </ul>
Lack of Support	<p>1. Institutional Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of support from institutions, such as universities or workplaces, in areas like promotions, leadership opportunities, and funding</li> </ul> <p>2. Family Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of emotional or practical support from family members, particularly in balancing work and family responsibilities</li> </ul> <p>3. Workplace Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient access to resources like professional development programs, mental health support, or flexible working hours</li> </ul> <p>4. Peer Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absence of collaboration or encouragement from colleagues, including isolation in male-dominated fields</li> </ul> <p>5. Governmental Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of governmental policies that help women in balancing career and family, such as maternity leave or child care facilities</li> </ul>
Lack of Mentorship	<p>1. Female Mentors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absence of female role models or mentors in leadership positions</li> </ul> <p>2. Career Advancement Guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of guidance or advice on navigating career progression, promotions, or leadership roles</li> </ul> <p>3. Research Mentorship</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Insufficient academic mentorship for women in research and publication endeavors</li> </ul> <p>4. Networking Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited access to professional networks that could aid career development</li> </ul> <p>5. Long-Term Career Planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absence of mentorship in developing long-term career strategies, especially in male-dominated sectors</li> </ul>
Gender Identity & Challenges	1. Cultural Expectations

Code	Sub-codes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How societal norms and cultural values shape perceptions of gender roles</li> <li>2. Balancing Roles               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Balancing gender expectations in both personal and professional settings</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Driving Change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promoting Gender Equality           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Addressing gender biases and stereotypes</li> <li>- Empowering women and girls</li> <li>- Advocating for equal opportunities</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Policy Reforms           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Updating organizational policies and guidelines</li> <li>- Implementing diversity and inclusion initiatives</li> <li>- Ensuring equitable access and representation</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Challenging Discrimination           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying and addressing discriminatory practices</li> <li>- Fostering inclusive and respectful work environments</li> <li>- Raising awareness about gender-based discrimination</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Driving Cultural Change           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transforming societal attitudes and mindsets</li> <li>- Challenging traditional gender roles and norms</li> <li>- Promoting positive role models and narratives</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. Grassroots Mobilization           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engaging communities and families</li> <li>- Initiating local-level campaigns and movements</li> <li>- Empowering individuals to be agents of change</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
Systemic Barriers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Gender Bias in Leadership Opportunities           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fewer women in higher-level leadership roles</li> <li>- Men often prioritized for promotions and leadership positions</li> <li>- Women steered towards teaching roles rather than research or administrative roles</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Cultural Expectations and Household Dynamics           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societal expectations of men as primary breadwinners</li> <li>- Women's success seen as secondary to men's</li> <li>- Resentment and power imbalance within households when women are more successful</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Discrimination in Hiring and Promotion           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women facing bias and discrimination, especially for higher-level positions</li> <li>- Qualified women discouraged from pursuing leadership roles</li> <li>- Colleagues questioning women's competence and leadership abilities</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>4. Challenges in Achieving Leadership Positions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facing politics and criticism when running for leadership roles</li> <li>- Having to work harder to prove achievements and qualifications</li> <li>- Overcoming resistance from male colleagues who doubt women's leadership capabilities</li> </ul> <p>5. Lack of Mentorship and Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women facing unique challenges such as lack of mentorship and unequal access to resources</li> <li>- Fewer role models and support systems for women in leadership</li> </ul>
Social Expectations	<p>1. Gender Roles</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women expected to manage family duties</li> <li>- Flexibility required in research roles not available for many women</li> </ul> <p>2. Cultural Norms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societal expectations shape women's experiences in Jordan</li> <li>- Challenges faced due to being a woman, but also support from family and community</li> </ul> <p>3. Societal Pressure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unspoken expectations placed on individuals by society</li> <li>- Pressure to conform to societal norms and standards</li> </ul> <p>4. Work-Life Balance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance</li> <li>- Expectations of women to prioritize family responsibilities over career</li> </ul> <p>5. Conformity Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pressure to adhere to societal norms and expectations</li> <li>- Challenges in breaking free from traditional roles and stereotypes</li> </ul> <p>6. Community Influence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Impact of local community on individual experiences and choices</li> <li>- Expectations shaped by the surrounding social environment</li> </ul> <p>7. Personal Choices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ability to make independent decisions and choices</li> <li>- Navigating societal expectations while exercising personal agency</li> </ul>
COVID-19 Impact	<p>1. Work-Life Balance Disruption</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Juggling professional and personal responsibilities became more challenging</li> <li>- Blurred boundaries between work and home life</li> </ul> <p>2. Childcare Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of access to regular childcare options</li> <li>- Increased burden of homeschooling and caregiving</li> </ul> <p>3. Emotional Turmoil</p>



Code	Sub-codes
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feelings of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty</li> <li>- Difficulty maintaining mental well-being</li> </ul> <p>4. Overnight Lifestyle Changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Abrupt shifts in daily routines and habits</li> <li>- Adapting to a new normal in a short timeframe</li> </ul> <p>5. Professional Upheaval</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Navigating changes in job responsibilities or employment status</li> <li>- Adjusting to remote work or altered work environments</li> </ul>
Men Feeling Undermined	<p>1. Prioritizing Family Responsibilities over Career Advancement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Turning down leadership opportunities to avoid conflicts at home</li> <li>- Feeling pressure from spouse to quit job and focus on family</li> </ul> <p>2. Perceptions of Women's Roles in Society</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societal expectations by of women as caregivers and homemakers</li> <li>- Challenges in joining the workforce due to gender biases</li> </ul> <p>3. Facing Gender Discrimination in the Workplace</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Doubts about qualifications and leadership abilities despite achievements</li> <li>- Encountering politics, criticism, and resistance from male colleagues</li> </ul> <p>4. Navigating the Emotional Toll of Success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Spouse's resentment towards partner's career success and education</li> <li>- Difficulty in balancing professional achievements and maintaining harmony at home</li> </ul> <p>5. Lack of Support and Understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling isolated without anyone to discuss the challenges</li> <li>- Expectation to "figure it out" without guidance or assistance</li> </ul>
Work-Life Balance/ Family Obligations	<p>1. Gendered Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women often expected to manage family duties</li> <li>- Lack of flexibility in research roles for women with family obligations</li> </ul> <p>2. Systemic Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limited access to affordable childcare</li> <li>- Unequal pay and lack of support for work-life balance</li> </ul> <p>3. Juggling Act</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenges of managing job and family responsibilities</li> <li>- Attending to children's needs and being present for them</li> </ul> <p>4. Emotional Toll</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stress and difficulty of balancing work and home life</li> <li>- Feeling overwhelmed by the constant juggling</li> </ul>

Code	Sub-codes
Gender Stereotypes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Occupational Segregation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women discouraged from pursuing certain fields (e.g., STEM)</li> <li>- Men given priority for leadership and promotion opportunities</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Doubts about Women's Competence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assumptions that women lack qualifications or leadership abilities</li> <li>- Resistance to women in positions of authority</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Work-Family Conflict <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expectations for women to prioritize family over career</li> <li>- Challenges in balancing professional and personal responsibilities</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Sexist Attitudes and Behaviors <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perpetuation of outdated, patriarchal mindsets</li> <li>- Discriminatory treatment and criticism towards women</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. Overcoming Obstacles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determination and hard work to prove one's capabilities</li> <li>- Support from family, teachers, and allies in challenging stereotypes</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
Gender Gap	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Occupational Disparity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unequal access to job opportunities for men and women</li> <li>- Concentration of women in certain industries or roles</li> <li>- Barriers to career advancement for women</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. Educational Attainment Gap <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Differences in educational enrollment and completion rates between genders</li> <li>- Disparities in access to quality education</li> <li>- Gender biases in educational curricula and teaching practices</li> </ul> </li> <li>3. Wage Inequality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pay gap between men and women for similar work</li> <li>- Undervaluation of work traditionally performed by women</li> <li>- Lack of equal pay policies and enforcement</li> </ul> </li> <li>4. Sociocultural Norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Traditional gender roles and expectations</li> <li>- Stereotypes and biases influencing career choices</li> <li>- Unequal distribution of domestic and caregiving responsibilities</li> </ul> </li> <li>5. Leadership Representation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Underrepresentation of women in senior-level positions</li> <li>- Challenges faced by women in climbing the corporate ladder</li> <li>- Lack of mentorship and sponsorship opportunities for women</li> </ul> </li> <li>6. Institutional Barriers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discriminatory hiring and promotion practices</li> <li>- Inadequate family-friendly policies and support systems</li> <li>- Lack of diversity and inclusion initiatives in organizations</li> </ul> </li> </ol>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>7. Intersectional Disparities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Compounded challenges faced by women from marginalized groups</li> <li>- Intersection of gender with factors like race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability</li> <li>- Unique barriers experienced by women in specific cultural or regional contexts (e.g., the example from Jordan)</li> </ul>
Institutional Barriers	<p>1. Lack of Visible Role Models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women struggle to envision themselves in leadership roles due to the scarcity of female role models</li> <li>- Underrepresentation of women in high-profile positions makes it challenging for aspiring women to see a clear path to success</li> </ul> <p>2. Implicit Hiring Biases</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unconscious biases in the hiring process lead to women being overlooked for positions or promotions</li> <li>- Qualifications and expertise are not the sole factors considered, with gender playing an implicit role</li> </ul> <p>3. Societal Expectations and Stigma</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women in STEM fields face societal pressure and stigma for choosing non-traditional career paths</li> <li>- Stereotypes about work-life balance deter some women from pursuing demanding STEM careers</li> </ul> <p>4. Limited Access to Support Networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of organizations or support systems specifically tailored for women in STEM fields</li> <li>- Difficulty in building professional networks and accessing mentorship opportunities</li> </ul> <p>5. Underrepresentation in Leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women are underrepresented in high-level leadership positions within STEM disciplines</li> <li>- Limited visibility and recognition for women's contributions in the field</li> </ul> <p>6. Resilience and Determination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women in STEM demonstrate resilience and a steadfast commitment to overcoming barriers and stereotypes</li> <li>- Pursuing advanced degrees and leadership roles despite societal expectations and challenges</li> </ul>
Leadership Challenges	<p>1. Societal Expectations and Gender Norms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and household responsibilities</li> <li>- Questioning the need for women to pursue rigorous academic fields</li> <li>- Navigating cultural biases and societal expectations</li> </ul> <p>2. Overcoming Barriers and Stereotypes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determination to challenge gender inequality and advocate for</li> </ul>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>women in STEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Refusing to be defined by societal limitations and pursuing passions unapologetically</li> <li>- Resilience in the face of obstacles and a steadfast commitment to academic goals</li> </ul> <p>3. Lack of Mentorship and Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Absence of female mentors and advisors to guide women in STEM</li> <li>- Limited access to networking opportunities and professional relationships</li> <li>- Feeling unsupported in navigating the complexities of male-dominated fields</li> </ul> <p>4. Discrimination and Bias in Advancement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Resistance and skepticism towards women's qualifications and leadership abilities</li> <li>- Unequal pay and benefits compared to male counterparts</li> <li>- Discouragement from pursuing higher-level positions due to perceived lack of opportunities</li> </ul> <p>5. Navigating Power Dynamics and Resentment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dealing with spousal resentment and undermining of women's success</li> <li>- Constant power imbalances and expectations to resign from career pursuits</li> <li>- Lack of support and guidance in managing interpersonal challenges</li> </ul> <p>6. Lack of Visible Role Models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty in imagining oneself in leadership roles due to the absence of women in such positions</li> <li>- Feeling discouraged from pursuing leadership opportunities due to the lack of female representation</li> <li>- Lack of inspiration and mentorship from successful women in leadership roles</li> </ul>
Early Academic Interest	<p>1. Familial Inspiration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Witnessing family members' health struggles and wanting to help</li> <li>- Desire to provide care and support for those in need</li> </ul> <p>2. Academic Dedication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Intense focus on core science subjects in college</li> <li>- Hands-on experience through hospital volunteering</li> </ul> <p>3. Overcoming Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perseverance through a demanding medical specialization program</li> <li>- Determination to succeed despite the difficulties</li> </ul> <p>4. Transformative Moments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experiencing a "lightbulb moment" that ignited a passion</li> <li>- Appreciating the elegance and power of mathematical concepts</li> </ul>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>5. Intellectual Breakthroughs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Solving a complex theorem that no one else could</li> <li>- Deriving a sense of accomplishment and deeper understanding</li> </ul> <p>6. Pursuit of Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Driven by a desire to delve deeper into the field</li> <li>- Motivated by the beauty and complexities of the subject matter</li> </ul>
Professional Relationships	<p>1. Networking Challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fewer opportunities for women to build professional connections</li> <li>- Difficulty accessing influential networks dominated by men</li> </ul> <p>2. Gender Pay Disparity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Persistent wage gaps between men and women in STEM fields</li> <li>- Unequal compensation for similar roles and responsibilities</li> </ul> <p>3. Lack of Female Mentors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scarcity of senior women to provide guidance and support</li> <li>- Challenges for women to find relatable mentors and role models</li> </ul> <p>4. Cultural and Social Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Societal norms and gender-based biases that shape women's experiences</li> <li>- Navigating the complexities of being a woman in a male-dominated field</li> </ul> <p>5. Visibility and Representation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, especially in STEM</li> <li>- Fewer opportunities for women to gain visibility and access to higher-level roles</li> </ul> <p>6. Leadership Advancement Barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fewer women progressing to senior leadership roles</li> <li>- Challenges in breaking through the glass ceiling in male-dominated hierarchies</li> </ul>
Personal Relationships	<p>1. Family Encouragement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supportive parents, especially mother, who encouraged academic and professional pursuits</li> <li>- Desire to emulate successful family members, such as a father with a PhD</li> </ul> <p>2. Overcoming Societal Expectations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facing skepticism and discouragement from family members about pursuing a career in a male-dominated field</li> <li>- Challenging societal norms and gender roles to pursue personal ambitions</li> </ul> <p>3. Mentorship and Role Models</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Receiving guidance and support from professors who recognized</li> </ul>

Code	Sub-codes
	<p>and nurtured academic potential</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seeking to inspire and empower the next generation of women in STEM through mentorship and advocacy</li> </ul> <p>4. Sense of Purpose and Impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Driven by a desire to make a difference and help others, such as addressing women's health issues</li> <li>- Motivated by personal experiences and a commitment to creating positive change in the community</li> </ul> <p>5. Professional Accomplishments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gaining recognition for strong work ethic and technical expertise</li> <li>- Contributing to innovative projects and collaborating with talented colleagues</li> </ul> <p>6. Community Belonging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Finding a sense of belonging and understanding through friendships and social connections</li> <li>- Feeling supported by the local community in pursuing personal and professional goals</li> </ul>
Empowerment	<p>1. Collective Empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sharing personal stories and experiences with other women</li> <li>- Discovering shared struggles and finding strength in community</li> <li>- Collaborating to challenge harmful stereotypes and inequities</li> </ul> <p>2. Individual Agency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Owning one's identity and choices in shaping womanhood</li> <li>- Embracing cultural/national identity and using it to advocate for rights</li> <li>- Resilience in the face of gender-based challenges and expectations</li> </ul> <p>3. Defying Conventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Empowerment through challenging the status quo</li> <li>- Courage to speak up and work for a more inclusive society</li> <li>- Asserting one's voice and presence in male-dominated spaces</li> </ul> <p>4. Intersectional Perspectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognizing diverse experiences of womanhood across contexts</li> <li>- Amplifying marginalized voices and experiences</li> <li>- Holistic understanding of gender identity and empowerment</li> </ul>

The data provided outlines code relations that correspond to the following different themes:

- a) Cultural and societal norms: Many participants spoke about the entrenched societal expectations that define gender roles in Jordan. For example, Participant 1 noted, “Even though we are highly educated, we are still expected to prioritize our families over our careers. It’s not easy to break away from that expectation.” This sentiment was echoed across interviews, highlighting how traditional gender roles shape women’s professional opportunities.
- b) Barriers to leadership: Another recurring theme was the difficulty in accessing leadership positions. Participants frequently mentioned the absence of female role models and the lack of mentorship opportunities. Participant 2 stated, “I don’t see many women in leadership roles in my field. It makes it hard to imagine myself in those positions.” Participant 4 also added: “A big challenge is that the higher up you go, the fewer women you see”.
- c) Regional instability and economic uncertainty: The general instability in the region was a significant challenge for participants. Participant 4 explained, “With the current situation, securing international collaborations or even new projects is almost impossible.” This theme reflected the broader geopolitical factors that limit professional opportunities for women in Jordan.
- d) Work-life balance and personal obligations: Participants also discussed the challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities, particularly in the context of Jordanian cultural expectations. Participant 3 said, “There’s always the expectation that as a woman, you will take care of the household first. Career comes second, no matter how educated you are.”

