

Socio-Economic Rights | Section I

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Care to work? Policy Considerations for Engaging Jordanian Women in the Workforce

Modernization is the buzzword of recent policies and plans emerging from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. In the last decade, the Kingdom’s modernization initiatives supporting parenthood have been promoted as crucial solutions to increasing the country’s economic outcomes by promoting labor force participation for women. Currently, female labor force participation hovers at an appalling 14% considering that more than half of university graduates are women.¹ According to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report, released in 2022, Jordan ranks 145 out of 146 countries in labor force participation rate, while ranking first in secondary and tertiary education attainment rates.² The Kingdom has proclaimed that increasing women’s participation in the labor force is a high priority and has a goal of reaching 27% female labor force participation in the next decade.³

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the challenge of adapting care and family policies to the government of Jordan’s objectives, from economic development goals to maintaining social norms. Motives for interventions seem to signal an interest in gender equity and concerns around child development and family preservation. Indeed, for some, Jordan’s emerging caregiving market (and other liberal policies) might signal an easing in archetypal gendered norms around caregiving, domestic work, and women’s roles inside and outside of the public spheres. However, an analysis of the theory underlying care work and social reproduction along

¹ “Distribution of Jordanian Aged 15+ Years by (Females/Head of Household), Governorate, Activity Status, Some of Characteristics and Time. PxWeb.”

² “Global Gender Gap Report 2022.”

³ “Jordan 2025 A National Vision and Strategy | Arab National Development Planning Portal.”

with a review of Jordanian social perceptions—among men and women alike—hints at a potential gap in policy. The paper challenges policymakers to consider the stubborn female labor force participation rate differently. The paper starts by untangling feminist theories around care and work. It then explores Jordan’s specific context regarding norms and perceptions around gender and work and gender and care. From there, it reviews and analyzes Jordan’s policies and presents opportunities for policymaking.

What is care and what is work?

Feminist scholars have explored the contours of care and work within domestic spaces for decades, questioning what qualifies as one or the other, what the purpose of categorization is, and what bargaining occurs surrounding familial and individual valuation of both. Reviewing these ideas illustrates how complex it is to develop policy that seeks to shift organizational dynamics of work and family life. Grounding the country-level discussion with this theory helps to situate Jordan within global capitalism discourse that has increasingly commodified ways of being—creeping across private thresholds.

In the realm of political economy, where the debated categories are production and reproduction, early feminist theorists Dalla Costa and Jones challenged assumptions around the category of productive labor in the 1970s, arguing that domestic labor should be included.⁴ Since the family, popularly understood to be a natural, private, and apolitical institution “[provides] the ideological basis for relieving the state and capital from responsibility for much of the cost of social reproduction,”⁵ they argued that household activities should be scrutinized for their equalizing potential. Building a Marxist argument, they posited that categorizing domestic labor as “work” might be an emancipatory project for caregivers, wages for those who we expect to

⁴ Dalla Costa and James, *Women and the Subversion of the Community*.

⁵ Weeks, “Working Demands.”

SPRING 2024, VOLUME I
THE STUDENT JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN RIGHTS (“SJSHR”)

tend, comfort, nurture, clean, and organize for others.⁶ In the Marxian tradition, wage could be a point of leverage, wage might mean a shift in power.

In re-reading Dalla Costa and James, Weeks teases out a more radical idea around wages from Dalla Costa and Jones: it is not the presence of work that emancipates the worker; instead, the categorization allows the worker to refuse to do it.⁷ Work is a choice with options to demand, refuse, excel, or fail. It is emancipatory because of the choices that come with it. But the promise of choice in exchange for the presence of wages is not a guarantee. Instead, as Weeks points out, while wages for housework may result in some new form of agency, wages may also reinforce the gendered division of labor. Once waged, systems that rest on women performing caring labors are content with maintaining the status quo because it is compensated.⁸ For this reason, other feminists argue that policy that incentivizes women to seek power through wages outside of the household is the better approach to securing choice. Once value is conferred via wages from a source external to the household, women are in a better position to bargain on the value of their time within the household.

