

Social norms, female labour force participation, and marriage decisions in Jordan

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- Drawing on qualitative analysis of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, research findings suggest that social norms surrounding women's work outside the home remain **highly contested**, making it challenging to identify a single dominant normative position.
- Among women, working outside the home was frequently associated with **financial independence** and **autonomy**, increased **intrahousehold bargaining power**, and **self-actualisation**.
- Job suitability was critical in shaping support for women's employment. Prevalent social norms directly translate into concrete barriers that women experience, including concerns about **the workplace environment**, **safety**, and **working hours**.
- **Marriage** is a critical juncture at which women's paid work is expected to decrease or cease to exist, while domestic and care responsibilities increase without a corresponding redistribution to men. This reinforces a **dual burden** on working women.
- Employers often explicitly inquire about **women's family circumstances** during recruitment, suggesting a direct translation of social norms and supply-side constraints into employer behaviour.

These findings are essential for identifying evidence-based pathways to enhance women's economic participation and for identifying key blind spots where further research and data are needed.

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Background and context

Jordan faces persistent challenges in promoting women's economic participation, with high unemployment and low labour force participation rates, particularly among women and youth (Leape et al., 2025). Despite increasing levels of educational attainment among women, female labour force participation rates have remained persistently stagnant and low at around 14% for the last decade, being the fourth lowest in the world and the lowest in non-conflict settings (ILO, 2024a, 2024b; World Bank, 2025).

Recent studies across the MENA region have examined a range of barriers to women's labour force participation, addressing both supply and demand constraints. However, one key yet underexplored dimension is the role of social norms, job attributes, and marriage decisions in women's labour supply.

Social norms, marriage decisions and work

Evidence suggests that private beliefs and beliefs about others, often rooted in social norms surrounding women's roles within the family, can influence women's decisions to work outside the home (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Heath et al., 2024; Joslin & Nordvik, 2021). For instance, family members may resist women's employment due to concerns about their (perceived) safety in transit or at the workplace (Alam et al., 2023). Women are also typically expected to bear a disproportionate share of domestic responsibilities, which affects their decision to work and the type of work they choose (Delecourt & Fitzpatrick, 2021).

Marriage in Jordan is nearly universal and a central social and economic decision for young people and their families (Salem, 2014; Sieverding et al., 2018). In a context of persistently low female labour force participation, the economic stakes of marriage can also play a significant role (Duflo, 2012).

Research overview

Our study explores challenges and perceptions surrounding female labour force participation and the potential relationship between marriage decisions, job attributes, and women's work outside the home.

We conducted **nine focus group discussions** (FGDs) and **four in-depth interviews** (IDIs) in Amman, Jordan.

- FGDs included 9-12 participants and lasted approximately two hours. The different participant groups include unmarried young women, mothers of unmarried young women, fathers or first-degree male relatives of unmarried young women, and unmarried young men. Three FGDs were

conducted with young women, and two with each of the remaining participant groups.

- IDIs lasted approximately one hour and were conducted with four private hiring managers: two from male-dominated sectors and two from female-dominated sectors.
- The sessions were conducted in Arabic and facilitated by experienced moderators, ensuring gender matching with participants.
- Participants' residency spanned the central governorates. All participants received financial compensation for their participation and time.
- The FGDs included a collective exercise in which participants had to allocate 24 hours across eight activities based on their perceptions of how a woman typically and ideally spends her day.[1]

The insights gathered in this qualitative stage inform the second stage of the project—a **discrete choice experiment** aimed at: (i) examining which job attributes young women value most, and (ii) quantifying how much earnings they are willing to forego in exchange for other non-wage attributes, including workplace commute safety and work environment.

Key findings

Social norms surrounding women's work outside the home remain **highly contested** in Jordan, with participants expressing a range of diverging views.

Prevailing social norms and support for women's work outside the home

The **male breadwinner norm** was the most consistently identified across participant groups. Participants emphasised men's primary role as financial providers, with this responsibility understood not simply as an economic function but as a fundamental element of male identity.

The norm that women bear primary responsibility for **children's upbringing** also featured substantially. It not only portrays women as caregivers, but also stems from the idea that care is a natural female duty and skill. Among women, the norm was increasingly contested, particularly considering the dual burden it imposes when combining paid work outside and unpaid work inside the home.