- e) Men feeling socially threatened by highly educated wives: A new theme emerged from participants described the societal challenges faced by women whose educational and social status surpasses that of their husbands. They highlighted how men may feel socially and emotionally threatened by having a wife who is more educated or socially higher in status, leading to tensions in both personal and professional life. Participant 4 shared, “My husband feels undermined when he realizes the extent to which I am more successful or educated than he is. This created a constant power imbalance at home, and as a man, he doesn’t know how to deal with it, so he constantly pushes back and asks me to resign.” This theme sheds light on the intersection of marriage dynamics and professional ambitions, where highly educated women may face not only societal resistance but also personal opposition from their spouses.

These themes provided a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural and structural barriers facing Jordanian women in their pursuit of professional advancement.

### **Discrepant Cases**

While most participants shared common experiences, there were some discrepant cases where participants had divergent perspectives. For example, one of the participants who worked in a leadership role felt that while societal barriers exist, she had managed to overcome them by building strong networks and pursuing international collaborations. She stated, “It’s not easy, but I’ve found ways to navigate the system by focusing on what I can control, like building my research portfolio and networking with colleagues abroad.” Discrepant cases like this were critical to the analysis, as they demonstrated that



while societal barriers are significant, individual agency and professional networks can sometimes mitigate these challenges. These cases were factored into the analysis by acknowledging the role of personal strategies in overcoming broader systemic issues.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The following section outlines the strategies implemented during the study to ensure trustworthiness in the findings. Trustworthiness was evaluated through four main criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Each criterion was addressed through specific strategies, some of which were adjusted during the study to respond to the challenges encountered in data collection and analysis.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the findings represent reality and whether the results are believable from the perspective of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several strategies were outlined in Chapter 3 to ensure credibility, including prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation, and member checking. Due to the challenges posed by regional instability and the shift to remote interviews, the time spent with participants was somewhat reduced from what was originally planned. However, efforts were made to ensure that each interview allowed sufficient time for participants to reflect on their experiences and elaborate on their perspectives. This study used two forms of data collection - semistructured interviews and SenseMaker narratives - which provided multiple perspectives on the research question. The use of these two methods allowed for cross-verification of the data. For example, themes that emerged in the SenseMaker narratives, such as the impact of

societal norms on career progression, were corroborated by the in-depth interviews. After the initial coding of the interview data, a member checking process was implemented. Summaries of the findings were shared with the participants to verify that their views were accurately represented. Participants provided feedback on the summaries and adjustments were made to ensure that their perspective was authentically captured. These strategies collectively strengthened the credibility of the findings, despite adjustments due to the unforeseen challenges encountered during the data collection phase.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of this study can be applied to other contexts. It is not the responsibility of the researcher to ensure that findings are applicable to all contexts, but to provide enough detail for others to determine if the findings may be applicable to their context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A key strategy used to support transferability was providing a rich, detailed description of the participants' backgrounds and the context in which the study took place. Detailed demographic data were collected, and participants' personal and professional experiences were thoroughly explored during the interviews. This allows future researchers or practitioners to assess whether the findings can be transferred to other settings, particularly for highly educated women in other Middle Eastern or conflict-affected countries. The study specifically highlighted the regional instability in the Middle East, and how these conditions influence women's access to the labor market. By situating the findings within this specific socio-political context, the study offers insights that can be transferable to other regions experiencing similar instability. Therefore, the combination

of thick description and the attention to the regional and cultural context allows the findings to be transferable to similar studies on gender, education, and labor market access in other settings.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the consistency of the research process and whether the study could be repeated with the same results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In Chapter 3, strategies such as audit trails, detailed documentation of the research process, and peer review were outlined to ensure dependability. To that extent, an audit trail was maintained throughout the research process, which documented every stage of the data collection, coding, and analysis. Notes on the interviews, the rationale behind coding decisions, and reflections on how themes were developed were kept in a secure research journal. This allowed for an external review of the process, ensuring that the data were handled systematically and consistently. Regular peer debriefing sessions were conducted with a fellow researcher to discuss the coding process and emerging themes. This peer review process helped to maintain objectivity and ensure that the analysis was aligned with the research questions. No discrepancies or biases were identified during these sessions. The switch to remote data collection due to regional instability introduced some inconsistencies, particularly in the ability to build rapport with participants. However, these inconsistencies were mitigated through detailed follow-up interviews and triangulation between the different data sources, ensuring that the dependability of the study remained intact. Therefore, the combination of an audit trail and peer review processes helped ensure the dependability of the study, making it possible for other

researchers to follow the same steps and potentially replicate the study in different contexts.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants' responses rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure confirmability, the study employed several strategies, including reflexive journaling, triangulation, and external audits. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to record personal reflections, decisions made during the research process, and potential biases that could influence the data interpretation. This journal served as a tool to maintain self-awareness and minimize researcher bias. The use of both SenseMaker narratives and semistructured interviews allowed for cross-verification of the data, reducing the likelihood that the findings were influenced by any one method or interpretation. The combination of these methods provided a fuller picture of the participants' experiences and ensured that the results were grounded in the data. Additionally, an external audit of the data analysis process was conducted by a research advisor, who reviewed the coding process, theme development, and overall analysis to ensure objectivity. The audit confirmed that the findings were consistent with the data and that no researcher bias was present. Together, these strategies ensured that the findings were driven by the participants' experiences and reflections, not the preconceived notions of the researcher.

## **Results**

This section presents the findings of the study, addressing each research question using data from both the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and SenseMaker, supported by tables, figures, and percentages. The MAXQDA analysis reveals critical themes relating to gendered barriers, societal expectations, and the influence of regional instability on the labor market access of highly educated Jordanian women. The research questions are explored individually, with relevant participant quotes to substantiate each finding. Discrepant cases and nonconforming data are also discussed to provide a comprehensive overview of the results.

### **Narrative Analysis and Identified Themes**

The combination of thematic coding, discourse and sentiment analysis, and the use of MAXQDA provided a robust framework for the analysis of interview data. These methods enabled a detailed and systematic exploration of the data, while also allowing for the identification of deeper cultural and social dynamics that influence women's labor market participation. The Table below reflects the frequent use of each term as highlighted in both the SenseMaker narratives and KII interviews.

**Table 6***Frequency of Terms Used*

<b>Term</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Sense Maker</b>	<b>Sense Maker</b>	<b>Sense Maker</b>	<b>Sense Maker</b>	<b>Part. 1 KII</b>	<b>Part. 2 KII</b>	<b>Part. 3 KII</b>	<b>Part. 4 KII</b>
Woman	203	100.0 0	33	14	11	36	13	34	33	29
Challenge	76	100.0 0	9	14	9	9	13	9	7	6
Gender Discrimination	70	100.0 0	15	12	4	3	10	17	6	3
Family Obligations	44	100.0 0	5	2	7	10	4	7	6	3
Patriarchal	27	75.00	2	0	1	0	6	7	2	9
Societal Expectation	27	75.00	3	0	4	10	3	3	1	3
Gender Bias	26	87.50	4	6	2	2	3	5	1	2
Gender Stereotype	22	87.50	4	0	5	6	3	2	1	1
Identity	20	25.00	0	0	0	10	2	3	4	1
Barrier	13	75.00	1	2	2	0	3	4	0	1
Change	13	75.00	1	0	0	1	2	3	2	4
Male- Dominated	12	75.00	4	2	1	3	0	1	0	1
Instability	11	25.00	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	7
Pressure	8	75.00	1	0	1	1	1	0	1	3
War	7	25.00	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	5
Covid-19	6	37.50	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2
Gender Disparity	6	37.50	1	2	0	0	0	3	0	0

*Note.* From MAXDQA Results, 2024.

### ***Theme 1: Gender Stereotypes***

Research Question 1: What are the key barriers preventing highly educated women from accessing leadership positions in Jordan's labor market? One of the main barriers identified was the persistence of gender stereotypes and societal expectations that women should prioritize family over career. Participants discussed how these norms hinder women's progress, particularly in leadership roles. Participant 1 stated: "There's still this idea that women should focus on their families and not on advancing in their careers. Even though I have a Ph.D., there are always these subtle signals that my work isn't as important as a man's". Participant 2 described: "As a highly educated woman, it's frustrating because there's always this underlying assumption that my family should come first, even when I'm fully qualified to lead.". Similarly, Participant 4 highlighted how cultural expectations in STEM fields often result in fewer women pursuing leadership roles: "In my field, you don't see many women in leadership roles. There's this expectation that men should be in charge, and it creates barriers for women to even apply for those positions". From the narratives and discourse analysis, the majority of respondents highlighted family obligations as a critical factor influencing their career decisions. As shown in Table 5, gender stereotypes was mentioned 87,5% in women's narratives as a critical barrier to leadership. Additionally, all participants emphasized the importance of family obligations, which further limits women's professional mobility. Only 12.5% mentioned the lack of female role models as a significant factor.

**Table 7***Factors Influencing Career Decisions*

Factors	Times Mentioned	Percentage
Gender Stereotypes	22	87,5%
Family Obligations	44	100%
Lack of Role Models	1	12,5%

*Note.* From MAXDQA Results, 2024.

However, Participant 3 offered a slightly different perspective, suggesting that perseverance and self-advocacy could help women break through these barriers: “I’ve found that being persistent and making myself visible has helped me overcome societal expectations.”

***Theme 2: Institutional Biases***

Several participants discussed the institutional biases that exist within the academic sector, which make it harder for women to access leadership roles. These biases manifest in the form of unequal opportunities, lack of mentorship, and limited professional development for women. These obstacles were particularly prevalent in male-dominated fields such as STEM, where women are often not considered for leadership roles. Participants explained how patriarchal structures hinder women's progression to leadership roles, even when women are equally or more qualified than their male counterparts. Participant 2 shared: “It’s not about qualifications; it’s about who gets seen as leadership material. And in most cases, men are seen as more capable, even when they’re not.” Participant 2 elaborated on these barriers within academia: “There are systemic issues in the way leadership roles are filled. Women aren’t always considered for these positions, and it’s hard to climb the ladder when you don’t have the



same support as men”. Participant 3 shared her experience of running for a leadership position in a hospital, where she encountered overt gender bias from her male colleagues: “Some of my male colleagues said women aren’t good leaders. It’s a really old-fashioned mindset, but it’s still there, and it can stop you from advancing no matter how qualified you are”. As shown in Table 7, the perceived barriers to leadership show the percentage of responses given to each category.

**Table 8**

*Perceived Barriers to Leadership*

Barrier	Times Mentioned	Percentage
Gender Stereotypes	22	87,5%
Family Obligations	44	100%
Gender Discrimination	70	100%
Societal Expectations	27	75%

*Note.* From MAXDQA Results, 2024.

***Theme 3: Work-Life Balance Struggles***

Many participants discussed the difficulty of balancing work and family life. The expectation that women should manage both their careers and their families was a recurring theme, with participants describing how this dual responsibility affects their professional progress. Participants found it challenging to manage both professional and family obligations, particularly in a society that places high expectations on women’s caregiving roles. Some participants also mentioned that despite societal pressures, they need to continue working due to financial necessity. Participant 1 shared: “It’s a constant juggling act between work and home life. My husband even suggests I should quit my job to focus on the family, but we need the money.” All participants described juggling work and family responsibilities as a significant challenge, while 37.5% mentioned the

financial necessity of continuing to work. The lack of societal and organizational support for women was also a factor, though mentioned by fewer participants.

***Theme 4: Need for Gender-Sensitive Policies and Support Structures***

When asked about the strategies that can be implemented to support women’s access to leadership roles in the academia, and particularly in the STEM field in Jordan, participants discussed the importance of policy reforms and support structures such as mentorship programs and flexible work arrangements. Many participants called for gender-sensitive policies that address work-life balance issues, such as childcare services and flexible working hours. Mentorship programs were highlighted as crucial for creating pathways for women to advance into leadership positions. Participant 2 stated: “We need policies that allow women to balance family life and career. More flexible work hours, better childcare, and structured mentorship programs would make a big difference.” As shown in Table 8, 50% of the participants emphasized the need for gender-sensitive policies, particularly those related to flexible work arrangements and childcare. Both mentorship programs and flexible work arrangements were mentioned by 25% of participants, indicating that structural support systems are necessary to foster women’s professional growth.

**Table 9**

*Suggested Strategies for Supporting Women’s Leadership*

Strategy	Times Mentioned	Percentage
Gender-Sensitive Policies	4	50%
Flexible Work Arrangements	2	25%
Mentorship Programs	2	25%

*Note.* From Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) Results, 2024.

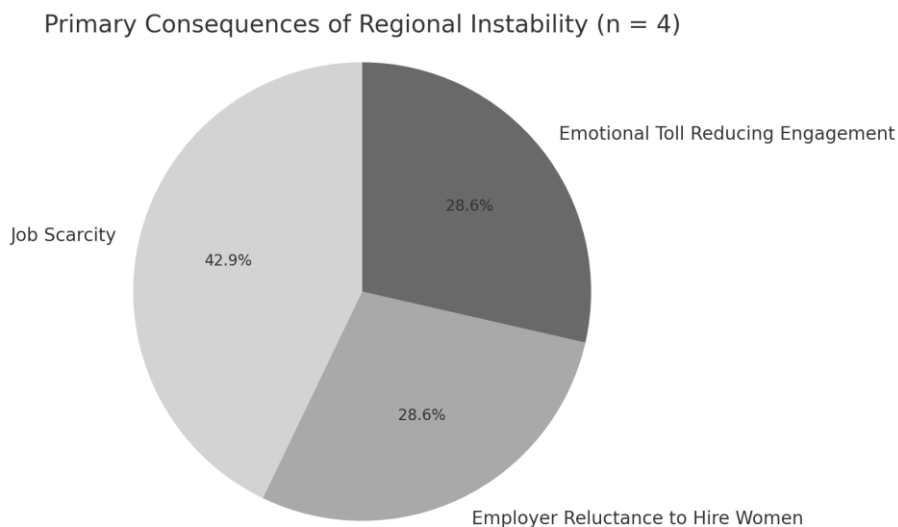
***Theme 5: Job Scarcity Due to Regional Instability***

Many participants revealed that COVID-19 and the regional instability significantly affect women's access to job opportunities. They discussed how conflict in the broader Middle East has led to job scarcity and increased competition for available positions, with men often being prioritized. Participants highlighted how the unstable economic situation reduces the number of available jobs and the extent to which employers are less likely to hire women due to concerns about family responsibilities during times of crisis. Participant 4 explained: "The regional conflict has had a huge impact. Jobs are hard to come by, and men are often given priority when positions open up because employers assume women will need more flexibility." Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants (42.9%) identified job scarcity as the primary consequence of regional instability. 28.6% of respondents emphasized that employers are less likely to hire women, particularly during times of crisis, due to assumptions about women's family obligations. Another 28.6% mentioned the emotional toll of the instability, which reduces their ability to remain professionally engaged.

**Figure 3**

*Primary Consequences of Regional Instability on Jordanian's Women Career*

*Advancement*



*Note.* From Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) Results, 2024.

