



Social Norms and Political Processes: Pathways to Enhance Civic and Political Participation

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

Policy Brief -5

2025

Introduction

The brief addresses the role of social and gender norms in shaping youth participation, with a focus on equitable access and political inclusion. Acknowledging barriers and opportunities, the brief provides recommendations for government institutions, civil society organizations, and political parties to foster more inclusive spaces for youth engagement by addressing both structural and cultural barriers to participation.

The brief is an outcome of the Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Lab, organized by the Arab Renaissance and Democracy Organization (ARDD) in partnership with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, as part of the New Generation Program. It highlights the fifth session of the lab titled “Social Norms and Political Processes: Pathways to Enhance Civic and Political Participation”, and what twenty participants from political science and law students from the University of Jordan discussed in this regard. Following the lab’s work methodology, the session featured Dina Al-Basheer, a lawyer and member of the Jordanian Parliament, and was moderated by Ibrahim Al-Adra, Lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University of Jordan’s Faculty of Arts.

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The Impact of Social Norms on Youth Political Participation in Jordan

With around 70% of its 11 million citizens under 30, Jordan has one of the youngest populations in the world. Despite this, youth remain largely excluded from decision-making and political participation, mainly due to a lack of safe, inclusive spaces for them to express their opinions. Traditional gender roles, particularly in rural areas, further exacerbate this exclusion, as young women are often confined to domestic responsibilities, limiting their access to education and career opportunities. These restrictions reflect a broader societal structure where entrenched norms reinforce gender inequality, granting men more opportunities to engage in political and public life. Young people in Jordan are aware of the social and gender norms that shape their lives and aspirations, as well as the challenges these norms create for equitable participation. Participants in the Policy Lab expressed frustration over how these norms constrain their ability to contribute meaningfully to society.

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“We are aware of the roles we’re expected to play, but we also know that these expectations keep us from contributing fully to society”

(Lab Participant)

Social Norms: Shaping Roles and Limiting Engagement

Social norms fundamentally shape youth participation in Jordan's political and civic life. These norms play a crucial role in building social identity and defining individual roles within society and dictate not only personal choices but also collective behaviors and societal expectations. As discussed in the Policy Lab, social norms are often unwritten yet deeply embedded within the cultural fabric, governing behaviors in ways that are reinforced through family and community traditions. In the Policy Lab social norms were defined as *"customs and traditions that mediate actions and values, which, although unwritten, are collectively upheld by society."* While these norms can adapt over time due to social and power dynamics, they remain resilient and often inhibit progressive change. Values like dignity, freedom, and respect, which are universally cherished across cultures, are mediated by these norms. A participant noted the impact of these entrenched norms, stating,

"Norms are what bind us as a community, but they also hold us back when we try to change"

(Lab Participant)

This dual nature of social norms both binding and restrictive frames the broader struggle young Jordanians face in balancing tradition with aspirations for greater inclusivity.

Disengagement and the Demand for Inclusive Spaces

Research conducted by ARDD in 2022 within the framework of the New Generation (Gen G) program highlighted a growing disconnect between youth and public life. Many young Jordanians expressed feeling marginalized from civic processes and indicated a lack of confidence in political institutions and civil society.

"We want to contribute, but the system doesn't seem to want us. There are no real spaces for us to engage, and even when we do, it feels like our ideas aren't taken seriously"

(Lab Participant)

This widespread disengagement underscores an urgent need to challenge the social norms that stifle youth involvement and to establish inclusive, safe spaces where youth can actively participate in the political landscape.

Balancing Principles with Social Norms

One of the central discussions within the Policy Lab revolved around balancing core democratic principles with the reality of social norms. The importance of values such as freedom of expression and equality was emphasized as they are foundational in a democratic society.

"These principles must be practiced in a way that respects collective community values and maintains public harmony."

MP Dina Al-Basheer

This perspective reflects the understanding that while personal freedoms are essential, they must be harmonized with shared social values to create a participatory environment that respects both individual rights and societal cohesion. In the Policy Lab, participants explored how values and principles like commitment, justice, and honesty differ from norms. While principles are individual and universally respected, norms are community-bound and situational, often deeply tied to local traditions.

"Norms are collective standards that bind us, while values are personal beliefs that we carry with us"

(Lab Participant)

This distinction is vital in understanding how Jordanian society navigates the tension between collective identity and individual rights, shaping behaviors that ultimately impact civic and political participation.

Tribal Structures and their Influence on Youth Political Participation

Tribal structures play a pivotal role in shaping social and political landscapes, especially in regions where traditional governance systems are deeply rooted. These structures exert significant influence over community dynamics, identity, and allegiances, affecting various facets of civic life. As participants in the Policy Lab pointed out, these norms often lead to participation based on societal expectations rather than individual beliefs, especially within tribal structures where loyalty to family or clan often supersedes personal ideology.

"Tribal and family affiliations influence elections, as candidates are often supported based on family ties rather than on political programs or genuine ideological beliefs"

(Lab Participant)



This dynamic reinforces a cycle where political participation is more about meeting social obligations than advocating for policies that reflect personal values.

While these norms sometimes restrict individual freedoms, the youth at the Policy Lab also acknowledged that social customs have their own strengths. Traditions, customs, and community structures create a support network that can, at times, promote engagement, particularly for women. In recent elections, for instance, many young women gained the support of their families and communities, who recognized the importance of female representation in political life. This shows the dual nature of social norms. They can both limit and empower youth participation depending on how they are engaged.