> **I think a woman can do anything. She can perform any kind of work, but society limits her. It is the perception of society that specifies what she can do and she cannot do, and it puts limits to the advancement of women. (Female participant, Mother of young woman, aged 26-40)**

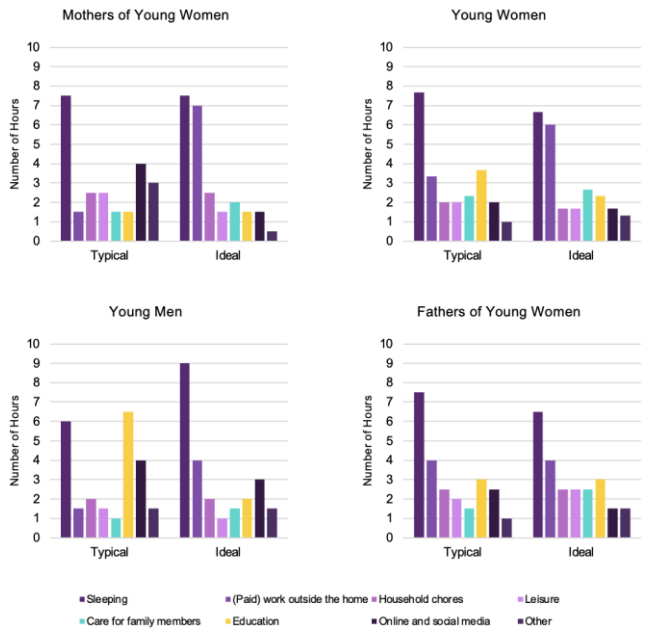
[1] These activities were: (i) sleep, (ii) paid work outside the home, (iii) household chores, (iv) leisure, (v) care for family members, (vi) education, (vii) time spent online or on social media, and (viii) other.

Attitudes towards women's employment cannot be uniformly characterised as either **support** or **rejection**, making it challenging to identify a single dominant normative position clearly.

- Among women, working outside the home was frequently described as empowering. It was often perceived as a means of achieving **financial independence** and **autonomy**, enhancing **intrahousehold bargaining power**, and supporting **self-actualisation**.
- Support is less homogenous across male participants, remaining **conditional**, **relational**, and **bounded** by the male breadwinner norm.

This heterogeneity is further reflected in the **time-use exercise**, in which typical and ideal allocations to paid work outside the home varied substantially within and across participant groups—and in which the most polarised responses were recorded among men (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Average time-use allocation of an unmarried young woman's day across participant groups: typical vs ideal time distribution



Importantly, support for women's employment frequently reflects a **coping strategy to economic pressure and rising living costs**, rather than a fundamental transformation of underlying gender norms.

Job suitability was critical in shaping support for women's employment. Among the norms identified, several translate directly into concrete barriers that women report experiencing when entering the labour market. The most identified barriers were: (i) **workplace environment**, particularly the gender composition of the workforce, (ii) **working hours**, (iii) **sector of employment**, and (iv) commute and workplace **safety**. Other barriers included structural labour market features such as low wages and limited job availability.

Marriage and work decisions

Marriage expectations were one of the most salient themes. The question of how employment intersects with marriageability is not just a theoretical concern but actively negotiated in participants' everyday lives. Yet, one cannot identify a single normative position, nor can one clearly infer the direction or magnitude of a potential marriage market penalty or premium. Determining whether working women face a systematic penalty or premium requires large-scale quantitative evidence that can more precisely identify the distribution of these preferences.

Demand-side considerations

Norms that portray women as **caregivers**, restrictions on **women's mobility** and **late working hours**, and the role of **parental** and **spousal authority** in labour supply decisions are not only normative barriers experienced by women themselves, but also practical considerations that employers incorporate into their recruitment decisions.

One relevant factor influencing hiring is women's **marital status** and transition into **motherhood**. Employers reported explicitly inquiring about women's family circumstances during the recruitment process, suggesting a direct translation of the supply-side constraints into employer behaviour. Perceived incompatibility between motherhood and paid work is justified not only by the practical challenges associated with arranging childcare, but also by participants' scepticism regarding the adequacy of substitute forms of care.

Policy implications

Improving women's economic participation is not only a matter of economic policy. It requires understanding and navigating social norms that continue to shape women's choices and opportunities.

Despite increasingly contested, social norms that underpin men's role as breadwinners and women's role as caregivers continue to be deeply entrenched. Yet, these are not individually held but shaped within households and communities. Interventions that engage husbands, fathers, and broader family networks may be more effective than those that target women alone.

Policies that promote safe working environments, reasonable working hours, reliable transport, and female-friendly workplaces are likely to be more effective than those that focus on wages alone. Expanding access to affordable childcare and encouraging a more equal distribution of household responsibilities can make it more feasible for women to take up paid work. Yet the effectiveness of this policy strategy depends on whether these services are perceived as legitimate and normatively accepted alternatives to maternal care.

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