### ***Theme 6: The Impact of Marital Dynamics on Women's Career Advancement***

A distinctive and relatively underexplored theme that emerged from the Key Informant Interviews is the impact of marital dynamics on women's ability to advance in their careers. Specifically, the sense of social and emotional threat felt by men when their wives achieve a higher social or educational status was highlighted as a factor affecting women's career trajectories. This dynamic, described in detail by Participant 4, sheds light on how traditional gender roles and marital relationships can create barriers to women's professional growth. Participants noted that, in some cases, men feel socially and emotionally threatened by their wives' professional success, which creates tensions within the marriage. This dynamic has profound implications for women's ability to pursue leadership positions or advanced career opportunities, as it can lead to overt or covert forms of discouragement, emotional conflict, or even explicit resistance from their spouses.

**Psychological and Social Threat to Men.** The perception that men must occupy the dominant role within the household remains prevalent in many parts of Jordanian society. When women surpass their husbands in terms of education or career advancement, it can disrupt traditional marital power dynamics. This perceived power imbalance often leads to feelings of inadequacy or threat on the part of the husband, which in turn manifests in various ways that undermine the woman's professional aspirations. Participant 4 described how her husband's response to her career progression impacted her: "He became more distant when I started earning more and getting recognition at work. It wasn't something he ever said directly, but it was clear that he felt undermined by my achievements."

**Subtle Forms of Resistance and Discouragement.** Rather than outright opposition, many participants noted that the resistance they faced from their husbands was subtle. This could include behaviors such as emotional withdrawal, passive-aggressive comments, or even decreased support for household and caregiving responsibilities. In many cases, this dynamic placed additional stress on the woman, who found herself having to manage both career pressures and emotional tension at home. Participant 1 mentioned how her husband's reactions to her career progression added an emotional burden: "He wouldn't directly stop me from advancing in my job, but the emotional toll was heavy. I had to juggle my success at work with ensuring that things at home didn't fall apart. He didn't seem happy for me."

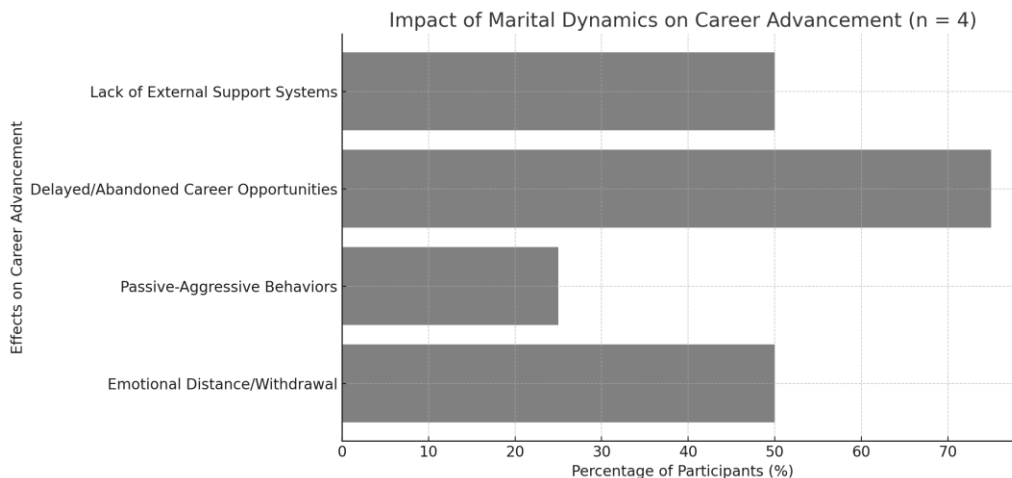
**Effects on Career Decisions and Progression.** This dynamic of marital tension over career success can lead women to make significant compromises in their

professional lives. One of the participants shared that she had either delayed or completely abandoned leadership opportunities to preserve marital harmony. These decisions were often made out of a sense of duty or emotional pressure, rather than a lack of ambition. Participant 2 discussed how she turned down a promotion to maintain balance in her marriage: “I was offered a leadership position, but I turned it down. I knew that accepting it would cause problems at home, and at the end of the day, I just didn’t want to deal with that conflict.”

**The Role of Patriarchal Norms.** This theme connects with the broader context of patriarchal norms in Jordan, where men are often seen as the primary breadwinners and heads of the household. These societal expectations can exacerbate the sense of threat that men feel when their wives surpass them in professional success. Patriarchy reinforces the idea that a man’s status is tied to his professional and social standing, and when a woman challenges that by succeeding, it can be perceived as an erosion of the man’s authority. This perspective was supported by Participant 3, who noted: “There’s this unspoken rule in our society that men should be the ones in charge, especially when it comes to income and status. When that changes, it’s like an invisible pressure that weighs on both of us.”

**Limited Support Systems for Professional Women.** In addition to the emotional and psychological impact of these dynamics, one participant highlighted the lack of external support systems that could help women navigate these marital challenges. In the absence of counseling or support from extended family or community members, women often found themselves alone in dealing with the emotional fallout

from their spouses' discomfort. This isolation further compounded the pressures they faced in balancing work and home life. Participant 4 shared: “I didn’t have anyone to talk to about it. There’s this expectation that you’ll just figure it out, but I didn’t know how to deal with his resentment over my career.” Figure 3 shows that 75% of participants indicated that marital dynamics led them to delay or abandon career opportunities, suggesting that the impact of spousal reactions to professional success is a significant barrier to women’s career advancement. 50% of participants noted emotional distance and the lack of support systems, highlighting the personal and professional isolation experienced by women as they try to navigate both career advancement and marital harmony, and 25% of participants experienced passive-aggressive behaviors from their spouses, further reflecting the subtle, yet damaging ways in which marital dynamics can undermine professional growth.

**Figure 4***Impact of Marital Dynamics on Jordanian's Women Career Advancement***SenseMaker Results: Insights Beyond the Narratives**

This section provides an analysis of the data collected from the SenseMaker platform that was not explicitly discussed in the Key Informant Interviews. In SenseMaker, participants are asked to share a story related to the topic in question. The prompt is intentionally open-ended and unbiased, allowing participants the freedom to describe their experiences without being directed toward a specific outcome. This approach minimizes the influence of the researcher's assumptions and can reveal insights that might be missed by traditional questionnaires.

After data collection, the narratives were combined with triads and dyads, offering a comprehensive view of the topic. Unlike typical tools where analyzing text responses can be time-consuming and complex, SenseMaker provides a way to visualize the narratives. The use of triads and dyads helps create diagrams based on participant input, allowing us to easily identify different dimensions of the stories and compare them, contributing to a more complete understanding. Additionally, when participants analyze



their stories, data from triads and dyads can reveal more to researchers than the narrative alone. This type of analysis highlights how participants truly feel about the events they describe. This is especially useful when participants use sarcasm or ambiguous language, as the additional data can help clarify key aspects of the stories. These analyses also indicate which parts of the story are most significant to the participant. For example, a participant wrote a story with an overall miserable tone, but concluded with a hopeful statement. Although it might seem that the story's main message was one of despair, the participant's triad data aligned more with the final hopeful sentiment. This suggests that feelings of hope were stronger than those of dread, changing how we interpret the story.

By examining the dyads, triads, and other signifiers, this section identified additional themes and insights related to women's career experiences in Jordan, particularly focusing on how these patterns further illuminate the systemic challenges women face. These findings help supplement the qualitative insights from the narratives by providing patterns and trends from the broader dataset. By examining the triads and dyads, we can better understand how participants perceive their professional journeys, societal pressures, and institutional barriers through their voices and own narratives.

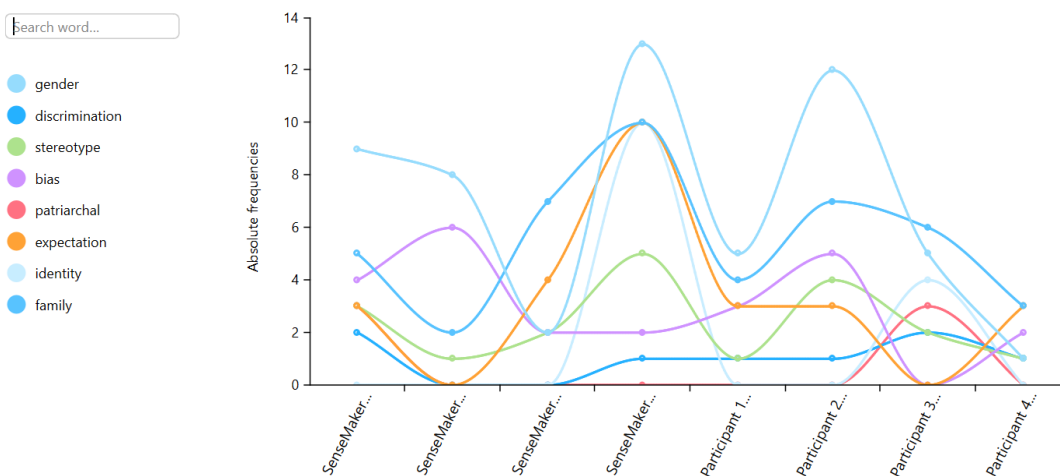
### ***Story Collection and Narrative Prompts***

I initiated my story collection between January 2024 and October 2024. The SenseMaker link was distributed via email to 62 Jordanian women working in STEM fields, adhering to our participant selection criteria. To maximize participation, I followed up with reminder emails, shared the study flyer on social media platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook, and via the Jordanian Ministry of Education to advertise the

study. Ultimately, I received 4 responses. The questionnaire aimed to gather micro-narratives, prompting participants with a first narrative: *Share an experience that helped you to understand your identity as a woman*. This analysis focuses on the narratives of Jordanian women who shared their personal experiences that helped shape their identity as women. Through discourse analysis, I examine recurring themes such as gender expectations, cultural norms, family influences, personal ambitions, and professional challenges. Additionally, qualitative insights from the discourse allow for a deeper understanding of how these women navigate their identity in a patriarchal society.

### ***Shaping Female Identity in a Patriarchal Society***

The narratives reveal that gender expectations and societal stereotypes play a significant role in shaping women's identity. Participants stated that women in Jordan are made aware of the gendered roles they are expected to play, which often limit their aspirations and choices. This experience speaks to how deeply ingrained societal norms influence women's sense of self. The discourse reflects the constant negotiation between personal ambitions and societal expectations. Figure 4 shows the most frequent words appearing in the narratives include *expectations*, *gender*, and *family* highlighting the ongoing struggle women face in overcoming family and societal limitations. Over 55% of the interviewed women indicated that they struggle with gender stereotypes, which influence their identity. Despite excelling academically or professionally, many women face skepticism or discouragement solely due to their gender.

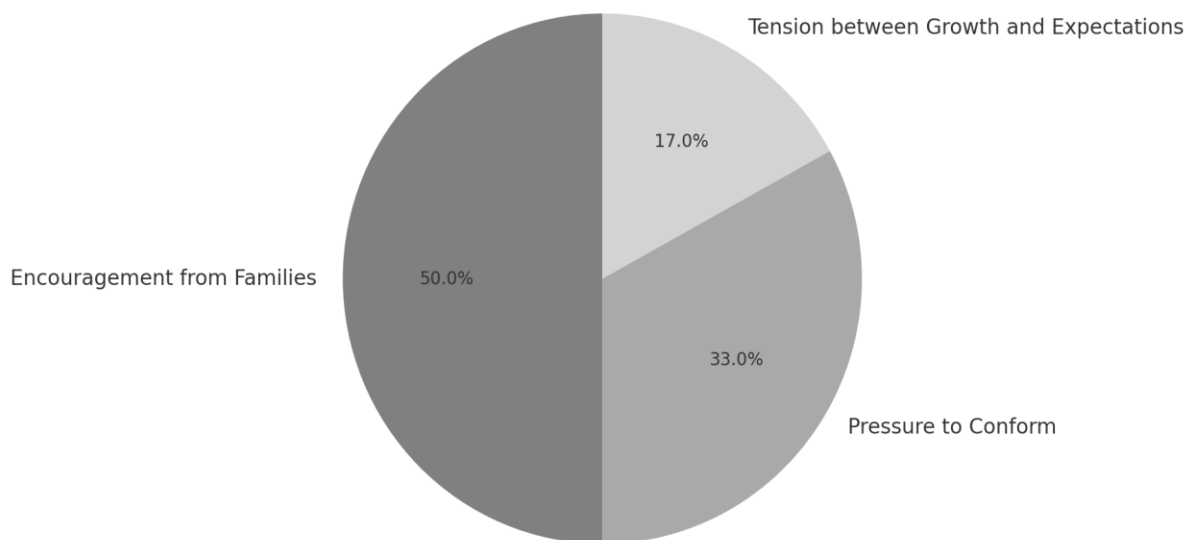
**Figure 5***Word Trends: Gender Expectations and Stereotypes*

*Note.* From MAXQDA Results, 2024.

The influence of family dynamics on shaping identity is another prevalent theme. Participants often discussed the expectations placed upon them by family members, such as balancing family life with professional aspirations. Here, family plays a dual role: both as a source of support during the early education phase and as a vehicle for reinforcing societal expectations. The tension between familial obligations and personal ambition is central to many women's experiences. Figure 5 shows that while 50% of participants received encouragement from their families regarding education and career, 33% reported feeling pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, including marriage and motherhood. This tension between personal growth and familial expectations contributes to shaping their identity as women.

**Figure 6***Participants' Experience on Education, Career, and Gender Roles*

Participants' Experiences on Education, Career, and Gender Roles (n = 4)



The intersection between cultural traditions and societal norms plays a crucial role in how women understand their place in society. Participants frequently noted the challenges they face in balancing modern aspirations with traditional gender roles. Participant 3 noted: “Jordanian society has deep-rooted traditions that shape the roles and expectations of women. These traditions often emphasize the importance of family, honor, and modesty. Navigating between these traditions and my career ambitions has been a constant challenge”. Terms such as *traditions*, *honor*, *family*, and *modesty*, reflecting the deep-seated cultural expectations placed on women were often used by participants. These norms often dictate the boundaries within which women must operate. Participants also discussed their experiences navigating male-dominated fields and the professional biases they face, particularly in STEM and academia. These professional challenges further influence their identity as women striving for recognition in a

patriarchal system. One of the participants mentioned that: “Despite excelling academically in mathematics, I was met with skepticism and discouragement simply because of my gender. It highlighted the gender biases that women face in my community and made me realize that I would need to fight for recognition.” This narrative illustrates the gender biases women encounter in their careers and how these challenges shape their understanding of their identity as professionals and women.

### *Navigating Educational and Professional Identity*

A second prompt was asked to participants to gather narratives describing experiences in their educational journeys and how these moments influenced their decisions to pursue advanced degrees and professional success. The prompt asked to: describe a key experience from the educational journey and how the participant arrived at the current level. The discourse analysis uncovers key themes such as personal passion, gender stereotypes, support from family and mentors, and perseverance in the face of societal expectations. The analysis also explores how these themes intersect with identity and aspirations.

The most prominent theme in the narratives is overcoming societal and gender-based stereotypes. Jordanian women pursuing advanced degrees, particularly in male-dominated fields such as STEM, often face skepticism from society. However, their passion and determination enable them to challenge these expectations. One of the participants stated that: “Growing up in Jordan, I faced various societal pressures and expectations that could have deterred me from pursuing higher education, particularly in a field like mathematics. People questioned why a woman would need to study something

so rigorous.” This experience reflects the pervasive societal belief that women are less suited to demanding academic fields. Women in these narratives often feel the need to confront and defy these gender norms in order to succeed academically. Another significant theme is the role of family support in shaping the educational journey. Many women noted that their families, particularly their parents, played a key role in encouraging them to pursue higher education and break through societal barriers. 50% of participants identified parental encouragement as a key factor in their academic success, while 30% mentioned mentorship from family members. 20% cited emotional support, underscoring the importance of family in both fostering ambition and offering guidance.

