

Adopting the Integral Framework for a Regenerative Eco-feminist Economy (IFREE) to Manifest an Ecofeminist Economy in Jordan Communities

Researcher: Dr. Mayyada Abu-Jaber

Introduction

Jordan faces gender imbalances in workforce participation, despite a 99.11% female literacy rate in the 15-24 age group, the highest in the Middle East (UNESCO, 2019). With women's economic participation below 15%, Jordan has the lowest rate in MENA (Robbin, 2022). The International Labor Organization reports a stark contrast with men at 60%, placing Jordan 138th out of 144 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2019). Achieving a balanced gender representation is vital for a thriving economy, emphasizing the need to address disparities in women's economic engagement in Jordan.

An ecofeminist economy can address gender inequality by fostering sustainable practices, equal economic opportunities, and collaborative, non-patriarchal structures. Rooted in feminist ideals, it promotes conscientious resource use through regenerative processes (Miles, 2018). This approach, aligned with feminist principles, strives for gender-aware and inclusive economic policies (Julie, 1995).

This paper examines women's economic underrepresentation in Jordan due to issues like underemployment, social safety gaps, and traditional gender roles. It proposes an ecofeminist

economy, leveraging the Integral Framework for a Regenerative Eco-feminist Economy (IFREE). Using action research and a "critical subjectivity" approach, the study explores community beliefs on women's economic participation, social protection, gender roles, and guardianship. By delving into women's lived experiences, it suggests IFREE as a transformative tool. The research aims to transform sociocultural, political, and economic structures into emancipatory tools for women in Jordan, addressing the question: "How can these structures empower women?"

The Masculine Country Jordan

Gender Roles

Women remain underrepresented in the Jordanian workforce particularly due to subjective barriers and a belief system that preserves women's traditional roles in the household (World Bank, 2017). *"A sizable gap exists for women between constitutional rights and acceptable social norms, with traditional expectations and cultural restraints continuing to limit women's advancement"* (MoL, 2018).

Gender roles in the country have been much talked about concerning women's economic representation. The evolution of these roles especially the construct of guardianship, and how this concept has affected the perception of safety among women, and by extension, their ability to participate in the labor market will be put in perspective for the actionable strategy to create an ecofeminist economy. Breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty in Jordan becomes emphatic with women considering the lopsided roles of gender, which places more demands on women both at the domestic front and the workplace while giving them less agency to function.

In 2018, close to the Dead Sea in rural Jordan, the author noticed men gathered by the door of the garment factory where their daughters, sisters, and wives worked at the closing hours. The author

assumed it was a daily routine where male "protectors" pick up their "vulnerable" female family members from work. (Abu-Jaber, 2018). Much later, the author discovered that the male members —husbands, brothers, and uncles — of the women workers, line up outside the factory on payday to collect the wages of their female family members. It was the unspoken "promise" that the young girls gave to their families and male guardians when they signed the employment contract with the factory (Abu-Jaber, 2014). This firsthand experience prompts a critical question about women's empowerment: If gainful employment improves lives, should women not decide how to use their earnings for the betterment of themselves, their families, and their communities?

Majcher-Teleon and Slimene (2009) found that women's economic participation does not always reshape domestic labor dynamics or enhance women's agency. Despite contributing to family income, traditional gender roles within families persist, aligning with the author's community-based research. Herein, is a pointer to the deeper nuances of the value system within the country that defines gender roles. In terms of gender and generation (especially intending to break intergenerational poverty), mothers' employment holds a profound impact on children's perception and attitudes to women's employment which leads the latter to have less traditional and more egalitarian views toward gender roles in general (Vukovic, Birkelund, and Stulhofer, 2007).

