Norms and Beliefs Affecting Women's entry to the job market: A comparative analysis between Jordan and Pakistan

CRIF Research

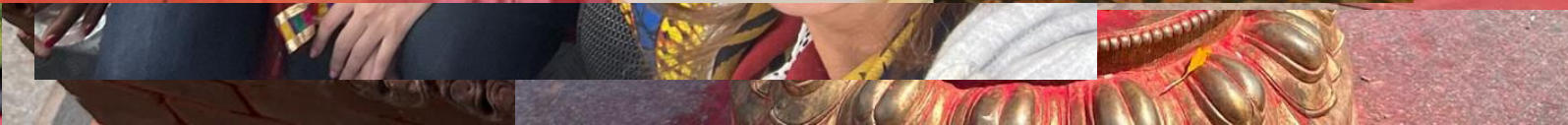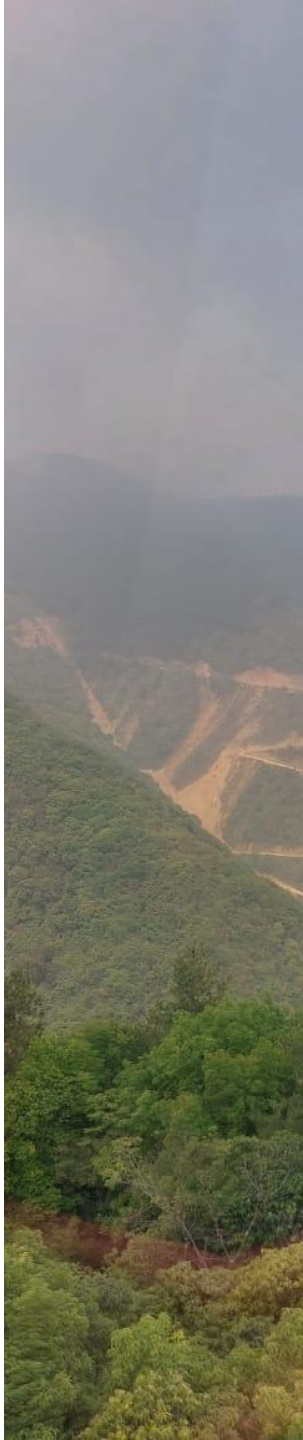Prepared by Dr. Mayyada Abu Jaber & Hina Saleem

12 November 2025

Opening Thinking Question

Respond to any <u>one</u> of the following questions in the chatbox:

1. (As a woman), did you have to negotiate your decision to work with your family members?

or

1. Do you see women around you having to negotiate their decision to work with family members?

Why?

Lower secondary completion rate, female (% of relevant age group)

Legend: Pakistan, Jordan / World, Pakistan, Jordan

Research

Research questions:

- How are <u>beliefs and norms held by close relatives in Jordan versus Pakistan</u> affecting women in terms of their ability to participate in the formal labour market?

- What are the <u>factors and/or belief systems related to close relatives that **facilitate** women</u> in Jordan versus Pakistan to participate in the labour force market?

- In the context of Jordan and Pakistan, <u>what support mechanisms can be introduced</u> to influence beliefs and norms at the family-level to facilitate female labour force participation?

Aims & Objectives:

- Deep-dive into the role of beliefs and norms held by close relatives that hinder FLFP.

- Support mechanisms and factors that allow women to transcend these beliefs which in turn allows them to actively participate in the labour market.

Methodology:

Primary Research:

- Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) uncovers the lived experiences of a given category of women

- Aims to engage women with feminist perspectives, thus challenging gender bias

- Aims to elevate and understand voices of women participants, in order to comprehend gendered relations between men and women

- Ficr Circle discussions create a safe space for women to engage in discussion freely, forming primary data Uses a feminist approach of trust, transparency, and inclusivity whilst building on existing knowledge.

Secondary research:

- Literature review with the context of Pakistan and Jordan, giving reasons to highlight trends in FLFP.

Jordanian Sample: (16-24 Yrs).