Perseverance and resilience were central to the women’s narratives. Whether facing academic challenges, societal pressures, or gender biases, participants demonstrated unwavering determination to succeed and achieve their goals in STEM and academia. Participant 2 mentioned: “Despite the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated field like mathematics, I remained steadfast in my determination to excel academically. My participation in research projects and internships helped me gain hands-on experience and fueled my passion.” This narrative exemplifies how resilience in the face of obstacles, such as lack of representation and bias, has been a driving force for many women in STEM. Key words from this theme include *determination*, *resilience*, *passion*, and *challenges*, reflecting the focus on overcoming barriers and pushing forward despite adversity.

### **Analysis of Triads and Dyads from SenseMaker Data**

In the online questionnaire, participants were asked to reflect on their own experiences using the triads, dyads, and stones. A triad consists of a triangle where each corner represents a different concept or factor. Participants are asked to place a point (or drag a ball) anywhere within the triangle to reflect their position between the three concepts. If their experience strongly aligns with one concept, they will place the point near that corner. If it reflects a balance between two or all three, they can place the point somewhere between the relevant corners. Triads provide a way to capture and visualize the complexity of human experiences and perspectives by allowing for a range of responses instead of simple binary or scaled answers. Dyads result in a straight-line graph where participant responses are distributed along a continuum between two concepts. These are useful for understanding how participants balance or prioritize one factor over another. In the SenseMaker narrative-based data collection tool, stones are another method used to gather participant input in a flexible and intuitive way. Like triads and dyads, stones allow participants to reflect on their experiences and to arrange concepts freely, representing the relationships between different ideas. The stones are highly flexible and are used to capture complex, subjective experiences without constraining the participant to a specific structure.

#### ***Money/Livelihood vs. Career Satisfaction vs. Family Obligations***

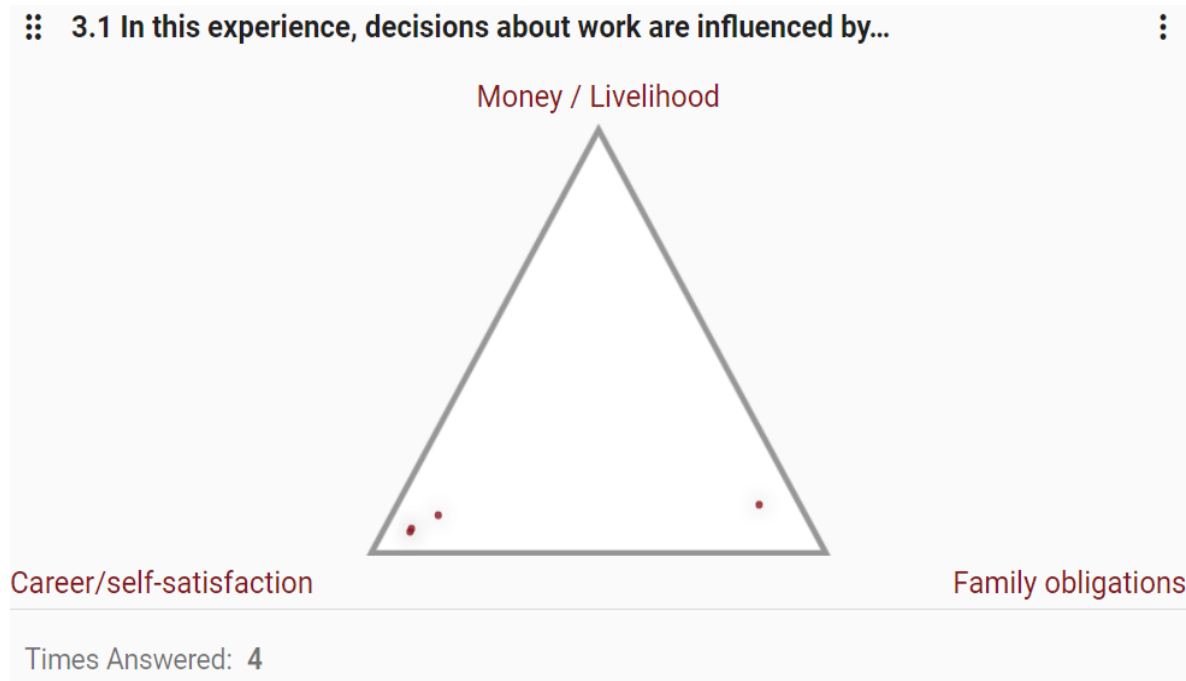
This triad explores priorities between financial needs, career satisfaction, and family responsibilities. Participants positioned their experiences within this framework, providing insights into how women navigate these competing priorities. Figure 6 shows

that 75% of participants placed a significant focus on wanting to achieve career satisfaction showing that despite societal pressures, personal fulfillment in one's career is still a central goal for many women. 25% emphasized family obligations, reflecting the deep cultural expectations around women's roles in the household. Financial stability is less of a motivator compared to balancing family and career aspirations.



**Figure 7**

*Money/Livelihood vs. Career Satisfaction vs. Family Obligations*

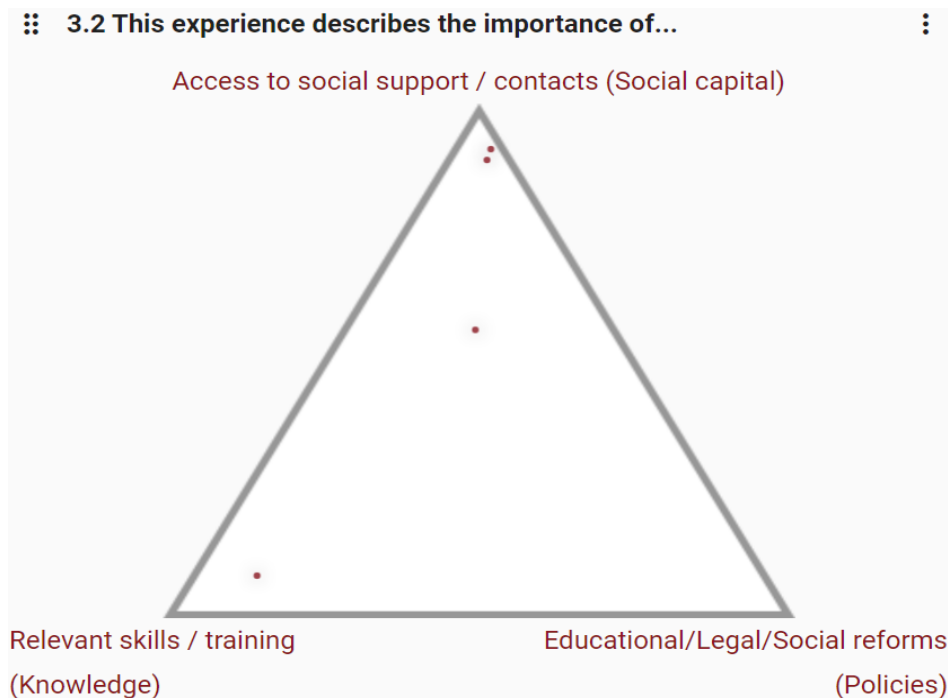


***Knowledge and Capability vs. Social Capital vs. Policy Reforms***

The following triad examines how participants view the importance of knowledge and skills, social capital, and educational and policy reforms in ensuring a successful professional journey. Figure 7 shows that 50% of participants pointed to social capital, indicating that access to social support is an important factor in their careers. 25% emphasized knowledge and capability, suggesting that their professional success is primarily driven by their expertise and competence while the remaining 25% focused on a combination of skills, educational reforms, and social standing in determining career success.

**Figure 8**

*Distribution of Knowledge and Capability vs. Social Capital vs. Policy Reform*



### ***Perceptions of The Workplace Environments***

In the SenseMaker tool, dyads responses are plotted along a line, showing the extent to which participants favor one factor over another. Figure 8 explores participants' perceptions of their workplace environments, ranging from supportive to oppressive. 50% of participants described their workplaces as oppressive or unhealthy, indicating a widespread perception of workplace challenges such as gender biases or lack of support. 25% of participants noted supportive work environments, showing that there are spaces where women feel empowered and encouraged. As such, a significant portion of women in STEM feel their work environments are oppressive, which could be attributed to

gender biases, lack of female representation in leadership roles, or cultural expectations that limit women's professional growth.

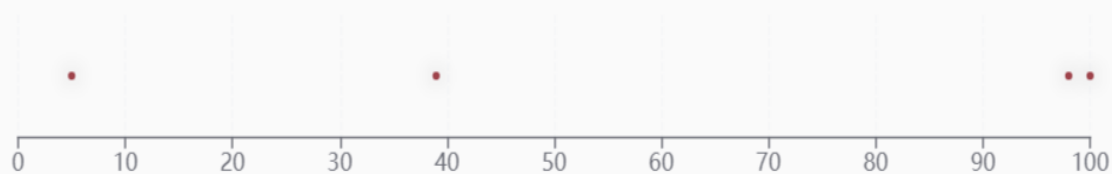
### Figure 9

#### *Workplace Environment Perceptions*

##### 3.6 The atmosphere at the workplace is...

Supportive/ Healthy

Oppressive/ Unhealthy



Times Answered: 4

#### *Work-Life Integration vs. Work-Life Conflict*

Another dyad assessed whether women experience their professional and personal lives as integrated or in conflict. 75% of participants expressed feelings of work-life conflict, highlighting the difficulty women face in balancing their professional ambitions with family obligations. Only 25% felt they had successfully achieved work-life integration, underscoring how rare it is for women to balance these two aspects of life without tension. There is, therefore, a strong sense of work-life conflict among Jordanian women, which likely stems from the traditional expectations placed on them to prioritize family over career.

#### *Career Advancement vs. Career Stagnation*

75% of participants reported experiencing career stagnation, reflecting the structural, cultural, and current regional challenges that prevent women from advancing

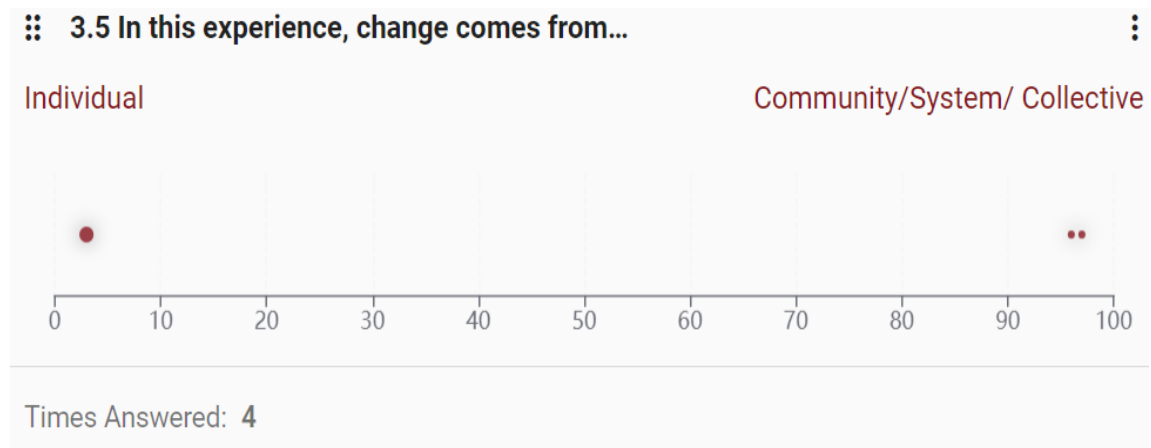
into leadership roles or higher positions. 25% of participants felt they were experiencing career advancement, which suggests that while many women are facing barriers, a small portion is still progressing in their fields. Therefore, career stagnation is a prominent issue for women in STEM, as many feel blocked from advancing due to both institutional biases and societal expectations. This is being further exacerbated by the current situation in the MENA region.

### *Change as Individual vs. Change as Collective*

Participants were asked whether they perceive change in their professional lives as an individual effort or something that happens at a community or systemic level. Figure 9 shows that 50% of participants see change as a result of individual actions, indicating that many women feel they are responsible for creating their own opportunities and overcoming barriers. The remaining 50% believed that collective or systemic changes are necessary for real progress, reflecting the need for broader institutional reforms to support women's advancement. Therefore, while women acknowledge the importance of individual resilience and action, there is also a recognition that systemic change is needed to address the structural barriers they face.

**Figure 10**

*Jordanian's Women Perception of Change in their Professional Lives*



### **Sentiment Analysis of Code Relations**

The data provided outlined code relations that correspond to different themes such as regional conflict, lack of mentorship, work-life balance, and gender identity.

Sentiments associated with these codes were analyzed through MAXQDA and categorized into five types: Positive, Slightly Positive, Neutral, Slightly Negative, and Negative. Below is a breakdown of the main findings from the code relations, highlighting key patterns and relationships between the codes and the sentiments expressed by the participants.

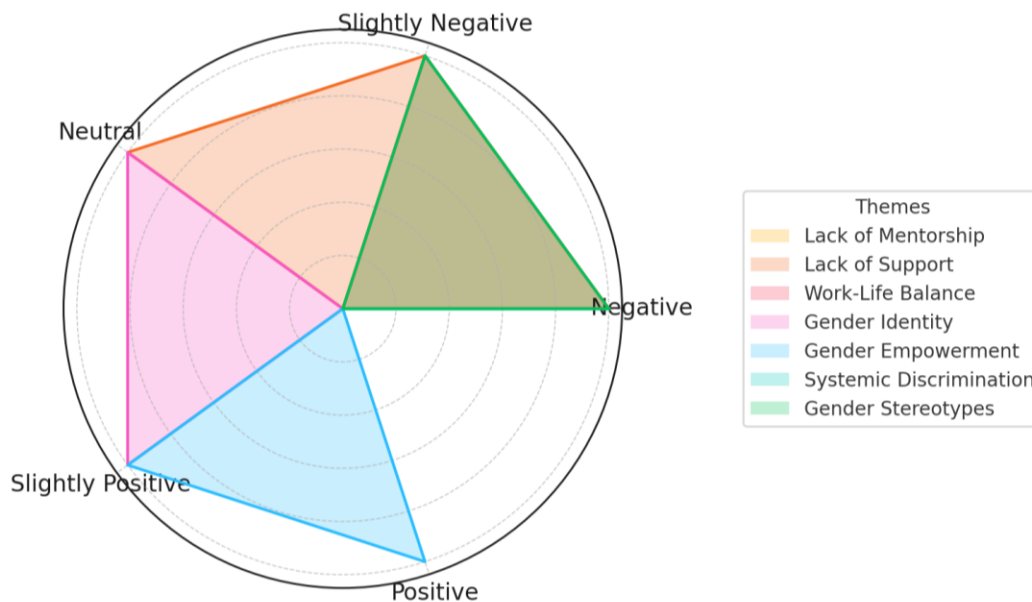
### **Key Patterns and Related Sentiments**

The radar chart in figure 10 visualizes the distribution of sentiments across different themes related to women's experiences, such as lack of mentorship, lack of support, work-life balance, gender identity, gender empowerment, systemic discrimination, and gender stereotypes. Each theme is represented by a separate polygon, showing how

sentiments vary for each. The chart is followed by a detailed analysis, providing a comprehensive view of the varying emotional responses across the themes.

**Figure 11**

*Sentiment Distribution of Jordanian Women Across Themes*



- Lack of Mentorship is highly associated with negative and slightly negative sentiments. There were frequent mentions of institutional failures in providing adequate mentorship opportunities for women, particularly in fields such as STEM, where female role models are scarce.
- Lack of Support shows similar patterns, with neutral to slightly negative sentiment. Participants expressed frustration at the systemic barriers that prevent women from advancing in their careers due to inadequate organizational support and mentorship structures.
- Discussions surrounding work-life balance and family obligations were largely associated with negative and slightly negative sentiments. Many participants

indicated that balancing family duties with professional goals is a persistent barrier, especially when compounded by cultural expectations that women prioritize family responsibilities.