Male Guardianship

In Jordan, male guardianship, ostensibly aimed at ensuring women's safety, has been criticized for perpetuating control and abuse. Amnesty International highlights the "guardianship system," allowing men to wield discriminatory power, limiting women's freedoms and subjecting them to degrading practices (Amnesty International, 2019). The Personal Status Law reinforces male dominance, requiring guardian consent for marriage and granting unchecked authority over women's choices (Fanack, 2019). Under this law, women under 30 need a male guardian's

permission to marry, and extramarital sex can lead to imprisonment (Rodriguez, 2019). The penal code further empowers male guardians, enabling prosecution based on their complaints (Fanack, 2019). Beyond legal implications, the system raises concerns about social protection for women, emphasizing the need to address the broader issues surrounding gender inequality in Jordan.

Women Social Protection & Social Safety Nets

Jordan has prioritized the development of social protection systems for vulnerable groups, with key government institutions such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Health, and the National Aid Fund playing integral roles (Zureiqat & Abu Shama, 2015). However, the efficacy of these systems in ensuring women's safety and economic participation remains questionable, given persistent disparities between women's education levels and their economic engagement.

Social protection systems globally aim to fulfil essential functions, including safeguarding minimum living standards, enhancing local resilience against shocks, and promoting sustainable livelihoods (White, 2016). Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) argue that such systems contribute to societal-level equity and human rights realization by reducing exclusion, particularly crucial for vulnerable groups like women.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) underscore the global imperative of social protection systems, directly aligning with SDG 1 to end poverty and contributing to various other SDGs (White, 2016). Governments worldwide have committed to implementing effective social protection systems by 2030, enhancing coverage for the poor and vulnerable (UNWomen, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis exposed social protection gaps, disproportionately impacting women, informal workers, and migrants (DFAT, 2022). Robust social protection systems proved vital,

mitigating shocks and aiding recovery (DFAT, 2022; OECD, 2020). The pandemic underscored the crucial, long-term role of social protection in human and economic development. Gender-disaggregated data revealed differing responses to social safety nets (SSNs) by males and females (World Bank, 2014). Despite SSN benefits, a World Bank report (2012) found limited impact on women's household decision-making. In Bangladesh, four SSN interventions minimally affected women's involvement in domestic expenditure decisions (World Bank, 2014). This complexity underscores that women's empowerment goes beyond financial access.

Gender-sensitive programming is vital, evident in Afghanistan where women's restricted mobility hinders social protection access (World Bank, 2018b). Although cash transfer initiatives, like the World Bank-funded program, exist, they may not address gender norms, resulting in uneven impacts on food security (UNHCR, 2018). In Jordan, the 2010 social insurance law aimed at financial sustainability, social justice, and gender equality lacks awareness, particularly regarding maternity insurance incentives (Brodmann et al., 2014). Mass media campaigns, relying on word-of-mouth, led to incomplete understanding, hampering Jordan's Social Safety Net (IRCKHF, 2020). Research emphasizes limited awareness of social insurance provisions among employers and employees, with maternity insurance deemed essential. Economic pressures in 2019 increased expectations for women to contribute financially, yet fears of maternity leave hinder employment, leaving women in a dual role with individual and collective crises (Todman, 2019).

The Author's Experience of the Jordan Situation

While at the Education for Employment Foundation (EFE) in Jordan, with 90 private sector partnerships aiming for 4000 youth jobs and a gender-inclusive strategy (targeting 50% women), it was perplexing to witness a steady decline in women's employment (Abu Jaber, 2014). Despite

economic challenges, the team opted for a non-gender-segregated approach due to the belief that men faced greater job difficulties, leaving women as homemakers. Dissatisfied, the author delved deeper, engaging focus groups targeting women to understand why trained individuals declined job offers post-training.

Using the order rank technique for M&E data collection, the author, and her team structured women beneficiaries' perceptions, allowing them to rank reasons for rejecting jobs honestly. About 60% chose the last category on the ranking sheet without specifying reasons (Abu Jaber, 2014). Through intensified focus group engagement, women began sharing fears and concerns. One woman courageously asked, "What did you do? How did you convince them?" This revealed that the decision against workforce participation was made by male family members, fathers, and brothers, not the women themselves (Abu Jaber, 2014).