FICR circle	No. of women	Working Status	Geographic location
1	6	Non-working	Rural: Sweimeh, Dead Sea region,
2	6	Working	Rural: Sweimeh, Dead Sea region,
3	6	Working	Rural: Shouneh, Dead Sea region,
4	6	Working	Urban: Irbid city
5	6	Non-working	Urban: Irbid city

Families' KIIs	Working Status of the female relative	Geographic location
3	Working	Urban: Irbid city
3	Non-working	Urban: Irbid city
3	Working	Rural: Shouneh
0	Non-working	Rural:

Pakistani Sample:

Families' KIIs	Working Status of the female relative	Geographic location
3	Working	Urban: Karachi-South
3	Non-working	Urban: Karachi-South
3	Working	Rural: Matiari district
3	Non-working	Rural: Matiari district

| FICR circle	No. of women	Working Status	Geographic location
1	6	Working	Urban: Karachi-South
2	6	Non-working	Urban: Karachi-South
3	6	Working	Rural: Matiari district
4	6	Non-working	Rural: Matiari district

Jordan

Women Employment in Jordan

- Women's Workforce Participation– 14.5% (contested due to informal labour market)

- Women are the most prominent victims of unemployment in Jordan

- The most active age group for women is 25 to 29 years old, representing 38.8% of female workers

- Women's economic participation drops after marriage and the birth of the first child

- 20% are the early-stage entrepreneurs ETA.

- Women make up 9.1% of senior management positions in companies.

- The public sector is labeled as more 'feminized,' and the majority of women are employed in this sector, offering stability with predictable working conditions, and thus more compatible with family life.

- Women tend to stop working or retire earlier than men.

Jordan Regions
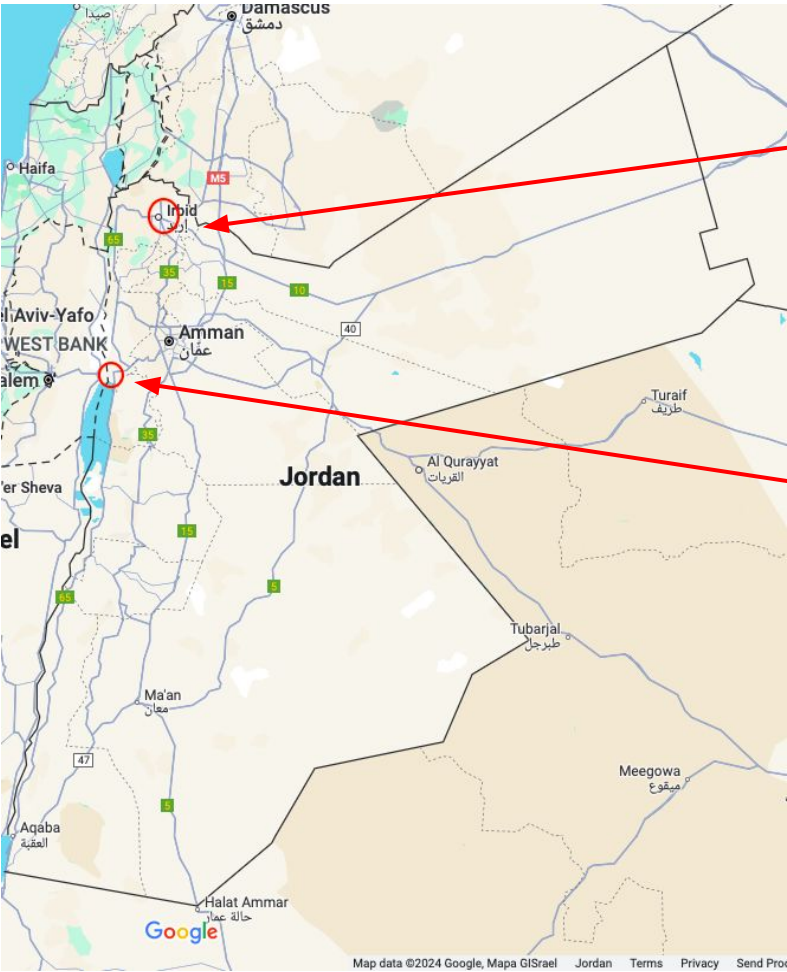
Indicator	Irbid	Shouneh-Dead Sea (Jordan Valley estimate)
Female Literacy	93.4%	~90%
Male Literacy	98.4%	~95%
Female Labor Participation	13.9%	10–12% (estimated rural)
Female Unemployment	39.7%	40–45% (limited formal jobs)
Female Higher Education Enrollment	58%	<40% (fewer tertiary institutions)
Main Female Employment Sectors	Education, Health, Public Administration	Agriculture, Food Processing, Home-based Work

Limitations to the Research in Jordan

- Research sample was relatively small and constrained to Dead Sea (rural) and Irbid (urban), thus the findings may not encompass the diversity of experiences and socio-economic contexts. Inability to generalise results across a population.