The purpose of laying out Dalla Costa and James’ theory and examining it through Weeks’ lens is to set up a discussion around categorization and what intellectual work it does. While Dalla Costa and James’ argument for wages for care work may not hold, the idea that the introduction of wages exposes new forms of *social* capital within existing social dynamics is an interesting one to consider when we observe the stubborn stagnation of Jordanian women’s labor force participation rate. Social capital here refers to acts of ‘demand’, ‘choice,’ and ‘resistance’. Though decades apart, resistance hints at more recent theory around caring labors among indigenous communities as a mode of decolonization. In these narratives, theorists warn against

⁶ Dalla Costa and James, *Women and the Subversion of the Community*.

⁷ Weeks, “Working Demands.”

⁸ Weeks, “Working Demands.”

linking the value of social reproduction solely to that of capitalist production, imbuing totality to capitalist ideology.⁹ For clarity, social reproduction here, borrowing from Laslett and Brenner, refers to the processes involving maintaining and reproducing a people, specifically those who labor and their power to engage daily and generationally in labor.¹⁰ Indigenous social relations, writes Hall, are oriented toward the well-being of community and kin, the power of which transcends social reproduction and shapes engagement not just in capitalist, but also in subsistence production.¹¹ In their caring labors, which extend to tending to the household, the community, and the land from which the community gains sustenance, indigenous women resist the draw of capitalist and colonial ideas of commodifying land and caring beyond nuclear family units.¹²

A review of family structure and female and male attitudes to family life, domestic responsibilities and care, along with dynamics in the country regarding gender and work. From there, a review of Jordan’s policies and what work these policies are trying to do illustrates possible gaps between policy and implementation.

Feminized labor or feminine responsibility in Jordan: families, care, work, and social attitudes

Jordan has one of the lowest rates of female labor participation (hovering around 14% in 2022) in the world.¹³ Among women who have at least a bachelor’s degree, unemployment is 18%.¹⁴ Though high, the more striking number is 53%, the percentage of women who hold at

⁹ Hall, “Caring Labours as Decolonizing Resistance.”

¹⁰ Laslett and Brenner, “Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives.”

¹¹ Hall, “Caring Labours as Decolonizing Resistance.”

¹² Hall.

¹³ “Distribution of Jordanian Aged 15+ Years by (Females/Head of Household), Governorate, Activity Status, Some of Characteristics and Time. PxWeb.”

¹⁴ “Table 2.7 : Population Age 15+ Years by Economic Activity Status, Sex, Educational Level & Nationality (Percentage Distribution). Third Round -2022.”

least a bachelor’s degree but are not economically active (not looking for work).¹⁵ The World Bank calls this the MENA paradox¹⁶: high rates of female education (97%) with low levels of economic participation.¹⁷ In a heavily commodified world, where modes of being are oriented around markets, it’s significant to observe such a large portion of a population resisting the pull of work.

Jordanian women are largely responsible for home-based duties in accordance with gendered social norms which categorize them as caregivers instead of breadwinners. In Jordan’s first gender barometer, completed in 2022, the majority of women identified first as housewives, even those who reported working full time.¹⁸ Exploring the feelings and perceptions around their responsibilities sheds light on how women and their families value and protect their care and home life duties. For example, a survey completed by Oxfam indicates that 83% of women respondents enjoy unpaid care work and both men and women call care work skilled work.¹⁹ Previous research cited in the Oxfam study found that 80% of women and men in Jordan consider care work fulfilling and valuable.²⁰ Not only do respondents imbue their duties with value, they consider their performance of care duties to be superior than the provision of care work by others. Though domestic workers are found in some more wealthy households, private nurseries are a disputed resource. A separate study conducted by the ILO found that women overwhelmingly prefer to leave their children with someone they know instead of a private nursery, despite policy provisions requiring employers to provide childcare at work.²¹ Among

¹⁵ “Table 2.7 : Population Age 15+ Years by Economic Activity Status, Sex, Educational Level & Nationality (Percentage Distribution). Third Round -2022.”