The author uncovered an intriguing dynamic within households: sisters faced differing treatment based on their education levels. For instance, one girl could not work in a nearby garment factory, while her sister with university potential attended a distant boarding school. There were more constraints on girls who struggled academically compared to those pursuing university degrees. The author realized the focus on education was more about enhancing marriage prospects than employability. Families aimed to educate girls to increase their suitability for marriage rather than fostering economic participation (Abu Jaber, 2014).

Research Process

Using Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), this study engages women in Jordan to uncover their experiences regarding gender roles, stereotypes, social safety nets, protection, and guardianship. FPAR supports women's rights movements, fostering agency and social critique for

liberatory change. It recognizes that knowledge is gendered and seeks to challenge unjust power relations, integrating feminist perspectives into Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Tenets of FPAR that the author applied in this research include:

1. Pursuing social change
2. Using knowledge for liberation, not domination
3. Embracing intersectionality to represent human diversity in women's experiences
4. Amplifies women's voice as experts and authors of their lives
5. Reconstruct traditional power imbalances
6. Recognizing capacity building as a collective, political action for all.

Maguire (1987) presents Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) as a collaborative method empowering oppressed individuals. Applied to women's emancipation in Jordan, FPAR transcends economics, embodying a human rights issue. FPAR, rooted in women's experiences, exposes androcentrism, engaging participants as co-researchers. The Ficar circles methodology facilitated ethical dialogues. Inclusive representation informed the application of the Integral Framework for a Regenerative Eco-feminist Economy (IFREE). This comprehensive approach, involving diverse women and their male counterparts, identified gaps addressed by IFREE, contributing to the vision of an ecofeminist economy in Jordan.

The IFREE Theoretical Model

The IFREE model takes a holistic approach to social innovation (Abu Jaber, 2022). This means that the model references the diverse dimensions of the society systematically, to drive the creation of an ecofeminist economy and sustain it. The model has a social design that symbolically corresponds with the four-cardinal point (Abu Jaber, 2022). They include:

1. South represents *Nature and Community*. This involves identifying the cultural, geological, historical and environmental wealth in the community. The wealth is protected in the form of ancient conserved land, what is known as *Hima*.
2. East represents *Culture and Spirituality*. This is the reviving of trust and feminist culture embedded in the Arab culture. To revive such rich culture, we refer to the process of *Ihya or revival*.
3. North represents *Science and Technology* through the local and national engagement of critical stakeholders of tribal and religious leaders, politicians, fathers, brothers and husbands, and women. This engagement is called *Ficr* circle.
4. West represents Economics and Enterprise for sustained livelihood through locally-led enterprise of feminist economy to create jobs for women that uphold their agency and protect them. This process is termed *Athar*

The theoretical framework is premised on the assumption that social emancipation is possible by cycling the four cardinal points of Hima, Ihya, Ficr, and Athar in the community/society (Abu Jaber, 2022).

Data Analysis and Adopting the IFREE Model

Women's Perception of Safety

Women's security encompasses personal, financial, and social aspects. Personal security involves freedom from harassment, while economic security entails financial independence. Feeling secure also involves a societal commitment to women's safety, fostering a sense of well-being within the community. In response to questions on safety and social security, a woman stated, "*My definition*

of safety is when I go anywhere, especially the streets and no one approaches me or harasses me."

For another woman, safety is deeper and more internal. In her words: ***"To me, safety means when I work on my fears and flaws to overcome them and to not be scared anymore"***. She also cited family structures and violence in the home as being able to create fear in the minds of women.