- d) A few mentions of slightly positive sentiments suggest that some participants found ways to manage both family and career, possibly with support systems that eased these challenges.
- e) The Gender Identity code elicited a mixture of neutral and slightly positive sentiments. Participants often acknowledged the difficulties associated with being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated field but also expressed feelings of empowerment when they were able to challenge societal expectations.
- f) Gender Empowerment featured stories of women overcoming barriers, and though the sentiment was not strongly positive, it reflects an emerging sense of accomplishment and advocacy for gender equality.
- g) Systemic Discrimination was overwhelmingly associated with negative sentiments, particularly in how institutionalized gender biases limit opportunities for women. Participants spoke about being denied promotions and facing discriminatory hiring practices that favored male candidates.
- h) Gender Stereotypes similarly carried slightly negative to negative sentiments, with frequent references to societal expectations that women should not pursue leadership roles or should focus on family over career.

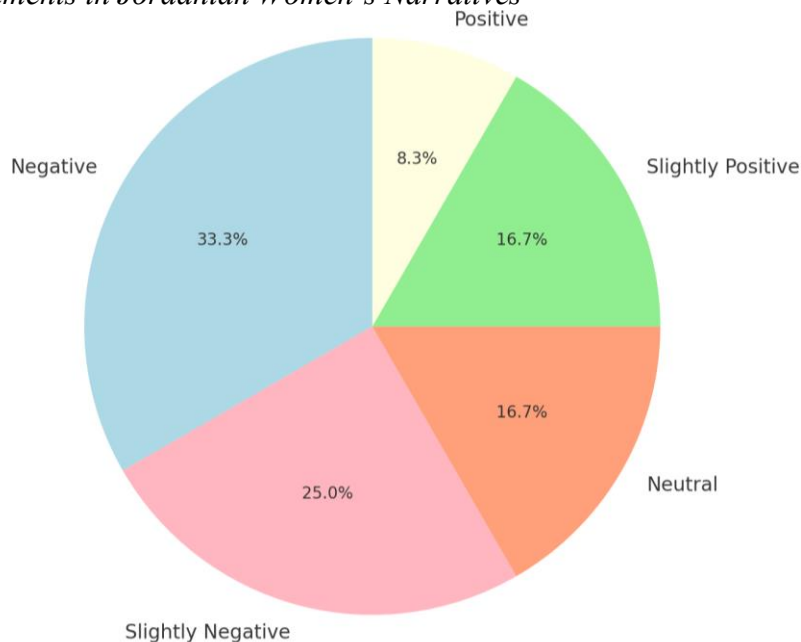
Overall, the prevailing sentiment in women's narratives was predominantly negative.

Figure 11 shows that 58.3% of the interviewees expressed negative to slightly negative

emotions regarding most of the themes discussed. Commonly used terms included *frustration*, *sadness*, and *unhappiness*, reflecting the overall discontent and dissatisfaction shared by the participants.

**Figure 12**

*Prevailing Sentiments in Jordanian Women's Narratives*



- i) Men feeling undermined also showed strong links to gender stereotypes, as interviewees expressed discomfort when their partners did not seem to support their professional success or their acceptance of leadership positions, contributing to negative dynamics in the personal and family life.
- j) Institutional barriers, such as gender bias and lack of formal leadership roles for women, were tied to both neutral and slightly negative sentiments. While some participants remained neutral when discussing their professional challenges,



others expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clear pathways for career advancement.

- k) The code Driving Change had a notable association with slightly positive sentiments, as participants discussed efforts to break through barriers and advocate for gender equality. This sentiment reflects a growing movement among women to take active roles in shifting the cultural and institutional narratives surrounding women's labor market participation.
- l) One participant maintained a neutral stance, particularly when discussing institutional barriers. They acknowledged the presence of challenges but seemed to accept them as part of the environment, without expressing significant emotional responses either way.

The sentiment analysis and code relations reveal a complex interplay between the themes being discussed and the emotions these generate. While negative sentiments are pervasive, particularly in relation to institutional barriers and societal expectations, there is a growing sense of empowerment among women who are actively driving change. This duality of negative experiences and positive responses highlights the tension between the obstacles women face and their resilience in overcoming them. The data suggests that while systemic barriers remain, there is a path forward for women who seek to challenge the status quo, though they often do so in the face of significant opposition. Addressing these barriers through mentorship, institutional reforms, and societal shifts is crucial for reducing the negative experiences associated with gender discrimination and enhancing opportunities for women's full participation in the Jordanian labor market.

### Summary

In Chapter 4, the findings addressed the central research question concerning the perceptions of educated Jordanian women on the discrepancy between their academic achievements and limited labor market access, particularly in the STEM field. The results were thematically analyzed, focusing on cultural, social, and gender-based barriers. The research highlighted that patriarchal societal norms, family responsibilities, and lack of institutional support significantly restrict women's access to the workforce. Themes such as gender-based discrimination, cultural expectations around family roles, and regional instability were central to these barriers. The study answered its primary research question by illustrating how patriarchal structures and socio-economic conditions contribute to the disparity between women's educational accomplishments and their professional opportunities. Many women revealed that societal expectations, especially related to their roles within the family, heavily influence their ability to pursue careers. Moreover, economic challenges in the region exacerbate competition for jobs, often pushing women to the margins of the labor market. Sub-questions were addressed through the identification of familial expectations and professional constraints. Family responsibilities, such as caregiving, were frequently cited as barriers, with many women expressing the expectation to prioritize home life over professional growth. Additionally, employers often prioritize male candidates, and the current regional economic instability compounds the issue. The narratives revealed additional dimensions of the societal challenges women face. It uncovered emotional and psychological impacts, particularly in the context of marriage. Many women felt that their career success was undermined by

marital dynamics, with husbands often expressing passive resistance. Some participants noted that their husbands felt socially threatened when their wives surpassed them in education or career success. This tension led some women to abandon leadership opportunities to maintain marital harmony. Furthermore, the lack of external support systems intensified feelings of isolation, particularly as women struggled to balance professional aspirations with familial expectations.

The concluding section of Chapter 4 synthesized the key findings, emphasizing the various barriers identified. These findings served as a foundation for Chapter 5, which focused on interpreting the results in greater depth, drawing conclusions, and making recommendations for future research and policy changes aimed at improving labor market access for Jordanian women. Chapter 5 also explored how these findings can inform broader socio-economic strategies and reforms in Jordan, with a focus on increasing female labor participation through targeted gender-sensitive policies and institutional support.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of highly educated Jordanian women regarding the gap between their educational achievements and their access to the labor market. Despite the significant advancements in female educational participation in Jordan, as indicated by the high number of women earning degrees in STEM fields and other academic disciplines, women's participation in the labor market remains staggeringly low (Krafft & Assaad, 2020). Through women's narratives, I focused on understanding the underlying factors contributing to this discrepancy by examining the social, cultural, familial, and economic barriers that Jordanian women face when trying to enter the workforce.

Key findings from this research revealed that cultural and gender-based norms, such as patriarchal structures, family obligations, and societal expectations, significantly impede the ability of Jordanian women to participate fully in the labor market. Additionally, economic instability and regional conflicts have further exacerbated the challenges, limiting the availability of jobs and reinforcing traditional gender roles. While education empowers women to aspire for professional success, the lack of institutional support, such as limited job opportunities and inflexible work environments, creates a significant gap between women's educational attainment and employment opportunities. The impact of marital dynamics on women's career advancement constituted a distinctive and relatively unexplored theme emerging from the study as the impact of men feeling socially and emotionally threatened by their wives' higher social and educational status.

This dynamic, where men feel undermined by their spouse's professional and academic achievements, is a critical factor that affects not only marital harmony but also women's ability to pursue career opportunities.

In this chapter, I discuss the implications of these findings in the context of existing literature and presents newly published research that supports and enhances our understanding of these issues. I also identify gaps in the literature and offers recommendations for policy makers and future research that could address these challenges.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Recent studies have continued to explore the educational and employment disparities faced by women in the Middle East, particularly in Jordan. Krafft and Assaad (2020) emphasized the critical need to understand the disconnect between high female educational enrollment and low labor market participation in Jordan. Their findings align with this study, highlighting that structural unemployment, gender discrimination, and societal expectations of women's roles in the family remain major barriers. Furthermore, a 2022 study by Assaad et al. indicated that economic policies and labor market conditions in Jordan have consistently failed to accommodate the growing number of educated women. The study reveals that while women continue to enroll in higher education at increasing rates, particularly in STEM disciplines, their employment outcomes remain bleak due to a lack of job creation in sectors open to women and unfavorable working conditions (Assaad et al., 2022). This is compounded by the gendered expectations placed upon women, where family responsibilities and cultural

pressures discourage them from pursuing long-term professional careers. Additionally, Sleiman and Mohanty (2021) argued that the mismatch between education and employment opportunities in Jordan is reflective of broader issues within the country's economic and political framework, where reforms have not been fully geared toward gender equality in the workforce. The authors suggested that policies designed to enhance women's economic participation need to be more inclusive and should take into account the unique cultural and social constraints women face.

These recent studies underscore the persistence of the challenges identified in this research, reinforcing the need for systemic change in both educational and employment policies to bridge the gap between women's educational achievements and their participation in the workforce. While there is a growing body of research on female education and employment in Jordan and the wider MENA region, several gaps remained and were partially addressed in this study. First, there is limited qualitative research that focuses specifically on the personal perceptions and lived experiences of highly educated women, especially in STEM fields. Most studies, such as those by Banihani and Syed (2020), focused primarily on quantitative data, providing statistical analysis of female participation in the workforce but lacking the depth of narrative insight that can only be gathered through personal interviews and qualitative methods. Additionally, while much has been written about the broader socio-cultural barriers to women's employment in Jordan, there is a lack of detailed analysis on how these barriers differ across different sectors, particularly in STEM. For example, the challenges faced by women in the

medical or engineering fields may differ significantly from those in education or humanities, yet there is little research that disaggregates these experiences by sector. There is also a gap in understanding the role of digital technologies and remote work opportunities in enhancing women's labor market participation. Given the recent rise of remote working trends, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to explore how flexible work arrangements could help overcome some of the barriers women face in traditional workplaces. Finally, the impact of regional conflicts and economic instability on women's employment opportunities is an area that has not been extensively covered in the literature. While economic and political instability is often cited as a macro-level factor limiting overall employment in Jordan, its specific impact on women's labor market outcomes remains under-researched.

### **Comparison of Findings with Peer-Reviewed Literature**

The findings of this study confirm, disconfirm, and extend knowledge in the discipline of women's labor market participation, particularly in the context of Jordan, by aligning with, challenging, or expanding on themes discussed in the peer-reviewed literature from Chapter 2. To that extent, the findings largely confirm the existing body of research on the socio-cultural barriers faced by women in Jordan when trying to enter or progress in the labor market. As discussed in Chapter 2, previous studies have shown that patriarchal norms, gender roles, and family obligations are critical factors limiting women's professional participation (Assaad et al., 2018; Banihani & Syed, 2020).

This research corroborates these findings, revealing that women often face pressure to prioritize family responsibilities over career ambitions. The participants in

this study consistently mentioned the expectations placed upon them to fulfill traditional domestic roles, which directly hinders their ability to pursue or maintain employment, especially in demanding fields such as STEM. This aligns with Mehtap et al. (2019), who argued that cultural and societal attitudes towards women's roles significantly impact their economic activity and advancement.

Similarly, this study supports the findings of Krafft and Assaad (2020), who highlighted the paradox of high female educational attainment coupled with low labor market participation in Jordan. Despite the high levels of education among the women interviewed, most faced structural obstacles, such as limited job creation and discriminatory hiring practices, which prevented them from securing appropriate employment. The consistency of these themes across different studies confirms that the challenges women face in transitioning from education to employment are deeply rooted in Jordan's socio-cultural and economic framework.

### **Disconfirmation of Prior Findings**

While this study confirms much of the literature, it also disconfirms certain aspects, particularly around the family's role in women's employment decisions. Some previous studies, such as Haddad and Ibrahim (2020), suggested that the family dynamic in Jordan is uniformly restrictive when it comes to women's professional aspirations. However, the findings of this study reveal more nuanced perspectives. Some participants shared that their families, especially their parents, were highly supportive of their educational and career goals, even encouraging them to pursue further education or professional opportunities abroad. This more supportive familial role contrasts with



earlier studies, which predominantly emphasized family as a limiting factor. Thus, while family pressures certainly exist, this research adds complexity to the narrative by highlighting cases where family support facilitated educational and career advancement. Additionally, this study challenges the notion that gender barriers in Jordan are uniformly experienced across all sectors. For example, previous literature, such as Al Kharouf (2008), often generalized women's experiences, but this study found that the extent to which women face obstacles differs based on the sector in which they work. Women in STEM fields reported significantly higher barriers compared to those in education or public administration, where they felt more accepted and had greater opportunities for employment. This nuanced finding disconfirms the broader generalization of barriers and suggests that future studies should explore sector-specific challenges more closely.

### **Extension of Existing Knowledge**

Unlike other researchers, who typically focus on quantitative data regarding barriers such as family responsibilities, social norms, and workplace discrimination, I used a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the personal perceptions and lived experiences of educated Jordanian women regarding the disconnect between their high educational achievements and their limited access to employment. This qualitative focus on the voices of women themselves fills a significant gap in existing research, which has primarily relied on macro-level quantitative data. As such, this study extends the current body of knowledge by providing a deeper understanding of how regional instability and economic conditions affect women's employment prospects. While Assaad et al. (2022) touched on the impact of economic instability on labor market opportunities, this research

expands on that by focusing specifically on the experiences of Jordanian women during times of regional turmoil. Participants indicated that regional conflicts reduced overall employment opportunities but also exacerbated societal pressures on women to remain in traditional roles, thereby further discouraging their participation in the workforce.

Moreover, this study highlights the impact of marital dynamics on women's career advancement. Marital dynamics play a significant role in shaping women's career advancement, particularly in conservative societies like Jordan. Albotmeh and Irsheid (2013) addressed a similar theme by discussing how men in patriarchal societies can feel socially and emotionally threatened by wives who are more educated or professionally accomplished. This dynamic often leads to tensions in both personal and professional spaces, with women being pressured to downplay their achievements to maintain social harmony. Traditional gender roles within marriage often place a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities on women, including child-rearing, household management, and caregiving for extended family members. These expectations frequently conflict with professional aspirations, especially for highly educated women pursuing careers in competitive sectors such as STEM. Jayachandran (2021) pointed out that married women are more likely to face challenges balancing their domestic roles with career ambitions, which can limit their ability to take on demanding professional roles that require long hours or travel. Furthermore, research by Banihani (2020) highlighted that societal expectations of women as primary caregivers often deter them from seeking promotions or leadership positions, as these roles are perceived to be incompatible with family obligations. In Jordan, where familial honor and social norms are deeply intertwined with

marital roles, women are often expected to prioritize family over career, resulting in delayed or stagnant career progression. Marital status itself can also impact career advancement, as single women may have more flexibility and time to dedicate to their professional lives compared to married women, who are subject to greater family obligations. According to Haddad and Ibrahim (2020), unmarried women in Jordan tend to experience fewer career interruptions and greater professional mobility, while married women are often constrained by the demands of their domestic life. Moreover, Assaad et al. (2022) found that women in Jordan are frequently required to obtain their husbands' approval for employment, especially in sectors that may involve travel or interaction with male colleagues, further limiting their career opportunities. These marital dynamics create additional barriers for women, particularly those in fields that demand significant time and commitment, such as medicine, engineering, and academia. As such, another novel insight from this study is the personal sacrifice and tension between professional success and social harmony that women experience, especially within family units. While earlier research has addressed gender role conflicts, this study showed how some participants felt the need to downplay or hide their success to maintain peace at home, especially in marriages where the husband feels threatened by his wife's achievements. This social balancing act, where women must choose between advancing their career and preserving family dynamics, represents a new layer of complexity in understanding how gendered expectations hinder women's participation in the labor market. This issue points to the deeper psychological costs of success for highly educated women in Jordan.