- Challenges accessing and engaging with families of participants. Privacy concerns and apprehension led to families refusing to meet with researchers.

- Hesitation limited the collection of data, leading to <u>selection bias</u> and affecting the information of families that were open to discussing the topic of FLFP and employment choices.

Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into FLFP in Jordan. Future research could cover additional regions to gain a more in-depth understanding across Jordan

Family Mindset & Influence

Employed women:

- **Conditional Support**: Families approve work within 'respectable' sectors. (No work in small shops (Irbid) or hotels (Dead Sea)

- The family desires for women to secure a "good job" with a good salary

- Fathers are decisive, and mothers are protective.

- Disappearance of a "culture of shame" - rigid views are changing

- Support driven by economic necessity.

- Shift from protection to pragmatic acceptance.

Unemployed Women:
- Family as Gatekeeper.
- Mothers fear workplace harassment.
- Brothers & fathers restrict movement.
- Collective decision-making overrides individual choice.
- Guardianship narrative. Women are honored by staying at home and having the family provide for them.

Women are honored by staying at home and having the family provide for them.

Family Perception Regarding Labour Status Differences

"*I won't let my daughters work for 200JD a month, that doesn't make sense. If salaries were higher, around a minimum of 400JD then I would have no problem with it, even if she finishes at night.*" The father of a non-working participant

Employed women:

- Families were more likely to say there were cultural shifts.

- Benefit from supportive family structures that encourage their careers.

- Fathers as allies, encouraging education & employment.

Unemployed women:

- Men as breadwinners, women as caregivers (cultural argument).
- Public sector idealized; private sector stigmatized
- Family-imposed restrictions stem from either family honour, safety, or the preservation of traditional roles
- Societal and family expectations that prioritize traditional roles.
- Disincentivised by low wages and hours that are incompatible with personal life.

Women's Agency

Employed women:

- **Choice:** Demonstrations of <u>agency in motivations for employment</u>: desire for financial independence and self-improvement.

- <u>**Economic Agency:** Saving for further education and advocating </u>for themselves in family discussions regarding employment.

- **Voice:** Choosing jobs that align with needs, e.g., flexibility (Dead Sea area)

- **Strong Argument:** The discussion had a more progressive attitude regarding women's rights.

- **Legal rights:** Higher average age of marriage, and would identify certain terms in the marriage contract (legally aware)

Unemployed Women:

Choice: Own Criteria and limitations
- Work is desired **"if"** standards are met, which adds obstacles, such as salary, working hours, safety, and growth.

External criteria and limitations:
- Demand for previous experience.
- Family expectations when engaging in the workforce.

Early marriage limits opportunities for education and employment, leading to a cycle of dependence.

Impact of Economic Situation

Employed women:

- Make a deal with their families to help economically with the cost of living.

"Everything is more expensive now, and life is becoming more difficult," - FGD working participant

- Some women work to be able to afford their studies"

"For me , I study and work , and I also support my family" - FDG working participant

- Some women believe men now want to marry a working woman because a single income is not enough for a family

"I don't think that men are against women working, it could even be the opposite", - FDG working participant

Unemployed women:

- The economic crisis has discouraged women from working due to its impact on <u>low wages.</u>

<u>"</u>Why would I work 10 hours for 200 JOD? It's not worth it." – FGD, Irbid

- To some, the effort of the job and the difficulties that surround it (including safety issues) it is not worth the small salary.

Digital Empowerment

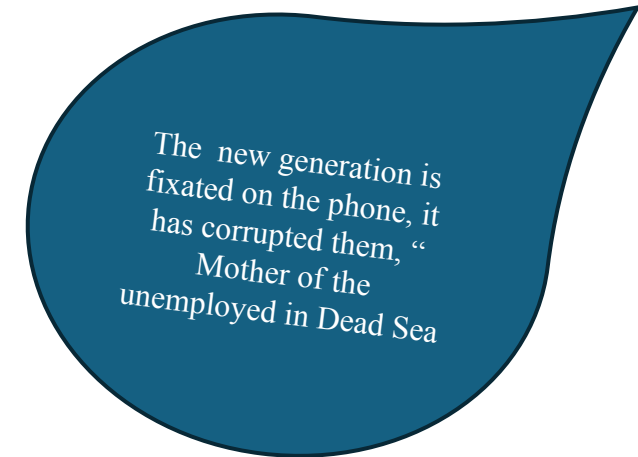• Phones connect women to knowledge, work, and the world.