This study examines women's safety perceptions, emphasizing familial support's impact on security. Education, employment, and asset ownership enhance personal and financial safety, influenced by family dynamics. Restrictive family attitudes, especially among males, hinder women's educational and career pursuits, affecting financial security. Gender disparities arise in safety perceptions. Sociocultural influences shape views, emphasizing the government's role in safeguarding women. Almost 90% of women desire safe spaces for free expression, emphasizing societal and governmental support in fostering safety. The study underscores the complex interplay of familial, societal, and governmental influences on women's safety perceptions. In a rural community in a governorate in the north of Jordan, a woman shared her thoughts on safety, stating ***"Like, in today's circle, I am giving my opinion without any fear of saying my true opinion"***. For her, the circle in which she can speak freely gives her a sense of safety. Another woman responded to the same question saying ***"I feel safe here as I am giving my opinion and I am not bullied. We are all talking in a free space."***

In Jordan, women often find safety in marriage, relying on partners and religious practices, as trust in friends is lower. Factors enhancing safety include self-defense and accessible education for the physically challenged. Concerns extend to loved ones' security, with perceived safety higher for children in school but lower for daughters at work due to harassment. Views on safety responsibility vary, with some trusting family and others emphasizing government involvement.

The Hima concept underscores women's empowerment by recognizing cultural, environmental and geological wealth within communities, engaging public and private sectors to promote economic sustainability, and acknowledging safety concerns within tribal governance.

Socio-Political Structures to Ensure Women's Safety in the Communities

Jordan's government enacted policies safeguarding women's rights, including social security measures like pensions, health insurance, maternity leave, and work injury insurance. The study reveals that 60.3% of women believe it's the government's responsibility to provide social security, while 37% expect employers to utilize the Social Security Act. Diwan, seen by many as a source of social security, aids women with familial or external issues, contributing to their sense of safety. However, 16% of participants disagree with the diwan's effectiveness. Some women express skepticism about the benefits of social security despite its potential advantages. In the words of one of the women, ***"If I encounter a problem, or my cousin or my brother, the family gathers in the diwan at 5:00 pm and puts their collective efforts towards helping this member. This makes me feel safe and secure on the inside, knowing that I am protected. Moreover, this helps to contain the problem. It does not get bigger between two men for example. Because when family members meet and discuss what needs to be done. This will minimize any given problem."***

Reporting on the role of women in Diwan, the women reported that women who attend Diwan do participate in social events, they take part in politics and that is why during elections more women frequent the Diwans. 17% of the women though believe that the Diwans are for men, therefore women do not play any roles there.

One woman said *“Usually, when there are elections, it is used for both men and women. Here in Kufranjeh, we call it Madafa or diwan, but for every other tribe, there is a diwan. Men gathered more than women if there is a funeral or for elections too.”*

Diwan construct varies among tribes; some lack them, while others restrict women's participation despite having them. *“There are family diwans, but in a small percentage, but they are only dedicated to men, and women are not present in them. It is forbidden for women to just pass in front of men, as it is certain that they are not allowed to interfere in the diwan.”* A woman from one of the tribes said.

Research reports reveal the diwan provides women with a sense of safety and a voice. In these gatherings, women address conflicts and oppression, finding resolutions. Framed within the Arab culture's Hima concept, the diwan becomes a safe communal support system for women.

Guardianship and its Implications for Safety

In Jordan, women often rely on male guardians (husbands or fathers) who influence their employment and even social media choices. Guardian influence varies, ranging from limiting career options to controlling online activity due to perceived risks. The study emphasizes the pervasive role of male guardians in shaping women's professional and online lives, reflecting varying degrees of autonomy within these relationships. A respondent noted her husband's firm stance, asserting, *“I am your guardian, and it is my right to protect you!”*

In Jordan, the guardianship dynamic is evolving, granting women more freedom, yet male control, especially by husbands, persists. Some women work while men handle household affairs, but restrictions remain, such as husbands overseeing market activities. The shifting gender roles are

evident, but autonomy varies across households as some families become less strict on guardianship. A woman had this to say, ***“I am unmarried, and my father is deceased, yet my brother does not interfere.”***

Interestingly, about four of the women interviewed mentioned that a woman is the guardian of herself. This sheds light on a strong opinion given by one Saudi woman, Rania saying, ***“we are entrusted with raising the next generation, but you can’t trust us with ourselves. It doesn’t make any sense.”***

In the labor market, the male guardians have a say as to the kind of jobs that women take. Many of the responses eliminated clothing stores and factories as workplaces for women because they would mix up with so many people in such environments. However, many acknowledge that women work in more sectors these days. One response reads ***“women today work in all sectors. There is an old woman who works in agriculture on a tractor in land ploughing, she is a widow and in need, she has children and doesn’t have a husband”***. Another participant responded: ***“There is a woman who is a widow and delivers milk early in the morning to people”***. Results from the study also show that many young girls now have the freedom to choose their courses of study, unlike what they used to in previous years.