¹⁶ “Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa.”

¹⁷ “Table 2.7 : Population Age 15+ Years by Economic Activity Status, Sex, Educational Level & Nationality (Percentage Distribution). Third Round -2022.”

¹⁸ “Jordan Gender Barometer.”

¹⁹ “Why We Care.”

²⁰ “Why We Care.”

²¹ Triangle, “Assessment of the Maternity Insurance in Jordan.”

working and unemployed women, and among their partners and families, there is a strong reluctance to letting a stranger manage care-related tasks. Their reasons include fear of perceived incompetence by family and members of their community, concerns around privacy, and loss of contributive value.²² These surveys hint at the social status conferred on women who engage heavily in the emotive and tending duties of domestic labor.

Against the backdrop of how women perceive themselves and how others perceive them in the realm of household caring activities, details around women engaging in formal workspaces round out the context for women’s relationship to work.

Findings from Jordan’s first gender barometer survey (conducted in 2022),²³ a policy research working paper from the World Bank (survey completed in 2019)²⁴, and a third comparative analysis of Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, also from the World Bank²⁵, seem to hint that women and their communities are favorable toward women working. According to the World Bank’s study of perceptions in Jordan, 96% of respondents (both men and women) were okay with women working, but only 80% were okay with women working outside of the home. Similarly, 72% were okay with married women working.²⁶ If women work in mixed-gendered environments, the degree of comfort with women working decreased by 38% while if women are likely to return home after 5pm, favorability decreased to 26%.²⁷ Overarchingly, women also overestimate the liberal nature of their partner’s views on a married woman working or returning after 5pm.²⁸ These numbers indicate potential structural barriers (e.g., mixed gendered workspaces and set hours) that are more easily mitigated with policy solutions.

²² “Why We Care.”

²³ “Jordan Gender Barometer.”

²⁴ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen, “Measuring Social Norms About Female Labor Force Participation in Jordan.”

²⁵ “Second State of the Mashreq Women Report.”

²⁶ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen, “Measuring Social Norms About Female Labor Force Participation in Jordan.”

²⁷ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

²⁸ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

Moving beyond the confines of how men and women partners feel about one another’s work habits and domestic chores and toward assumptions about how they perceive others and how they are observed by others *outside of* partnership draws attention back to the question of women. In more than 60% of cases, survey respondents thought that others in their communities did not believe it was fine for women to work.²⁹ Women trended more liberal in considering their beliefs about women working than others, but trended more conservative in positioning themselves against what they thought others might think³⁰. When questions of status were explored by the survey, it became clearer that breadwinner norms might inhibit perspectives on work: women and men worry about how a working woman’s husband will be perceived by others much more than how they consider it themselves.³¹ This point aligns the World Bank’s comparative analysis of care and work in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, which shows Jordanian men and women exceed their regional counterparts in strongly agreeing that when jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.³²

Despite the attitudes raised above about childcare and domestic work, all surveys indicate that both activities are cited by women as at least partial challenges to women working.³³³⁴³⁵

The Policy Space

From perceptions and norms rise questions of what policy is trying to address and whether there are gaps that remain unaddressed.

Jordan has embarked on a series of economic modernization initiatives in the last two decades, and more recent strategies explicitly call out increased participation of women in the

²⁹ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

³⁰ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

³¹ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

³² “Second State of the Mashreq Women Report.”

³³ “Jordan Gender Barometer.”

³⁴ “Second State of the Mashreq Women Report.”