This study highlights the growing importance of digital technologies and remote work as potential avenues for overcoming traditional barriers to employment. While much of the literature that I discussed in Chapter 2 focused on in-person work environments and institutional discrimination, I examined the possibility that digital platforms and remote work may offer women more flexible options that allow them to balance professional and familial responsibilities more effectively. This extension of the literature provides a potential pathway for addressing the employment gap and suggests a need for further research on the role of digital tools in expanding women's access to the labor market.

While previous researchers acknowledged the barriers women face in STEM fields, I produced a more detailed exploration of how cultural gender norms in academia manifest in specific ways within STEM disciplines. For example, the women in this study described a lack of female role models and visible women in leadership, which compounded the gendered barriers they already face. This specific STEM focus, along with the psychological barriers created by the absence of female mentors in male-dominated fields, is less emphasized in prior research. This study adds depth to this issue by connecting the symbolic absence of women in leadership roles to the overall discouragement felt by women trying to break into higher academic positions in STEM. Lastly, this study extends the literature by emphasizing the need for gender-responsive policies that not only promote women's participation but also address the unique barriers they face at different stages of their professional lives. While Sleiman and Mohanty (2021) emphasized the importance of reforms, I highlighted specific recommendations,

such as introducing more family-friendly workplace policies and expanding mentorship programs for women in STEM, which were not widely discussed in previous literature.

### **Interpretation of Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the feminist theory, which provides a comprehensive lens for examining the systemic gender inequalities that impact women's participation in the workforce. Specifically, the feminist theoretical framework used in this research highlights the ways in which social, cultural, and institutional structures maintain gender disparities in employment opportunities. Feminist theory not only addresses the barriers women face but also seeks to understand the power dynamics and societal norms that perpetuate these inequalities (Bierema & Cseh, 2003; Brisolará, 2003). By using this framework, the study sought to explore how educated Jordanian women perceive the discrepancies between their educational achievements and their access to the labor market. The findings align with the feminist theory's emphasis on patriarchal structures as a central force limiting women's opportunities in the public and professional spheres. Participants in this study repeatedly cited societal expectations regarding their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers as major barriers to their full participation in the labor market. These findings support the feminist theory's assertion that patriarchal norms are deeply embedded in societal institutions, perpetuating gender-based inequality by restricting women to traditional roles (Johnson, 2004). The participants' narratives about having to balance family obligations with career aspirations reflect Tisdell's (1998) notion of psychological and structural barriers within feminist pedagogy, where power structures both in the home and in public spaces limit women's mobility and economic

independence. This study also reinforces Bierema and Cseh's (2003) analysis of how these gender norms operate at both micro (individual) and macro (societal) levels.

Women in this study described how family and community expectations often dissuaded them from pursuing demanding careers, especially in STEM fields. This finding illustrates how the structural constraints imposed by patriarchal society influence women's professional choices, consistent with feminist theory's assertion that unequal power dynamics dictate women's access to resources and opportunities (Brabeck & Brown, 1997).

### **Feminist Pedagogy and Women's Voices**

The feminist framework's focus on *uncovering women's voices* is also central to the findings. The narratives of highly educated Jordanian women revealed their frustrations with systemic gender discrimination, as well as their resilience in navigating a labor market that largely excludes them. This is consistent with Bierema and Cseh's (2003) argument that feminist theory seeks to amplify marginalized voices by documenting lived experiences that are often ignored in traditional academic and professional discourses. By documenting the participants' experiences of discrimination and marginalization, this study contributes to feminist theory's goal of making women's struggles visible and contributing to social change (see Brisolara, 2003).

### **Structural Barriers and Institutional Discrimination**

The Feminist theory's focus on institutional discrimination is also validated by the findings. Many participants reported encountering gender-based bias in workplace settings, particularly in male-dominated fields such as STEM. This aligns with feminist

theory's assertion that institutions, whether they are educational, governmental, or corporate, play a crucial role in reproducing gender hierarchies (Calás & Smircich, 1996). Van den Brink and Benschop (2012) have noted that even in supposedly meritocratic systems, women often face structural barriers that limit their career advancement. This was evident in the participants' narratives of exclusion from leadership roles or being passed over for promotions, despite their qualifications. Moreover, the feminist theory emphasizes the intersectionality of discrimination, where gender intersects with other social categories such as class, ethnicity, and religion. While the participants in this study were all highly educated women, many still experienced these overlapping forms of discrimination, particularly in how their marital status or family responsibilities were used as justifications for limiting their career prospects. This finding underscores the feminist theory's assertion that gender discrimination cannot be understood in isolation but must be examined within the broader context of intersecting social inequalities (Benschop & Verloo, 2016). The participants' reflections on how their education did not translate into equal employment opportunities confirm feminist theory's critique of meritocracy. Feminist scholars argue that, despite the rhetoric of equality in educational attainment, gender-based barriers prevent women from fully benefiting from their academic achievements (Kumra et al., 2014). This was evident in the participants' descriptions of being underemployed or unable to secure positions commensurate with their qualifications. The feminist post-structural lens applied in this study highlights how structural power imbalances in the labor market systematically disadvantage women, reinforcing existing gender inequalities.

### **Feminist Economic Critique**

The Feminist theory also provides an economic critique of gender inequality, particularly the undervaluation of women's labor both in the formal economy and in unpaid domestic roles. The participants' accounts of balancing work and family obligations, often without institutional support, echo feminist critiques of how unpaid care work disproportionately falls on women, further limiting their economic independence (Fraser et al., 2019). Participants described how expectations around caregiving not only reduced the time available for paid employment but also negatively affected their career progression. This reinforces the feminist theory's claim that traditional economic models fail to account for the full extent of women's contributions, both in the workplace and at home. The study also extends feminist economic theory by examining how neoliberal reforms in Jordan have created labor market conditions that exacerbate gender disparities. Assaad et al. (2022) and Moghadam (2004) argue that neoliberal economic policies, such as privatization and cuts to public sector employment, disproportionately harm women, who are often overrepresented in the public sector. This study confirms these findings, with participants highlighting how public sector cuts have made it even harder for women to secure stable employment, pushing many into precarious or informal work, where they are further marginalized.

As such, the feminist theoretical framework applied in this study provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the systemic barriers faced by educated Jordanian women in accessing the labor market. The findings of this research are consistent with feminist critiques of patriarchy, institutional discrimination, and the undervaluation of



women's labor. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate the persistence of gender inequalities in both the private and public spheres, despite their educational achievements. At the same time, this study highlights the complexity of these issues, suggesting that future research and interventions should focus on both macro-level structural changes and micro-level support systems to address the unique challenges faced by women in Jordan.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this study has contributed valuable insights into the perceptions of highly educated Jordanian women regarding the discrepancies between their education and access to the labor market, several limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations primarily stem from the research design, execution, and context of the study, and they affect the trustworthiness of the findings.

### **Sample Size and Generalizability**

One of the main limitations of this study is the small sample size. While qualitative research typically focuses on depth over breadth, the limited number of participants in this study, only four women, restricts the generalizability of the findings. Although the study aimed to achieve data saturation, the reduced sample size due to external factors, such as the ongoing conflict in the MENA region, means that the findings may not fully capture the diversity of experiences among highly educated women in Jordan. As a result, the study's findings cannot be assumed to apply broadly to all educated Jordanian women, especially those in different fields, socioeconomic backgrounds, or regions of the country. Additionally, the participants in this study were

selected from specific academic and STEM disciplines, which further limits the generalizability of the findings to women in other fields, such as the humanities or social sciences. The study may not adequately reflect the experiences of women in different sectors, potentially limiting the scope of the conclusions drawn.

### **Participant Bias and Self-Reporting**

A second limitation arises from the reliance on participants' self-reported data. As the study employed semistructured interviews, the participants were asked to share personal experiences and perceptions regarding their struggles in accessing the labor market. This method is subject to several biases, including social desirability bias, where participants may provide responses they believe are more socially acceptable or expected. This could result in participants understating certain challenges or overemphasizing others, thus potentially skewing the findings. Additionally, participants may have interpreted the interview questions based on their personal perspectives, leading to subjective responses. While this is a common issue in qualitative research, it is important to acknowledge that the data collected reflect individual experiences, which may not fully capture the broader structural and systemic factors influencing women's employment opportunities.

### **Technology-Related Limitations**

The use of the SenseMaker tool in data collection had some inherent limitations. While the software helped streamline the analysis process by allowing participants to self-interpret their narratives, it lacked the flexibility to explore follow-up questions in depth. To address this limitation, follow-up interviews were conducted with participants.

These follow-up interviews allowed the researcher to ask more specific questions based on the themes and narratives that emerged from the initial SenseMaker data. This helped to provide deeper insights into participants' experiences and added richness to the data that was not fully captured by SenseMaker alone. Additionally, and although SenseMaker automatically generated visual data based on participants' self-interpretation, the software's reliance on pre-programmed triads and dyads limited the complexity of thematic analysis. To address this, manual coding of the data was incorporated as an additional step in the analysis process. This involved reviewing participants' narratives and using qualitative coding techniques to identify themes and patterns that may not have been fully captured by the software's automated categorization.

Lastly, the inability of SenseMaker to perform skip logic was another challenge that could have led participants to answer questions irrelevant to their experiences. To address this, participants were given clear instructions on how to navigate the system and encouraged to use the non-applicable options where necessary. Additionally, participants were informed that they could provide explanations in the follow-up KIIs for any questions they felt were not relevant, helping to ensure that irrelevant responses did not negatively impact the data.

### **Limitations of the Theoretical Framework**

While the feminist theory provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing gender inequalities, it is important to note its limitations in fully capturing the diversity of participants' experiences. This study revealed that not all women experienced the same degree of discrimination or exclusion, with some finding support within their families

and communities. Therefore, while the feminist theory emphasizes broad structural inequalities, it must also account for individual variation and the potential for agency within these structures. Additionally, the theory may not fully capture the potential of emerging digital technologies and remote work opportunities, which some participants viewed as ways to bypass traditional gender barriers.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, the following recommendations are presented to enhance the participation of highly educated Jordanian women in the labor market. These recommendations are grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study and are framed to respect the boundaries of the research. Additionally, the recommendations include a rationale based on the findings of this study, an expected outcome, and are structured into short, medium, and long-term ones, depending on the urgency of the action. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, researchers, and community leaders can create a more supportive environment for Jordanian women to fully participate in the labor market, addressing barriers across social, personal, legal, and economic dimensions. These actions will not only empower individual women but also strengthen the Jordanian economy and promote gender equality in the long run.

#### **Short-Term Recommendations**

##### ***Reforming the Legal Framework***

Action: Legislators and legal experts should focus on reforming and enforcing stronger anti-discrimination laws, particularly in the areas of hiring, promotion, and wage

equity. Strengthening legal frameworks and their enforcement is essential to reducing gender-based disparities in employment, ensuring that women have equal opportunities in hiring and advancement.

Rationale: Despite significant progress in education, the study found that many women still face discrimination in the workplace. Several outdated laws in Jordan contribute to the limited participation of women in the labor market and perpetuate gender inequality. These laws, often rooted in traditional values, have been criticized for hindering women's economic empowerment and maintaining discriminatory practices in employment and the workplace. For instance, the Personal Status Law (Family Law) governs matters related to marriage, divorce, inheritance, and family roles, and is based largely on the Sharia principles. Reforming the Personal Status Law to remove provisions that allow men to dictate women's employment decisions is crucial for promoting gender equality in the labor market. Allowing women to have full autonomy over their employment choices would not only empower them but also contribute to the country's overall economic growth by expanding the labor force (Jansen, 2021). Another example is the Labor Law. While Jordan's Labor Law does provide maternity leave, the current provisions are insufficient to support working mothers and do not reflect global standards for parental leave. Article 70 of the Labor Law provides only 10 weeks of paid maternity leave, which is below the 14 weeks recommended by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Additionally, there is no provision for paid paternity leave, and the law does not explicitly promote shared parenting responsibilities (Al Mufti, 2015). Inadequate maternity leave and the absence of paternity leave put a disproportionate

burden on women to balance work and family duties, often forcing them out of the labor market. Extending maternity leave and introducing paid paternity leave would encourage shared responsibility between parents, reduce the strain on women, and promote their retention in the workforce. Studies show that countries with more comprehensive parental leave policies, such as Sweden and Norway, have higher rates of female labor force participation and more equitable gender dynamics in the workplace (Baird & O'Brien, 2015).

Another example is Article 72 of the Jordanian Labor Law stating that women should receive equal pay for equal work. However, the enforcement mechanisms are weak and the wage gaps persist across multiple sectors (AlMaaitah et al., 2019). According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, Jordan ranks low on wage equality for similar work, indicating that the law is not effectively enforced (World Economic Forum, 2020). Reforming this law to include stronger enforcement mechanisms, such as regular wage audits and penalties for non-compliance, would help address gender-based wage disparities. Wage transparency policies, which have been successfully implemented in countries like Iceland, could also be introduced to ensure that employers provide equal pay for equal work. These reforms would reduce wage gaps and promote fairness in the labor market. Another area in need of reform is the restriction on women working in certain industries and nighttime work. Although some restrictions on women's employment in hazardous or strenuous jobs are justified for safety reasons, Jordan's Labor Law prohibits women from working between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. in most industries (Article 69). While the law was introduced to protect women, it effectively

limits their opportunities, especially in fields like healthcare, hospitality, and manufacturing, which may require nighttime shifts (Al Mufti, 2015). Reforming these provisions to allow women more flexibility in choosing their working hours and job roles, with proper safety measures in place, would open up new employment opportunities for women. This would also align Jordan's labor laws with international standards that promote women's participation in all sectors, provided their health and safety are adequately protected.

Moreover, Jordan's Labor Law lacks comprehensive protections against sexual harassment in the workplace, which is a major barrier to women's labor market participation. While the law prohibits acts that infringe on public morals, it does not specifically address sexual harassment, leaving many women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse without adequate legal recourse (Al-Saidi, 2017). A study by UN Women (2019) found that sexual harassment is a significant issue for women in Jordan, with many reporting that they feel unsafe or uncomfortable in certain work environments. Introducing comprehensive anti-harassment legislation that clearly defines and prohibits sexual harassment in all forms, along with creating accessible reporting mechanisms, would make the workplace safer for women. This would encourage more women to enter and remain in the labor market, knowing they are protected from workplace abuse. Countries like France and Canada have implemented robust anti-harassment laws, which have led to more secure and equitable workplaces (Chamberlain et al., 2019). Lastly, under the Jordanian law, the mandatory retirement age for women is 55, while for men, it is 60. This discrepancy in retirement age reinforces gender inequality by cutting women's

careers short and limiting their lifetime earnings potential (AlMaaitah et al., 2019). Given that many women spend part of their careers out of the workforce due to family responsibilities, retiring earlier than men further reduces their financial security in old age. Raising the retirement age for women to align with that of men would allow women more time to advance in their careers, earn higher wages, and contribute to the economy. It would also help address the issue of pension inequality, as women would have more time to accumulate retirement savings. Countries that have equalized retirement ages for men and women, such as Germany and Australia, have seen improvements in gender equality in both the workplace and retirement security (Daly & Rake, 2018).

Expected Outcome: Reduced discrimination in employment processes and improved gender equality across the workforce.

### ***Investigating Mental Health Impacts***

Action: Mental health professionals and researchers should examine the mental health effects of balancing professional and family responsibilities and develop counseling services and support networks.

Rationale: The study highlighted the emotional strain that many women face when balancing family and career responsibilities. By addressing mental health concerns, support systems can help women better manage these competing demands, reducing burnout and improving job retention.

Expected Outcome: Enhanced mental health support for women, enabling them to manage professional and family duties more effectively.



***Explore Early Career Mentorship Programs***

Action: Universities and professional organizations, in collaboration with the Jordanian Ministry of Education, should investigate the impact of mentorship programs on women's job satisfaction, career longevity, and advancement.

Rationale: The literature emphasizes the importance of mentorship in career development, especially for women in male-dominated fields. Mentorship can provide guidance, support, and opportunities that increase job satisfaction and career progression, ultimately reducing the high dropout rates seen in early careers.