"Before, we needed permission to go out; now, I attend training from my phone." – FGD participant, Dead Sea

• Online marketplaces, e-commerce, and enable entrepreneurship.

"My phone is my school and my job; I learned how to design and sell online." – FGD participant, Irbid

Remote work platforms open new employment pathways.

"My mother says phones ruin girls, but for me, it's how I found my purpose." – Young woman, Irbid

The new generation is fixated on the phone, it has corrupted them, " Mother of the unemployed in Dead Sea

Restrictive use of phones as mothers fear social exposure and harassment via phones.

Regional differences: Movement Restriction

Irbid

Urban areas:

- Greater personal freedom
- Normal for women to walk around the city in day and at night.
- Women may participate in activities with limited family control.
- Allow for autonomy and agency over daily lives
- Collective movement is encouraged at night.

Dead Sea

Rural areas:

- Greater restrictions in movement and autonomy.
- High familial control - women rarely leaving the house alone
- Permitted to leave the house under the supervision of trusted women in daylight
- Safety of roads (lights at night..etc.)

"For us, because most of us in this area, even if we are married, we live with the extended family in the same house, it is hard just to go out for work or not, because then it is a family opinion and we need the permission of the whole family, it is not an individual decision." FGD non-working participant, (Dead Sea).

"Yes of course we go out as girls, and my sisters too, our parents are okay with us going out with our friends in the city." FGD non-working participant, (Irbid).

Regional differences Family Mindset & Influence

Irbid (urban):

- Families supportive of women if certain criteria met e.g., type of job, working hours, good salary, safe and clean.

- Jobs in certain sectors such as malls and small shops viewed with disapproval because of safety concerns.

- Teaching, healthcare or office-based work often preferred.

Dead Sea (rural):

- Priority of economic necessity over job quality - less about status and more about survival
- Women working in physically demanding jobs are more normalized
- Many women cited male relatives as the main barrier to entering the workforce
- Restriction on sectors, such as hotels or tourism.

Regional Differences

Irbid (urban): Structural Barriers

- Greater agency
- Families show a progressive attitude; no families were opposed to women working, but safety was an issue.
- Breadth of employment opportunities.
- Women can pursue higher education, partly due to the higher average age of marriage.

Dead Sea (rural): Cultural Barriers

- Limited autonomy and agency
- Barriers include adherence to traditional gender roles and resistance from male family members.
- Limited acceptable sectors
- Societal emphasis on early marriage creates a cycle of dependency.

Hope for the Future

- A noticeable shift in societal attitudes, redefining the concept of honor.

- Men redefining masculinity as partnership, not control.

- The digital era is reshaping norms faster than policies ever could.

- Early marriage has become less common, with the growing acceptance of broader educational and career opportunities for women.

- New fields of work are becoming more acceptable for women, e.g., tourism and retail sales.

- Many participants prioritized completing their education and finding employment before getting married.

- Legal awareness empowered women to reclaim their agency and actively negotiate for their future.

The Road Ahead

- **Education, legal rights, and negotiation skills** have empowered Jordanian women to redefine power and actively shape their futures.

- **Digital access**, particularly through smartphones, has emerged as a tool of emancipation, opening up learning and economic opportunities, while also reflecting intergenerational shifts in social norms.

- **Collaborative empowerment** through shared learning and collective progress is creating a more inclusive and participatory future.

- **Evolving masculinities** are shifting from dominance to collaboration, enabling men to become allies in promoting gender equality.