³⁵ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen, “Measuring Social Norms About Female Labor Force Participation in Jordan.”

labor force as paths forward. The country’s Economic Modernization Vision (2023-2025)³⁶ emphasizes unleashing the potential of women as an important mode to grow the country’s economy. Contributing to this high-level strategy are two strategies designed to improve the wellbeing of women and engage them in the workforce: The Strategy Framework National Strategy for Women in Jordan (2020-2025)³⁷, the National Human Resources Development Strategy.³⁸ These two strategies have objectives related to formalizing the care sector, viewing a formalized sector as integral to increasing women’s labor force participation and improving women’s quality of life.

In addition to these strategies, the country has iteratively developed legislation to draw women into the workforce. These policies include care provisions, but also include maternity and paternity leave, maternity insurance, and gender discrimination policies. For example, women enjoy guaranteed maternity leave. Women in the public sector receive 90 days of paid leave, while women in the private sector are allowed 70 days of leave.³⁹ The government also established a paid maternity leave fund in 2011 in order to reduce gender discrimination in hiring and retention of women in Jordan’s private sector.⁴⁰ Differentiating between public and private sector leave policies aligns with the notion that the government believes that women searching for work prefer public sector opportunities, either as civil servants or as educators. In a nod to the discussion above on acceptable work for women, it may also indicate awareness of public perceptions around public sector work vs. private sector work.

³⁶ “Economic Modernisation Vision.”

³⁷ “Strategy Framework National Strategy for Women in Jordan (2020-2025).”

³⁸ “National Strategy for Human Resource Development 2016-2025.”

³⁹ “Second State of the Mashreq Women Report.”

⁴⁰ Triangle, “Assessment of the Maternity Insurance in Jordan.”

Care work, however, tells a different story. Jordan is just beginning to transition its care sector from an informal, home-oriented, and sometimes religious approach to one that is more formalized. Its first care policy was enacted through labor law in 2006 with a seemingly low threshold for access, and then amended in 2019 to liberalize the threshold further.⁴¹ Jordan’s care policy could be interpreted to actively encourage families to shift from a male breadwinner model to a dual breadwinner model, from “total gender specialization” to “partial gender specialization” per Gornick and Meyers.⁴² However, Article 72, makes care contingent on employment status. Employers, not the state, are obligated to establish nurseries in workplaces when employees collectively have 15 or more children who are under five years of age. In other words, Jordan’s care markets are not a public good. In fact, there are currently only 1,179 licensed nurseries, 2,758 childcare providers, and 12,191 children enrolled in nurseries, leaving nearly 1.5M children without access to childcare services.⁴³ Instead, market benefits—care—may only be enjoyed by those whose labor the market benefits directly from—formal employment. Though production depends on social reproduction, again recalling Laslett and Brenner, the policies as they stand allow the market to remain immune to rewarding the project of caring labors. Informal workers, many of whom are women, do not benefit from access to childcare services (let alone other care options).⁴⁴

In another move to transition its care sector, the country released its National Social Protection Strategy in 2019 to cover the period of 2019 to 2025.⁴⁵ It has three pillars: opportunities for families to be economically self-sufficient through the labor market, empowerment of Jordanians through education, healthcare and social services by helping people

⁴¹ Qutteineh, “Jordan.”

⁴² Gornick and Meyers, “Creating Gender Egalitarian Societies.”

⁴³ “Study Highlights Correlation between Childcare Services and Women’s Workforce Participation.”

⁴⁴ “Why We Care.”

⁴⁵ “Jordan National Social Protection Strategy (2019-2025).”

to remain integrated within their families and communities; and social assistance enabling the poor to maintain a basic level of consumption with dignity.⁴⁶ Within the first pillar, the Ministry of Social Development calls for the government to develop regulations for home-based businesses, explicitly naming childcare as an informal business that needs to be brought from the informal to the formal sector. Universities have been essential to effectuating the transition. Four universities, supported by a collaboration between the Ministry of Social Development and international development organizations, offer social work programs.⁴⁷