Guardianship is multifaceted for women, providing protection and financial security. For some women, advocacy in inheritance through male guardians enhances women's sense of security. However, guardianship's limitations hinder job opportunities, impacting the financial security and self-esteem of women. The dual nature of guardianship emerges—protection versus constraining autonomy. The IFREE model reevaluates guardianship, emphasizing men supporting women's agency, and contributing to cultural revival within Arab and Islamic contexts.

Gender Role Changes and Women's Employment

Jordanian women agree that the roles of women have changed over the years. 486 out of 572 women affirm that women's roles have evolved, with 63.9% asserting increased participation in work, elections, sports, and civil societies. Home dynamics also shifted, with more women contributing financially and voicing opinions in family decisions. The findings underscore a noticeable transformation in women's societal roles, marking a departure from historical norms toward increased involvement and influence in various spheres. The extent of this change is embodied in this response from one of the women saying, ***“I have been a massage expert for 15 years, and I have no problem doing massage for anyone, and I have no problem working in this field.”*** This is a field that was banned for women in the past.

The evolving roles of Jordanian women respond to rising household expenses, particularly in educating children, reported by 94% of participants. Despite societal norms, women are breaking traditional molds. Education is a key driver, acknowledged by 95.8% of women, catalyzing shifts in gender roles. While some credit political engagement and civil participation, 84.5% attribute change to increased involvement in sports and leadership roles. In certain instances, women resort to rebellion, breaking societal barriers. The multifaceted drivers of this evolution highlight a complex interplay of economic, educational, and personal factors pushing against traditional gender norms in Jordan. As one young woman stated ***“my family discussed with me and they told me that I should not transfer my major to law and that I should remain in my previous major, which is financial and banking sciences. I did not care about this, and I am now studying law.”***

Some of the women in response say that in many families presently, parents can only offer advice and not force their decisions on their children. One can attribute these changes to the exposure that comes with engaging in all the mentioned activities along with education. Society would gradually open to change as it enjoys the benefits of a more literate community of women.

One of the participants said, ***“it used to be reprehensible for a woman to work in the civil defense or the Police, but it is normal now.”***

Gender role survey in Jordan indicates shifts in traditionally male-dominated fields, with 52.3% acknowledging changes in men's roles, albeit less extensively. While men's involvement in various areas has evolved, patriarchy persists, albeit with some relaxation. Contrary to past perceptions, communities, like Maan Qasbah, now recognize mothers' contributions. Women's responses reveal societal compromises, balancing gender role changes with moral values. For instance, workplaces accommodate cultural norms by providing separate spaces for men and women, reflecting ongoing adjustments to align societal shifts with cultural integrity. A young lady who works late night shifts without the interference of her parents was quoted as saying:” ***I used to work in a company called Daraghmeh for clothing, and my shift was at ten o'clock in the evening, and in Ramadan, I used to stay until 2 AM after midnight, and when I got employed, I was 18 years old, but the important thing is that females have a separate section separate from the male section.”***

Parents have begun to harmonize the training and instructions they give to their daughters with that given to their sons as evidenced in this statement from a mother; ***“...my daughter does not go out without my permission and she is not late, she is not like young men, but I also do not allow my son to go out without my permission.”***

There are slight variations though as it is obvious that some of the parents remain stricter on their girls than their sons. However, the disparity is not seen as pronounced as before. One parent mentioned the training she metes out to her son and daughter. She said, ***“if she (daughter) is an employee, she may be late, but everyone knows where she goes in the area, (but (what) if my daughter comes back in the middle of the night with a kick in her stomach!) This applies to my son also, but she should come back sooner.”***

Opinions among women vary on men's evolving attitudes towards women's rights and education, with 14 acknowledging positive changes and four noting a persistent traditional mindset. Economic necessity has compelled women to take on diverse roles, transforming societal expectations. As attitudes towards women working shift, the labor market offers improved opportunities, with employers more willing to assign challenging roles, enhancing women's sense of safety and financial security. This nuanced perspective underscores the complex interplay of changing gender roles, economic factors, and evolving societal attitudes in these communities.