Expected Outcome: Improved career satisfaction and advancement opportunities for women.

***Promote Counseling for Professional Imbalances***

Action: Counseling services, mental health professionals, and NGOs should establish support programs for couples managing professional imbalances.

Rationale: Professional imbalances within families, particularly when women pursue careers, can lead to emotional and relational strain. Counseling services focused on mitigating these imbalances can reduce stress and create healthier family dynamics, facilitating better support for women in their careers.

Expected Outcome: Reduced emotional strain in relationships, leading to healthier family dynamics and stronger professional engagement for women.

**Medium-Term Recommendations*****Explore Gender Norms in Rural vs. Urban Areas***

Action: Researchers and sociologists should conduct studies to explore how gender norms and family expectations differ between rural and urban areas.

Rationale: Social and cultural barriers play a significant role in limiting women's participation in the workforce. Rural and urban settings may experience these barriers differently. A deeper understanding of these differences will allow policymakers and organizations to develop region-specific strategies to address these issues.

Expected Outcome: Greater understanding of how different gender norms affect labor market participation, providing the foundation for targeted interventions.

***Conduct Case Studies on Women's Employment Barriers***

Action: Researchers and career development centers should conduct case studies of women who have successfully navigated the labor market to develop personal development programs.

Rationale: Identifying the strategies used by successful women can offer insights into overcoming employment barriers. These case studies will provide practical tools for future programs, helping other women develop skills and resilience to succeed in the workforce.

Expected Outcome: Creation of practical, skills-based programs and tools that help women overcome barriers to employment.

***Research Family-Friendly Policies***

Action: Policymakers and employers should investigate the effectiveness of family-friendly policies (e.g., maternity leave, flexible working hours) and propose improvements.

Rationale: The study found that family obligations are a significant factor limiting women's employment. Implementing and improving family-friendly policies can make it easier for women to balance work and family responsibilities, encouraging greater workforce participation.

Expected Outcome: Increased adoption of such policies, which can significantly improve working conditions for women.

***Evaluate Gender Quotas and Wage Disparity Audits***

Action: Government and corporate HR departments should assess the implementation of gender quotas and conduct regular wage audits to reduce disparities.

Rationale: Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and often earn less than their male counterparts. Gender quotas and wage audits can help close these gaps by promoting transparency and accountability in hiring and wage practices.

Expected Outcome: Increased gender representation in leadership positions and reduced wage gaps between men and women.

***Tailor Workforce Training Programs by Sector***

Action: Educational institutions and workforce development agencies should study sector-specific barriers for women in STEM and non-STEM fields and develop tailored workforce training programs.

Rationale: Women face different barriers depending on the industry, especially in STEM fields where they are often underrepresented. Tailored training programs can address these specific challenges, equipping women with the skills needed to thrive in male-dominated sectors.

Expected Outcome: Targeted training initiatives that address specific challenges faced by women in different sectors, leading to increased workforce participation.

***Promote Male Allyship Programs***

Action: NGOs, community leaders, and family advocates should promote the idea of male allyship within families to encourage men to actively support their wives' career ambitions.

Rationale: Many women face resistance from male family members when pursuing careers. Promoting male allyship can shift family dynamics, encouraging men to support and advocate for their wives' professional growth, which is essential for breaking down cultural barriers.

Expected Outcome: Improved family dynamics and greater support for women's professional endeavors.

***Foster Gender Role Conversations***

Action: Social researchers, community groups, and family counseling centers should facilitate discussions about evolving gender roles within marriages and relationships.

Rationale: As more women enter the workforce, traditional gender roles within marriage and family are being challenged. Open conversations about these evolving roles can lead to greater acceptance of women pursuing professional success, creating a more supportive environment.

Expected Outcome: Increased awareness and acceptance of gender role shifts, enabling women to pursue their professional ambitions more freely.

**Long-Term Recommendations*****Shift Social Barriers Through Community Collaboration***

Action: Local organizations, religious leaders, and community groups should work together to shift traditional norms that restrict women's professional engagement.

Rationale: Changing deep-rooted social and cultural norms is a long-term process, but it is essential for achieving gender equity. By engaging influential community figures, society can gradually shift towards greater acceptance of women in professional roles.

Expected Outcome: A gradual but significant shift in societal norms, leading to wider acceptance of women's roles in the workforce and greater gender equity.

### ***Examine the Impact of Regional Conflicts***

Action: Economists and conflict resolution experts should investigate the long-term effects of regional conflicts and economic instability on women's participation in the labor market.

Rationale: The political and economic instability in the region has had a disproportionate impact on women's employment opportunities. Understanding these impacts can inform recovery efforts and help design more inclusive post-conflict economic policies.

Expected Outcome: Deeper understanding of how instability impacts women's employment prospects, which will inform recovery efforts in post-conflict regions.

### **Recommendations Table**

The proposed table hereunder organizes the recommendations based on their implementation timeline, helping guide stakeholders through short, medium, and long-term actions, thus providing clarity on which actions need immediate attention versus those that require longer-term planning. Each recommendation is linked to responsible parties, a timeline, expected outcomes, and priority levels. This clear structure facilitates accountability and makes it easier for organizations and policymakers to implement the recommendations. Additionally, the table covers various aspects - social, cultural, legal, educational, and economic - ensuring a holistic approach to tackling barriers for women's participation in the labor market. This integration ensures that recommendations address the issue from multiple perspectives. By using this table, policymakers and organizations have a structured, prioritized, and clear roadmap for improving women's participation in

the labor market, making it a valuable tool for real-world application and strategic planning.

**Table 10**

*Recommendations for Improving Jordanian's Women Participation in the Labor Market*

Recommendation Level	Recommendation	Responsible Party	Timeline	Expected Outcome	Priority Level
Legal and Policy	Strengthen anti-discrimination laws with a focus on enforcement in hiring, promotion, and wage equity.	Legislators, Legal Experts	Short-Term	Stronger enforcement of gender equality laws leading to reduced discrimination in hiring and promotions.	High
Personal Development and Empowerment	Investigate the mental health impacts of balancing professional and family responsibilities to develop counseling services and support networks.	Mental Health Professionals, Researchers	Short-Term	Improved mental health support for women balancing professional and family responsibilities.	High
Education and Workforce Training	Investigate the outcomes of early career mentorship programs and their impact on women's job satisfaction, career longevity, and advancement.	Universities, Professional Organizations, Ministry of Education	Short-Term	Enhanced career satisfaction, longevity, and advancement opportunities for women.	Medium
Personal Development and Empowerment	Promote counseling and support networks: Programs that provide counseling for couples dealing with the challenges of	Counseling Services, Mental Health Professionals, NGOs	Short-Term	Reduced emotional strain in couples facing professional imbalances, promoting healthier relationships.	High

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	professional imbalances.				
Social and Cultural	Further exploration of gender norms and family expectations, especially between rural and urban areas, and the role of extended family structures.	Researchers, Sociologists, Ministry of Education	Medium-Term	Increased understanding of how gender norms impact labor market participation in diverse communities.	Medium
Personal Development and Empowerment	Conduct case studies of women who have successfully navigated the labor market and develop personal development programs for skills enhancement.	Researchers, Career Development Centers	Medium-Term	Practical strategies for overcoming employment barriers through personal empowerment.	Medium
Legal and Policy	Research the effectiveness of family-friendly policies (e.g., maternity leave, flexible working hours) and their potential for improvement.	Policy Makers, Employers	Medium-Term	Greater adoption of family-friendly workplace policies and improved conditions for women workers.	Medium
Legal and Policy	Evaluate the implementation of gender quotas and regular wage disparity audits in the public and private sectors.	Government, Corporate HR Departments	Medium-Term	Improved gender representation in leadership roles and reduced wage gaps.	High
Education and Workforce Training	Sector-specific studies on women's participation in STEM and non-STEM fields to identify barriers and propose tailored workforce training programs.	Educational Institutions, Workforce Development Agencies, Ministry of Education	Medium-Term	Tailored workforce training programs that address sector-specific barriers for women.	Medium

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Economic and Regional	Explore the effectiveness of microfinance and small business loans targeted at women entrepreneurs, as well as the role of digital entrepreneurship.	Microfinance Institutions, Government Economic Agencies	Medium-Term	Increased access to capital and entrepreneurial opportunities for women through microfinance and digital platforms.	Medium
Social and Cultural	Foster gender role conversations: Encourage discussions around evolving gender roles within marriage, particularly in relation to professional success.	Social Researchers, Community Groups, Family Counseling Centers	Medium-Term	Greater awareness and acceptance of evolving gender roles within marriage, facilitating professional success for women.	Medium
Social and Cultural	Create male allyship programs: Promote the idea of male allies within families, encouraging men to actively support their wives' career ambitions.	NGOs, Community Leaders, Family Advocates	Medium-Term	Increased male support for women's career ambitions, leading to more balanced family dynamics.	Medium
Social and Cultural	Address social barriers by collaborating with local organizations, religious leaders, and community groups to shift traditional norms that restrict women's professional engagement.	Local Organizations, Religious Leaders, Community Groups	Long-Term	Gradual shift in societal norms towards greater acceptance of women's professional roles.	High
Economic and Regional	Examine the long-term impact of regional conflicts and economic instability on women's labor	Economists, Conflict Resolution Experts	Long-Term	Better understanding of how regional instability affects women's	High

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market participation, particularly in post-conflict settings.

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employment prospects, informing post-conflict recovery efforts.

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### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings of this study have opened several avenues for further research that could deepen understanding and address gaps in the current knowledge regarding Jordanian women's participation in the labor market. These recommendations are grounded in the study's limitations and the insights gained from the literature review in Chapter 2. As such, further research should investigate the differences between rural and urban gender norms and how these differences impact women's access to the labor market. While this study focused on educated women in urban settings, a broader examination of rural areas could provide insights into how traditional family structures and regional norms affect women's employment opportunities. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for developing tailored interventions that cater to diverse communities across Jordan.

Women balancing professional aspirations with intense family responsibilities often experience stress and burnout. Research into the mental health impacts of these dual roles could inform the development of counseling services and support networks specifically designed for professional women in Jordan. This would enhance both their personal well-being and professional sustainability. Additionally, the impact of marital dynamics on women's career advancement represents a significant, yet often overlooked, barrier in discussions about gender equity in the workplace. While structural and

institutional barriers such as gender biases and unequal opportunities are widely recognized, the emotional and psychological effects of marital tensions - particularly those rooted in a husband's feelings of social and emotional threat - are less often addressed in academic literature. This theme highlights the need for broader societal change, where both men and women are supported in pursuing their professional goals without feeling that it undermines traditional marital roles. Addressing these dynamics could involve fostering more open conversations about gender roles within marriage, providing counseling and support systems for professional women, and encouraging male allies to support their wives' career growth.

While this study highlighted the need for stronger anti-discrimination laws and family-friendly policies, further research is required to assess the real-world impact of these legal frameworks. Studies could evaluate whether the implementation of gender quotas, wage audits, and anti-discrimination laws have led to significant improvements in gender equality in hiring, promotion, and wage equity. These evaluations could guide policymakers in refining existing legislation and ensuring its effectiveness. Also, given the significant differences between STEM and non-STEM fields highlighted in the literature, future research should explore the unique barriers women face in different sectors. A sector-specific approach would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the obstacles to women's participation and advancement, enabling the development of tailored training programs and workforce policies that address the needs of women in diverse industries. Moreover, further studies should examine the effectiveness of microfinance initiatives and digital entrepreneurship programs targeted at women. While

microfinance has been promoted as a tool for empowering women economically, there is a need for more data on its long-term impacts on women's financial independence, business success, and participation in the labor market. Additionally, research could explore how digital platforms are expanding entrepreneurial opportunities for women and reducing traditional barriers to entry. Further research should also focus on the role of mentorship and early career programs in improving women's job satisfaction, career longevity, and advancement. While this study noted the importance of mentorship, future research could provide more detailed analysis on how structured mentorship programs impact retention rates and career progression, particularly for women entering male-dominated fields. Lastly, given the ongoing instability in the Middle East, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of regional conflicts and economic crises on women's labor market participation. Investigating how post-conflict recovery programs address (or fail to address) women's employment issues could provide valuable insights into creating more inclusive economic recovery strategies in conflict-affected areas.

These areas for further research will not only expand upon the findings of the current study but also contribute valuable knowledge for addressing the challenges women face in the Jordanian labor market. By exploring these topics in greater depth, future research can help shape more effective policies, programs, and interventions to promote gender equality and economic empowerment for women in Jordan.

## **Implications**

The findings of this study on the discrepancy between Jordanian women's high educational attainment and their limited access to the labor market hold significant implications for positive social change. These implications are considered across different levels - individual, family, organizational, and societal - and are grounded within the study's scope, ensuring that they do not extend beyond the research's boundaries. Furthermore, the methodological, theoretical, and empirical implications provide a foundation for actionable recommendations that may influence future practice and policy.

At the individual level, this study highlights the importance of personal empowerment and mental health support for Jordanian women as they navigate the challenges of balancing educational achievement, professional aspirations, and family responsibilities. By identifying the psychological strain that many women face in managing these dual roles, this study emphasizes the need for counseling services and mental health interventions aimed at reducing emotional stress (Bierema & Cseh, 2003). These services can help women enhance their resilience and pursue career opportunities without compromising their well-being. Furthermore, individual empowerment through career mentorship programs, as suggested in the findings, can improve job satisfaction and career longevity, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as STEM (Gundersen & Kunst, 2019). Women who receive early career guidance are more likely to feel supported and develop the confidence to persist in their career pathways, contributing to greater gender parity in higher-paying fields. This increased representation of women in

diverse professional fields fosters positive role modeling for younger women, encouraging them to pursue non-traditional career paths.

At the family level, the study underscores the crucial role that familial support, particularly male allyship, plays in enabling women's participation in the labor market. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms within the family can often limit women's opportunities for professional growth (Salem & Yount, 2019). This study advocates for programs that engage male family members - husbands, fathers, and brothers - to become allies in supporting women's professional ambitions, helping to shift familial expectations. Such shifts can reduce the pressure on women to adhere to restrictive gender roles, thereby fostering healthier family dynamics where both men and women share responsibilities and support each other's professional goals. This creates a ripple effect, where families that embrace gender equality contribute to broader societal change by modeling inclusive behaviors that challenge patriarchal norms (Benschop, 2021). Encouraging family dialogue around evolving gender roles could also reduce family-related stressors that negatively impact women's career trajectories.

At the organizational level, this study highlights the importance of addressing workplace discrimination and implementing family-friendly policies that can improve women's access to and retention in the labor market. Strengthening anti-discrimination laws and enforcing wage audits are critical for ensuring that women are treated equitably in hiring, promotions, and compensation (Banihani & Syed, 2020). These legal measures can reduce institutionalized gender biases and create more inclusive workplace cultures where women feel valued and respected. The research also recommends the adoption of

flexible working conditions, such as maternity leave and flexible hours, which are essential for supporting women who balance professional and family responsibilities. Organizations that implement these policies can expect to see higher rates of job satisfaction and retention among female employees, contributing to a more gender-diverse workforce. Additionally, sector-specific training programs, particularly in STEM fields, can help overcome barriers to women's advancement in traditionally male-dominated industries, further enhancing organizational inclusivity (Tisdell, 1998). At the societal level, the implications of this study suggest that there is a need for legal and policy reforms that promote gender equity in the labor market. Reforming and strengthening enforcement mechanisms for gender equality laws can help close the representation gap in both public and private sectors. Furthermore, the study's emphasis on the role of community and religious leaders in shifting social norms underscores the importance of grassroots advocacy in driving societal change (Koburtay et al., 2020). Collaboration between local organizations and community leaders can help dismantle traditional norms that restrict women's professional engagement, promoting broader societal acceptance of women in diverse roles beyond the domestic sphere. Furthermore, this study points to the critical role that regional stability plays in women's economic participation. Given the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, policies that focus on post-conflict recovery must prioritize women's labor market access, ensuring that women are not excluded from economic rebuilding efforts. Policies aimed at improving access to microfinance and entrepreneurship opportunities for women can empower them economically and foster long-term societal resilience (Moghadam, 2004).