In developing care policy and strategy in this way, Jordan has also distanced itself from reconciling the work vs family conflict. Care, according to the law, is limited only to childcare, and very early age childcare at that. The policy leaves a significant gap and lack of acknowledgment of other types of care such as elderly, sick, disabled, or other dependent care needs. Though the National Social Protection strategy holds more promise, it focuses on economic conversion (informal to formal) rather than touching on the norms and expectations surrounding care. The market is limited and its contours, including access to it, are prescribed by the state. It is, as Fineman writes, relieved from the responsibility of reproducing society and is largely self-regulated and self-referential with regard to the important social roles it performs.⁴⁸ Indeed, tying childcare to work in this way does little to acknowledge the values ascribed to the role of care and domestic work cited above in many surveys.

⁴⁶ “Review of Jordan’s National Social Protection Strategy Pillars Recommended.”

⁴⁷ “Universities Partner to Rethink Social Work in Region.”

⁴⁸ Fineman, Martha, “Care and Gender.”

Care to work as a public good?

How then, to proceed? On the question of what intervention and when, the World Bank’s report on social norms and perceptions of caregiving and work proposes a framework to assess when interventions may be introduced to address barriers. Taking the shape of an s-curve, the framework illustrates that when norms are high because a population has highly internalized them, then the only intervention that may address the norm is an expensive norm change such as incentives and agenda building around political mobilization. When a population enjoys pluralistic ignorance (for example, all participants hold similar private but unshared views), disclosing these views to peers shifts a collective willingness to exhibit changed (liberalized) norms. Law is only suggested when the social norm enjoys active opposition and fairly public support for opposition.⁴⁹

In Jordan’s case, social perceptions that cast a positive light on gender and work tend to be privately held as noted above. Disclosing these views, in accordance with the World Bank’s framework may facilitate an increase in women seeking work opportunities; however, it does little to acknowledge the social significance of women’s role in caring labors, nor does it address the limitations of current policy offerings described above. Policy, per the World Bank’s framework, whether maternity leave, maternity insurance, anti-discrimination, or care laws do little to shift norms and perceptions unless loud opposition to these issues exists.⁵⁰

Further, on the issue of what policy does (or what wage does) as taken up by Weeks in her rereading of Dalla Costa and James, the approaches outlined in the current economic vision bring women into conversation with existing market structures, but they are not in dialogue.

⁴⁹ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen, “Measuring Social Norms About Female Labor Force Participation in Jordan.”

⁵⁰ Gauri, Rahman, and Sen.

SPRING 2024, VOLUME I
THE STUDENT JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN RIGHTS (“SJSHR”)

They are not, as Fineman argues they should be, responsive to the experience of motherhood.⁵¹ They do not, in the words of survey respondents, acknowledge the pride taken in contributing to family and communal development.⁵² Instead, they should, as Fineman urges, build on positive and care-affirming norms associated with archetypal ideas of mothering to set out state services for women. Dependency and vulnerability, she writes, should be woven into these policies.⁵³ Institutions and structures that define life’s circumstances and opportunities hold humans hostage to them.⁵⁴ Recognizing the strain woven into current policy around work and supposed interventions for social support, the act of not working takes on a resistant hue.

In the face of insufficient policies, what is at stake? Zooming out, women traditionally make up a significant majority of unpaid caregivers; in a 2018 report on caregiving, the ILO estimated the number of women involved in care roles to hover around 250 million worldwide, nearly double that of men.⁵⁵ As for unpaid care, a similar survey of 67 countries indicates that women spend roughly 4.5 hours per day on unpaid care, more than three times that of men.⁵⁶ In the throes of lockdown, the dynamism of emergent policymaking ran parallel to a sudden popular awakening to the importance of this group. Women were disproportionately burdened during lockdowns and school closures.⁵⁷ By mid-2021, 34% of women respondents reported an increase in direct care when contrasted with pre-COVID-19 levels. As for indirect care, 31% of women respondents reported an increase in care hours. If employed, their hours dropped along with their earnings as their responsibilities increased. Over one third of women respondents (35%) reported

⁵¹ Fineman, Martha, “Care and Gender.”