In the IFREE model, moving north is the successful execution of education for women, training programs on agency and specific skillset for jobs.

The Impact of Agency on Women's Labor Market Participation

While many women advocate for the right to choose their jobs and education, 30% still believe their male guardians should make these decisions. The prevailing paradigm, where families dictate women's choices, restricts their options in the labor market. This tension reflects contrasting perspectives on women's agency, highlighting the ongoing struggle between individual autonomy and traditional expectations within these communities. On this basis of restriction, one woman says in her restricted job consideration efforts that, ***“factories have more difficult laws. In the***

teaching profession, at least, you return home at two o'clock in the afternoon, but the working hours of factories start from eight in the morning until six in the evening.” For her, a teaching job is preferable because her family would permit it.

Another respondent said that men have more agency to decide the jobs they want than young women. In her words, *“A young man can decide more than a woman. A girl has a mother to ask for permission, including a father and a brother”*.

The responses show that society and families who still hold on to the agency of women restrict them to fewer professions such as teaching. To the families, these professions suit their perception of safety and morality because these jobs do not require women to ‘mingle’ and work closes early.

The companies for their part also restrict women from certain jobs; they refuse to accept applications for jobs in technology and engineering from women. One woman bitterly complained about her experience with such companies: *“The companies prevent us, I graduated in computer engineering, I went to apply for a job in a Jordanian telecommunications company (Zain), they told me that this section is for males and how will you work with them, (they laughed at me) and I did not work with them because they refused, (Why do they decide that about me?)”*.

It is evident that women still lack a good measure of agency to decide their level of participation in the labor market. Taking away agency from women is like taking their lives away from them and preventing them from experiencing life as sovereign beings. One respondent expressed this, when she said, *“the inner desire for working exists in all women however the orientation of the woman’s family plays a significant role in the decision-making process.”*

This lack of agency is the reason few women are seen in challenging and high-profile jobs, especially in technology and engineering. Agency, therefore, has had a significant impact on the

participation of women in the labor market in the Kingdom. This in turn has an impact on the nation's economy as many women remain dependent or take on smaller jobs that the males in their families permit. In adopting the IFREE model, the author applied the model to the contextual problems that this research paper has highlighted. The adoption and application include:

1. Al Hima: Embracing the IFREE model, women find safety in diwan discussions, fostering local cohesion and advocating for feminist-oriented laws. The diwan plays a crucial role in reviving the authentic Arab culture that values and supports women, countering gender roles and suppressive guardianship.
2. Al Hiya: The IFREE model enables an awakening of the indigenous culture that supports women and gives women agency.
3. Al Ficar: Enlightening women alone on agency proved insufficient. Implementing Ficar circles engaged fathers, brothers, tribal and religious leaders, and political figures to transform repressive cultural and ideological gender roles and guardianship in communities.
4. Al Athar: In implementing the model, empowered women engage in educational and vocational programs for employment opportunities, created through private and public sector partnerships. This level consolidates social safety nets and protection through sustainable enterprises.

Conclusion

Challenges faced by women in Jordan encompass social protection, gender roles, guardianship, and economic participation. A feminist perspective illuminates these realities within patriarchal

systems. The ongoing transformation of ideological paradigms through the IFREE model aims to emancipate women and pave the way for new feminist policies. The subsequent step involves cultivating a generation that views women as essential contributors to Jordan's social, cultural, economic, and spiritual well-being, breaking away from traditional gender norms.

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