### **Methodological Implications**

The use of a qualitative methodology has significant implications for future research on gender and labor market dynamics in Jordan. By adopting a generic qualitative design, the research was able to capture the nuanced experiences and perceptions of highly educated women, providing rich insights into the socio-cultural barriers they face. Future studies could expand on this methodology by incorporating longitudinal data to track changes in women's employment experiences over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys could enhance the robustness of findings, offering both depth and breadth of understanding.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The application of feminist theory in this study has advanced the understanding of gender inequality in Jordan's labor market. The study reinforces feminist arguments that patriarchal structures, both within families and in the workplace, perpetuate gender disparities. It also aligns with poststructuralist feminist perspectives that advocate for the deconstruction of social discourses that limit women's participation in the public sphere (Brabeck & Brown, 1997). This study contributes to the feminist theory by offering empirical evidence from a Middle Eastern context, where religious and cultural factors play a prominent role in shaping gender relations. Future research could build on this theoretical framework to explore the intersectionality between gender, class, and ethnicity in the labor market.



### **Empirical Implications**

Empirically, this study highlights the urgent need for more research on the labor market participation of educated women in Jordan and other Middle Eastern countries. There is a significant gap in understanding how specific policies, such as wage audits and gender quotas, impact gender equality in the workplace. The empirical findings of this study provide a foundation for further investigation into the effectiveness of these interventions, particularly in conservative societies where cultural resistance to gender equality is strong (Assaad et al., 2018).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In terms of practical recommendations, organizations and policymakers should prioritize the implementation of gender-sensitive policies that support women's full participation in the workforce. Employers should be encouraged to adopt flexible working conditions and mentorship programs that foster women's professional development, while policymakers must focus on strengthening legal frameworks to combat workplace discrimination. Additionally, community outreach programs that engage religious and local leaders can play a crucial role in shifting societal norms toward greater acceptance of women in professional roles. By adopting these practices, stakeholders can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable labor market for women in Jordan.

### **Conclusion**

This study has provided a comprehensive exploration of the discrepancy between high educational attainment and low labor market participation among Jordanian women.

Despite their significant academic achievements, many highly educated women in Jordan remain underrepresented in the workforce, pointing to a complex interplay of socio-cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. The findings of this study not only underscore the urgency of addressing these barriers but also present a compelling case for fostering positive social change across various levels - individual, family, organizational, and societal/policy. The central message of this study is that education, while critical, is not sufficient on its own to drive gender equality in the labor market. Without concurrent efforts to dismantle the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that limit women's professional opportunities, the potential of Jordan's highly educated women will remain unrealized. The findings of this study demonstrate that gender inequality in Jordan is not simply a matter of access to education, but a multifaceted issue rooted in deep-seated societal norms, legal frameworks, and organizational practices. Therefore, a multi-level approach is necessary to address the structural factors that perpetuate inequality and to promote meaningful participation of women in the workforce.

This study highlights the need for Jordan to move beyond education as the sole focus of women's empowerment and to adopt a more holistic strategy that addresses the societal and institutional constraints women face. Empowering women through education must be accompanied by systemic changes in the labor market, legal framework, and cultural norms to ensure that women can fully capitalize on their academic achievements.

At the individual level, the findings emphasize the importance of personal empowerment and resilience for women as they navigate professional and family responsibilities. Many women reported feeling discouraged by the double burden of

managing household duties and pursuing a career, a theme consistent with findings in other MENA countries (Salem & Yount, 2019). Programs aiming at improving mental health support and building resilience through mentorship and personal development initiatives are critical to help women manage these challenges. For example, studies have shown that career mentorship programs significantly improve job satisfaction and career longevity for women, particularly in male-dominated fields (Gundersen & Kunst, 2019). Empowering women to develop the confidence and skills needed to succeed in the workforce will have a ripple effect, inspiring other women to pursue non-traditional career paths and break down long-standing gender barriers. Moreover, by enabling women to overcome these barriers, individual empowerment contributes to greater financial independence, which in turn increases their ability to make autonomous life choices. This financial independence not only benefits women themselves but also has profound implications for their families and communities, as women are more likely to invest their earnings in the education and well-being of their children, fostering a cycle of empowerment across generations (Banihani & Syed, 2020).

At the family level, the study underscores the need for cultural shifts in gender roles and family dynamics. Many women in Jordan face resistance from male family members who hold traditional views of women's roles as caregivers and homemakers. The study highlights the potential for positive change through male allyship, encouraging men to become active supporters of women's professional ambitions. Research has shown that male allyship within families can significantly reduce the pressures on women to conform to traditional gender roles and allow them to pursue careers without guilt or

fear of familial disapproval (Benschop, 2021). By engaging men in conversations about evolving gender roles and the benefits of shared household responsibilities, families can create more supportive environments for women to thrive professionally. This shift in family dynamics not only promotes gender equality within the household but also serves as a model for broader societal change. As more families embrace gender-equitable norms, these changes can gradually erode the patriarchal structures that have long dominated Jordanian society.

At the organizational level, this study calls for urgent reforms in workplace policies and practices to create more inclusive environments for women. The findings point to the need for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, particularly in areas such as hiring, promotions, and wage equity. The implementation of gender quotas and regular wage audits can help address the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions and reduce wage gaps between men and women (Banihani & Syed, 2020). These reforms are crucial in creating a level playing field where women are judged based on their qualifications and contributions, rather than their gender. By addressing the structural barriers that limit women's professional opportunities, Jordan can tap into the full potential of its highly educated female population. Implementing these reforms would not only promote fairness and equality but also drive economic growth and social progress. As the country continues to develop, creating an inclusive and equitable labor market is crucial for its future prosperity. Moreover, the study emphasizes the importance of family-friendly workplace policies, such as flexible working hours, maternity leave, and childcare support. Many women reported that the lack of such policies made it

difficult for them to balance their professional and family responsibilities, leading them to opt out of the workforce. Studies have shown that organizations that adopt family-friendly policies experience higher retention rates among female employees and improved overall productivity (Tisdell, 1998). By making workplaces more accommodating to the needs of working mothers, employers can not only retain talented women but also foster a more diverse and innovative workforce.

At the legal level, the implications of this research are profound. The findings highlight the need for Jordan to adopt a more comprehensive approach to gender equality that goes beyond education and addresses the legal barriers that limit women's labor market participation. This includes reforming outdated laws that perpetuate gender inequality and implementing policies that promote gender equity in both the public and private sectors. Key areas in need of reform include the Personal Status Law, which allows husbands to restrict their wives' employment, and the Labor Law, which provides insufficient maternity leave and no paternity leave, reinforcing gender roles. Wage discrimination persists despite laws mandating equal pay, and women are restricted from certain jobs, including nighttime work, limiting opportunities. Additionally, inadequate legal protections against sexual harassment in the workplace deter women from entering or staying in the workforce, and the discrepancy in retirement ages for men and women further entrenches inequality. Reforming these laws is essential to promoting gender equity, increasing women's economic participation, and ensuring a more inclusive labor market.

Moreover, one of the most significant societal impacts of this study is its potential to shift cultural norms around women's roles in the workforce. The research demonstrates that social norms, particularly those related to gender roles and family expectations, are among the most significant barriers to women's employment in Jordan. Collaboration between community leaders, religious figures, and local organizations is critical in challenging these norms and promoting greater acceptance of women in professional roles. By engaging influential societal figures in the conversation, there is potential to drive a cultural shift that supports women's full participation in the workforce. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the importance of integrating gender-sensitive policies into post-conflict recovery efforts in Jordan and the broader MENA region. Women's economic empowerment must be a priority in rebuilding efforts to ensure that they are not excluded from the economic benefits of recovery. Policies that provide women with access to microfinance and entrepreneurship opportunities can help them achieve financial independence and contribute to the country's overall economic growth (Moghadam, 2004).

From a methodological perspective, this study has demonstrated the value of qualitative research in understanding the complex, lived experiences of women in Jordan's labor market. The use of participants' narratives followed by in-depth interviews allowed for a rich exploration of the socio-cultural and economic factors that influence women's employment decisions. Future research could build on this methodological approach by incorporating longitudinal studies to track changes in women's experiences over time, particularly as new policies and cultural shifts take effect. Theoretically, this

study has reinforced the relevance of the feminist theory in analyzing gender inequality in the labor market. The findings align with feminist arguments that gender inequality is perpetuated by both patriarchal structures and institutional biases. By applying feminist perspectives to the Jordanian labor market, this research has contributed to a growing body of literature that advocates for systemic change to address these deeply entrenched inequalities. Empirically, the study fills a critical gap in the literature by providing a detailed examination of Jordanian women's perceptions of the barriers they face in accessing the labor market. The findings offer valuable insights that can inform future research and policy development, particularly in the context of gender equality in the MENA region. As such, the findings call for immediate action from policymakers, employers, and community leaders. Policymakers should prioritize legal reforms that strengthen anti-discrimination laws and promote gender equality in hiring and wages. Employers should adopt family-friendly workplace policies that support women in balancing their professional and personal responsibilities. Additionally, community leaders and religious figures should be engaged in efforts to challenge traditional gender norms and promote greater acceptance of women's professional roles. By implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can create a more inclusive and equitable labor market that empowers women to fully participate in Jordan's economic development. The ripple effects of these changes will extend beyond the individual to benefit families, organizations, and society as a whole.

In conclusion, this study provides a compelling argument for the need to transcend education as the sole mechanism for empowering women in Jordan. While

education is undoubtedly important, it must be integrated with broader, systemic reforms in labor market policies, legal frameworks, and cultural norms to fully realize the potential of Jordan's highly educated women. The evidence is clear: tackling the structural barriers that hinder women's participation in the workforce is essential for Jordan to harness the full capabilities of its female population, unlocking significant economic growth, social progress, and enhanced gender equity. As such, this study advocates for a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy for gender equality, one that not only enhances educational access but ensures that women have the opportunity to thrive professionally and personally. Women's empowerment is more than an economic necessity, it is a fundamental issue of justice and human rights. Without dismantling the entrenched barriers that perpetuate gender inequality, the country risks leaving the potential of its brightest minds underutilized. As Jordan looks toward the future, the meaningful inclusion of women in all sectors of the economy will be crucial to its ongoing development and prosperity. The findings of this research provide a strategic blueprint for advancing gender equity, offering actionable recommendations that will drive transformative social change across the individual, familial, organizational, and societal dimensions.



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## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Research Question: What are the perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the discrepancy between their high educational level and lack of access to employment opportunities?

### **Introduction**

Thank you for deciding to take part in my research project. I am the principal investigator in charge of this study. The research question is: “What are the perceptions of Jordanian women in relation to the discrepancy between their high educational level and lack of access to employment opportunities?”. This interview will take about 60 minutes and consists of a first part on the SenseMaker platform (30 minutes) followed by a qualitative interview of approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Questions with several sub-questions will be grouped into three phases. Your life history will be the subject of the first stage, the details of your experiences will be the subject of the second stage, and making sense of your experience as a woman regarding equal access to job opportunities will be the subject of the third and final step.

I would like to ask for your consent to record this conversation so I can correctly capture your replies. Taking part in this interview is entirely voluntary and wishing to withdraw is possible at any time without any consequences or implications. Please feel free to take a break or pause the discussion when needed. Also, please inform me if you wish to discontinue using the tape recorder at any point while the interview is being registered. Your answers will be kept confidential. I will also provide you with a

transcript of the discussion when it's finalized. This is so you can think back on what you said, provide comments, and straighten up any inconsistencies from the interview.

I would also like to remind you that you have given written consent to participate in this interview. In order to confirm that we are both willing to proceed, we have both signed and dated two copies of the written consent. One copy will be given to you, while the other will be kept secure and apart from your written replies. Do you have any queries or want to express concerns before we get started? With your permission, I will start the interview now.

### **Introductory Questions**

These questions aim to learn more about you as a participant in this study.

**Background:** Please tell me a little about yourself (background, employment, etc.).

**Gender:** What does it mean to you to be a woman?

**Relationships:** Looking back, which personal and professional relationships have been significant to you and why?

**General question:** Could you tell me about a powerful learning experience you have had in your career?

### **Open-ended Questions**

#### **Focused Life History/ Feminist pedagogy: Psychological**

- 1- Tell me about your journey to becoming an academic and how you arrived at your current



- 2- How long have you held your current position? Specifics about the current position (i.e., status, work details, etc.).
- 3- Recall an early event (from your home, school, or elsewhere) that motivated you to pursue a higher degree and career.
- 4- Were you supported, as a woman, in this decision?
- 5- Workplace: Can you describe the atmosphere of your workplace?
- 6- Do you currently have or have you been previously in a leadership position/role?
  - a) If yes, what are the challenges in reaching that level?
  - b) If not, what are the obstacles hindering your progress?

**Details of Experiences/ Feminist pedagogy: Structural**

- 1- The concept of identity: Share an experience that helped you to understand your identity as a woman.
- 2- Is there any balance of power between men and women when accessing job opportunities in Jordan? Why?
- 3- Tell me about any obligations you have outside of your job, and describe how you manage to juggle them.
- 4- Primary/secondary earners who have two careers. How are the duties divided?
- 5- How do these obligations influence your capacity to complete job tasks, such as attending late meetings?

- 6- Did the COVID-19 situation impact your professional career and add to the existing challenges in equal access to job opportunities?

**Reflection on the Meaning/ Feminist pedagogy: Post-structural**

- 1- How would you define the concept of gender in access to job opportunities (men-biased, characterized and structured in a gendered way, masculinized or feminized, etc.)?
- 2- How do you believe your gender influenced your professional aspirations, experiences, plans, and present job experience? If not, please outline the important elements that influenced your career, in your opinion.
- 3- Have you seen any variations between the career choices or paths made by women and men in academia?
- a) If yes, could you explain those?

**Closing Statement**

I would like to thank you for taking the time to answer my questions and for sharing valuable insights related to your life history, your profession, and your experience as a woman regarding equal access to job opportunities. The interview has now come to an end. I will share a summary of the findings for your kind review. Is there anything else you would like to add? Thank you!

## Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

### **Interview Study Seeks Jordanian Women to Share Experiences About Access to Employment Opportunities**

There is a new study about the experiences of Jordanian women in relation to the discrepancy between their high educational level and lack of access to employment opportunities that could help policy makers and gender activists better understand and help women gaining access to the labor market. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences being a highly educated Jordanian woman and facing challenges when accessing employment opportunities.

About the study:

- One approximately 60 minute in-person or remote interview that will be audio recorded;
- You would receive a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank you;
- To protect your privacy, the published study would use fake names.

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- Women teaching part-time or full-time at a scientific department of a Jordanian university;
- Aged between 30 and 45;
- Having completed their doctoral degree;
- Having a minimum of five years of experience in the academic sector;
- Fluent in English.

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Rana El Khawand, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during September 2023.

## Appendix C: Participant Screening Protocol

## Screening Interview Questions

Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

**Introduction**

Hello, my name is Rana El Khawand, I am a Ph.D. student at Walden University and as part of my study, I am seeking Jordanian women to share experiences about access to employment opportunities. The study will talk more about the experiences of Jordanian women in relation to the discrepancy between their high educational level and lack of access to employment opportunities. The findings and recommendations would help policy makers and gender activists better understand and help women gaining access to the labor market. Interviews are scheduled to take place during December 2023. Would you be interested in participating? If yes, and before we set a date for that, I would appreciate taking a few moments to answer the following screening questionnaire:

**General Questions:**

1. Which category best describes your age? (18 to 25; 26 to 39; 40 to 59; 60 to 74)
2. Are you a woman teaching part-time or full-time at a scientific department of a Jordanian university?
3. Have you completed your doctoral degree as highest level of education?
4. Do you have at least 5 years of experience in the academic sector?
5. Are you fluent in English? (Yes/No)

**Schedule Interview?**

Yes/ No: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_