⁵² “Why We Care.”

⁵³ Fineman, Martha, “Care and Gender.”

⁵⁴ Fineman, Martha.

⁵⁵ Senghaas-Knobloch, “ILO Policy in Perspective.”

⁵⁶ International Labour Office, “World Social Protection Report 2020-22.”

⁵⁷ Alfes et al., “COVID-19 and Informal Work in 11 Cities: Recovery Pathways Amidst Continued Crisis.”

a decline in their earnings.⁵⁸ News outlets shined attention on the issue (“50 Million Americans Are Unpaid Caregivers. We Need Help” – New York Times)⁵⁹, yet less than 40% of those surveyed by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, a global network devoted to research and advocacy for informal women workers, received relief in the form of social protection coverage.

Zooming back in, these gendered statistics, taken together with Jordan’s norms and perceptions regarding care, gives unpaid caregiving new symbolism of both economic and social import. As Zuniga-Fajuri et al describe, the contributions made by unpaid caregivers hold a certain “social value and respectability.”⁶⁰ Eva Senghaas-Knobloch builds on this point, writing that traditional approaches to categorizing and advancing the rights of unpaid caregivers fall short of their needs. Her contribution urges the international community to recast caregivers’ work itself as a public good. Doing so, she writes, would reorient public understanding to agree that caregiving underpins the global economy and must be given due recognition.⁶¹ In this light, caregiving takes on the characteristic of a public good. Caregiving, for example, does not infringe on other people’s enjoyment of care. Everyone benefits from the contributions of caregivers. Their points go beyond James and Dalla Costa’s argument of wages for work as a monetary reward and more to Weeks’ argument of the power of demand.⁶² In categorizing caregiving as a public good, it takes on economic value, but not in the same way that it does when exchanged for wages. Instead, as a public good, it could be acknowledged with basic income, as elevated by Weeks as an alternate remedy for resolving the strained relationship

⁵⁸ Alfors et al.

⁵⁹ “Opinion | 50 Million Americans Are Unpaid Caregivers. We Need Help. - The New York Times.”

⁶⁰ Zúñiga-Fajuri, Hatibovic, and Gaete, “A Gendered UBI Proposal for the New Chilean Constitution (or Why Being a Surfer Is Not the Same as Being a Caregiver).”

⁶¹ Senghaas-Knobloch, “ILO Policy in Perspective.”

⁶² Weeks, “Working Demands.”

between domestic reproduction and waged production.⁶³ It is a revisioning that is also advanced by former Special Rapporteur Phillip Alston and Zuniga-Fajuir among others.⁶⁴⁶⁵

Toward a “modern” vision

As Jordan considers its economic modernization goals, it must more closely engage with the women whose labor the government so urgently wants to capture in its workforce. Approaches that exclude informal workers, limit care services to private market-based offerings, and allow social support only for working women and families by way of maternity leave and maternity insurance are insufficient to entice women. Though community-based social norms and gendered obligations certainly inhibit women to a certain extent, ignoring the pride woven into these norms and perceptions makes Jordan’s policies in their current vision untenable. It is critical for policymakers and feminist scholars alike to investigate social perceptions further and, through ethnographic examination, the specific experience of social reproduction in Jordanian family networks. Left unanswered here is whether the home is a site of resistance and whether the absence of educated women is an expression of resistance. This is an area for further research and one worth pursuing particularly for development practitioners, feminist economists, and women’s rights advocates who are at the forefront of efforts to engage and empower a female workforce.

⁶³ Weeks.

⁶⁴ Alston, “Universal Basic Income as a Social Rights-Based Antidote to Growing Economic Insecurity.”

⁶⁵ Zúñiga-Fajuri, Hatibovic, and Gaete, “A Gendered UBI Proposal for the New Chilean Constitution (or Why Being a Surfer Is Not the Same as Being a Caregiver).”

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