Pakistan

Women Employment in Pakistan

- Pakistan has a low Women Workforce Participation rate at 22.4%

- Participation of women in the labour market in urban areas is lower compared to rural areas
  - In urban areas, despite higher education completion levels for women, their achievements in education are not reflected in their participation in labour markets (Sayeed et al., 2019)
  - 59% Pakistani women above the age of 18 and with a bachelors or above degree are employed; this is 35% less than Pakistani males in the same category (Gallup Data, 2021)

- According to Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) Survey (2019), 40% of women need permission from a family member to seek or remain in paid employment

- Around 43% of men think women should not work outside while 80% of the women think they should be allowed to work (Minardi et al., 2021)

Pakistan regions

Districts in Sindh Province

Karachi-South

- Karachi-South is an urban district
- The literacy rate for women in the district is (15-24 years) is 83%, much higher than the national average of 65%
- Enrolment rates are also high in secondary schooling (80%)

Matiari

- Matiari is predominantly a rural district
- The literacy rate for women in the district is (15-24 years) is very low at 49%, much lower than the national average of 65%
- Enrolment rates are very low in secondary schooling (18%)

Main Findings

Close family relatives (male or female) play a key role in either amplifying or downplaying the barriers (mobility, safety concerns, household/childcare workload) that women face in their decision to work.

Their support or lack thereof was shaped by the following:

- Family mindsets around gender roles
- Family perceptions of social norms
- Influence of Economic factors

Family Mindsets around gender roles

Families perceptions of societal expectations

- Who are the family members whose mindsets matter more in decision-making around women's employment?

- Family mindsets not just govern decision to work but also the choice of career for women

- Employment was often seen as a secondary to household chores and childcare responsibilities

  "If she will not do it then who will take care of these matters." Husband, non-working woman.

- Husbands and fathers frequently invoked interpretations of Islam to argue that a woman's primary role is to care for the family and manage the home

  "You know how men are and what they do with women." Husband, non-working woman.

- Male gatekeepers often bring up fear of sexual harassment or inappropriate behavior from men

- Families also worry that allowing women to work in hospitality, retail, or service industries, will bring shame to the family

- Women themselves are not immune to these concerns.
  - Expressed discomfort with the idea of working in male-dominated sectors
  - Highlighted concerns about long working hours and unsafe work conditions
  - Mirrored the fear of harassment or inappropriate behavior from men, both on their way to work and at work

- Families concerns extend beyond the choice of sector to

  "They should trust us. If they don't trust us, we experience more stress. They create this fear in our minds that men will harass us. When these things are fed to us from the outset we remain tied to such fears and are then more likely to make mistakes." Working woman

Influence of Economic Factors

- Economic pressures arising from inflation or inability of male figures in the family to provide a living, override barriers (including mindsets of gatekeepers) that often prevent women from working

- However, women still stay responsible for managing household responsibilities and their own mothers or mother-in-law taking on the childcare responsibility in their absence

"He would say that the environment isn't safe for women.. But now that we have kids and he alone cannot provide for the family, he's allowed me to take on a teaching job because the hours are less. I can still take care of the home. His family would also discourage him that because I'm a woman I shouldn't work. But now we no longer live with the in-laws." Non-working women (looking for a job)

Women's agency

- Working women experienced a greater confidence in their ability to navigate the outside world through the job market

- The women reporting learning about themselves and managing other people through work experiences

- Working women demand and expect trust from their families as that would make their life easier

- Women who join the workforce also use their earnings to fund further studies and enroll in academic and technical courses that support career growth for them

- Most non-working women that were interviewed opposed the gatekeeping they experienced at the idea of pursuing a career. Especially those who were facing economic difficulties

Changes over the years

- All the working women interviewed expressed that there have been positive changes over the years

  - They shared that this is largely due to increase in economic pressures

  - They mentioned that younger female siblings and cousins ask them for advice on which subjects to choose that would make it more likely to find a job and on how they got permission to work

  - Working women in the family also become a source of sharing leads for job opportunities

  - Commuting together for work also helps them build their case for work

"Thinking has changed a lot. Previously, I used to think that I would not be able to leave my home ever. My elder cousin used to work but then she married someone against her parents' will. Then my family stopped other girls in the family to pursue an education, including me. My teacher requested my father to let me continue, which changed my life." Working woman

Support Mechanisms

a) Policies that can play a positive role in shifting family mindsets when it comes to Female Labor Force Participation (FLFP)?

- **Ensure safety and security**
- **Enable flexibility**

a) Role education institutions and awareness campaigns can play in influencing family mindsets to support FLFP?

- **Engage families**

- **Link learning to careers**

- **Addressing Beliefs Around Gender Interaction**

Support Mechanisms: Q/A for the audience

a) In your context, what kind of policies have played a positive role in shifting family mindsets when it comes to Female Labor Force Participation?

b) In your context, what kind of role education institutions have played in influencing family mindsets to support FLFP?

Thank You