Social Issues Impacting Youth Political and Civic Participation

Through the Policy Lab, participants identified several critical issues impacting their ability to participate in public life, including perceptions of transparency, equitable access to opportunity, and the gender quota system. Transparency and Fairness in Governance were particularly important to participants, who expressed the view that equitable access to opportunities is essential to fostering public trust and encouraging political engagement.

“For youth to believe in our institutions, there needs to be a strong focus on fairness, social justice, and accountability”

(Lab Participant)

Youth called for efforts to increase transparency, which they see as essential for inclusive participation. Wasta and Social Capital were also discussed as both supportive and limiting. While participants acknowledged that wasta can serve as a positive social network, they also highlighted the importance of ensuring that community support does not limit fair access to formal opportunities, especially for marginalized groups.

“Wasta is part of our social fabric,” a youth participant explained, “but there should be pathways for everyone based on their skills and dedication”

(Lab Participant)

In Jordan, *wasta* - the system of influence through family and community networks - is both a means of support and an area of concern when it comes to equitable opportunity. Youth in the Policy Lab acknowledged that wasta provides a valuable social support network, which has historically fostered community solidarity and connection. However, they also recognized that in formal settings, such as employment and political appointments, wasta can limit equal opportunities, particularly for youth and women without established family connections. Dr. Ibrahim Al-Adra noted that “*wasta is a network of family and tribal affiliation that has long played a role in supporting individuals through community solidarity.*”

“We respect wasta as part of our heritage, but it shouldn’t be a barrier to opportunities based on qualifications”

(Lab Participant)

The gender quota system also sparked considerable debate among participants. While the quota system was designed to increase women’s representation in politics, youth in the Policy Lab shared both supportive and critical perspectives on its impact. The 2022 election law, which expanded women’s seats in local councils from 15 to 18, was viewed by some as positive discrimination that helps raise awareness of women’s political roles. However, others felt the quota system inadvertently reinforces stereotypes, positioning women’s roles as supplementary rather than integral to the political process.

“The quota system gives a negative impression that women political participation is not truly earned”

(Lab Participant)

This division reflects the broader societal debate around the quota, highlighting a need for policies that promote gender equality based on merit and competence. These economic disparities lead to varying levels of political participation, as individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds may have distinct priorities and expectations from the political system. Political practices, such as policymaking and resource allocation, can in turn affect social relations due to economic inequality.

Recommendations

For the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Universities

- Develop and incorporate modules on social norms, their impact, and strategies for positively engaging with these norms in high school and university curricula to deepen students' understanding of their role in society.
- Collaborate across educational institutions to create a unified framework for teaching concepts related to customs, traditions, and social norms, promoting consistency in how these topics are understood and taught.
- Increase investment in social research, particularly within the humanities and social sciences, to provide a stronger evidence base for understanding the evolving impact of social norms on civic participation. Facilitate collaboration among researchers to focus efforts on key areas relevant to Jordanian society.

For Civil Society Organizations

- Implement targeted workshops and training programs to educate youth on the significance of political participation and civic engagement, empowering them with the skills and knowledge necessary for meaningful involvement.
- Collaborate with government entities to advocate for policies that increase the percentage of seats allocated to women, particularly within local councils, to support their active participation and representation in decision-making roles across sectors.
- Develop initiatives that highlight and reinforce the role of family and community support in encouraging youth political participation, in partnership with educational institutions and community organizations.

For Political Parties

- Develop youth-focused programs and outreach campaigns to attract young people into party activities, making party involvement more accessible and relevant to youth interests and concerns.
- Work with policymakers to promote legislation that supports youth, and women's access to the political system and reflects the aspirations of the next generation, ensuring political platforms address the needs of a modern Jordanian society.
- Encourage and promote family and community backing for youth participation in political parties, recognizing the influence of family networks and social support in strengthening youth engagement and fostering a supportive environment for political involvement.

For Youth

- **Engage Actively and Confidently:** Your voice is essential. Participate in civic spaces, community initiatives, and discussions that impact your future. Your contributions matter.
- **Promote Positive Social Change:** Respectfully challenge limiting norms by advocating for inclusivity, equity, and shared values. Change begins with critical thinking and constructive dialogue.
- **Lead by Example:** Demonstrate commitment, integrity, and responsibility in your actions. Let your engagement be driven by merit and a desire to serve the common good.
- **Stay Informed and Collaborate:** Strengthen your understanding of civic and political processes. Work together with peers, mentors, and institutions to build a more inclusive and responsive society.

The Generation G (New Generation) project was launched within ARDD in 2021 with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands to energize and encourage youth leadership in promoting gender justice. The project aims to promote dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policy relating to justice, particularly youth and women's rights.

Policy Labs are part of ARDD's research methodology, providing a dedicated space for discussing and researching public policy issues to enhance youth capacities and equip them with the necessary skills to engage in public policy-making processes. The labs also facilitate exchanging opinions with experts and researchers specialized in relevant topics, based on background papers prepared to address these issues.

Established in 2018, The Renaissance Strategic Center is an independent think tank based in Jordan that operates within the organizational framework of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD).