



## Women's Leadership in Jordan: Where Does the Gap Lie?

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

Policy Brief -6

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### Introduction

This policy brief addresses the barriers to women's political participation and leadership, particularly in addressing gender inequality in leadership roles. It provides recommendations for government institutions, civil society organizations, and political parties to reduce the gender gap and promote women's active engagement in political leadership at local and national levels. 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 Pro-

gram. It highlights the sixth session of the lab, titled "*Women's Leadership in Jordan: Where Does the Gap Lie*" 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 first-hand testimonies from Dr. Abla Abu Ulba, politician and First Secretary of the Jordanian People's Democratic Party and it was moderated by Dr. Amani Al-Sarhan, Associate Professor at the Center for Women's Studies at the University of Jordan.

## Addressing the Gap: Women's Civic and Political Participation in Jordan

Despite ongoing efforts to bolster women's roles in politics and leadership within Jordan, a great gender gap persists across various sectors. Jordan's standing in the *Women's Power Index* is indicative of broader gender equality challenges, ranking 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Arab world and 110<sup>th</sup> globally. For example, data from UN Women reveals that women hold less than 5% of board positions in the **private sector**, with a staggering 78% of companies lacking female board members. Senior management roles are similarly affected, with women making up only 9.1%, and a mere 2.6% of companies have women serving as chairs<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the political parity scores 22 out of 100 points, a minimal female engagement in political matters, with women constituting only 17% of the Cabinet, 13% in the national legislature, and 32% in local government.<sup>2</sup> According to the 2023 edition of the Gender Gap Report, Jordan ranked 124<sup>th</sup> in political empowerment, with only 14% female representation in **parliament** and 20% in **ministerial roles**<sup>3</sup>. However, following the September 2024 elections, the percentage of women in parliament increased to 19%<sup>4</sup>, while the proportion of women in ministerial roles decreased to 16%<sup>5</sup>.

This disparity is also pronounced at the Jordanian municipal level, where women constitute only 32% of the **councils**. This exacerbating gap can be reconnected to the baseline power structures and norms that permeate society and perpetuate inequality. These include deep-rooted customs and traditions that confine women to domestic roles, lack of serious commitment from decision-makers to promote institutionalized women's participation and the traditional favoring of men in the public sphere compared to women. Economic factors such as high unemployment rates and the unequal job allocations further exacerbate women's marginalization. Additionally, societal expectations and the fear of backlash and cyberbullying inhibit women from actively participating in political and public life. As highlighted by young participants, addressing these issues requires cultural shifts, the sustained normalization of women's political involvement, legislative reforms, and a rethinking of domestic role divisions:

*"It is difficult to make people change their minds, but there can be a normalization of women's participation in politics; but normalization is a transmission that can happen only through more equal participation. "*

**(Lab Participant)**

## Leadership Through the Eyes of Jordanian Youth

Recognizing the challenges presented in the statistics, Policy Lab participants were asked to identify male and female figures who embody leadership in Jordanian society. Notably, they mentioned mainly accomplished women who made significant societal contributions despite the challenges inherent to the context: among these were *Rula Al-Hroub*, *Tujan Faisal*, *Maryam Al-Lawzi*, *Rima Al-Abadi*, and *Sherine Abu Aqla*. This trend suggests how women breaking barriers and overcoming prejudice represents a strong inspiration for the next generations, thus supporting a change that sees women and men equally capable of exerting leadership for the wellbeing of their collectivity:

*"Women's participation is only seen as a political right, but it is an existential right"*

**(Lab Participant)**

Exactly in this regard, participants articulated their vision of an ideal leader, envisioned as an inspirational figure and a beacon of guidance who wields the power to shape the collective will. Such a leader is the epitome of responsibility, fostering collaboration and unity. With an unwavering ability to navigate through adversity, true leaders stand as problem-solvers in the face of daunting challenges, set goals with the intent to achieve them, manage emotions with composure and approach risks with careful calculation. A leader exemplifies integrity, is grounded in pragmatism, and upholds high **ethical standards**, actively listening to others and using charisma to foster authentic connections.



*“Leadership is not merely about holding a position; it’s about the ability to inspire, lead with integrity, and make tough decisions with empathy and wisdom.”*

**(Lab Participant)**

Agreed upon by all participants, this type of leadership is not merely a position but a call to action, rallying individuals toward a common cause.

Accordingly, equal opportunities for women must be fought for by both men and women, understanding the immense potential of integrating more women can have on the community wellbeing and the development of social justice for all. As individuals alone cannot achieve change, collective efforts are deemed more effective. In this sense, leadership is understood as teamwork, an exercise regulated by internal, unspoken laws that serve the scope of promoting acceptance of others and respecting each single individual.

*“According to my political experience as a leftist, the solution comes only in the form of organized work. This in fact entails some rules, the first of which is respect for teamwork and acceptance of the other, adherence to social and political democracy and the right of all to participate, whether in political work, trade union, or any form of collective work”.*

**Dr. Abla Abu Ulba**

## Youth Discussing Practical Solution: The Role of Civil Society and Education

The Lab discussion highlighted the pivotal role that CSOs (civil society organizations) play in promoting this cultural and social change and strengthening women’s leadership in Jordan. These entities are indeed instrumental in advocating for legislative reforms, challenging deep-rooted practices, and providing support networks for women who seek to participate more, all crucial elements to reach social justice and a fairer representativeness. Indeed, CSOs can mobilize resources, raise awareness, and foster environments where women’s contributions to political and social life are valued and encouraged, with educational initiatives and efforts promoting equality and justice crucial for a long-term change. As lab participants stressed, these initiatives

should start at the grassroots level, providing localized perspective that acknowledge specificities and peculiarities of the country; incorporate social justice into school curricula, and extend public awareness campaigns that challenge traditional stereotypes.

At the core of this strategy should stand a continuous collaboration of CSOs with educational institutions, media outlets, and governmental bodies to design and implement programs for women’s leadership in more traditional, male-dominated environments. In the participants’ view, by highlighting the achievements of Jordanian and regional women leaders and by understanding and considering local specificities, these campaigns can efficiently inspire a new generation of women to reach leadership positions and more actively participate in the public and political sphere.

*“To effectively think about future leadership, you must first know the history of Jordanian people, their political and social history”*

**(Lab Participant)**

International examples and best practices from other countries were discussed in this sense, offering valuable insights for the Jordanian context and its actors. For example, post-genocide Rwanda implemented quotas and policies to ensure women’s representation, fostering social reconciliation and national development. In the last decades, this strategy had a significant impact on the institutionalization of women’s participation: Rwanda is indeed the first country in the world with female majority in parliament, with 63.75 % in the Chamber of Deputies and 53,8% in the Senate. Successful experiences like that of Rwanda demonstrate the impact of systematic reforms and inclusive policies in the pathway for equality and social justice. Adapting such practices to Jordan’s socio-political structure could involve strengthening legislative quotas, promoting women’s involvement in peacebuilding and community development, ensuring women’s representation in all decision-making processes, not only in political institutions, but also within their families, at community level, in their governorates, ending with parliamentary setting.

*“Participation has a powerful meaning in all contexts, whether in meetings and celebrations, under the spotlight, or when building relationships and networks”*

**(Lab Participant)**

## Recommendations

### *For Policy-Makers, For the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Universities*

- **Mentorship and Networking Programs:** Establish programs where experienced female politicians mentor aspiring women leaders, building a supportive community in a society that still faces challenges in accepting women in political roles
- **Economic Empowerment Programs:** Promote female entrepreneurship, provide financial literacy training, and facilitate access to capital. Encourage businesses to adopt gender-sensitive hiring practices and create more job opportunities for women.
- **Address Historical and Cultural Barriers and Integrate Findings into Educational Initiatives:** Conduct research to identify and address historical and cultural barriers that hinder women's political participation. Use the findings to inform policies and initiatives aimed at increasing women's representation in leadership roles. Integrate these findings into school curricula to educate young people about gender equality and the importance of women's participation in leadership roles.

### *For Civil Society Organizations and Political Parties*

- **Promote Inclusive Leadership Training Programs:** Develop and implement leadership training programs that are inclusive of both men and women, focusing on the unique challenges and strengths of each gender. These programs should emphasize qualities such as integrity, ethical conduct, and active listening.

- **Highlight Successful Female Leaders and Launch Public Awareness Campaigns:** Create platforms to showcase the achievements of prominent female leaders in Jordan. Launch public awareness campaigns to educate society about the importance of women's leadership and political participation, highlighting the benefits of diverse leadership and the positive impact it has on society.
- **Encourage Mentorship, Networking, and Economic Empowerment:** Establish mentorship programs that connect emerging female leaders with experienced mentors. Encourage networking opportunities to build a supportive community that fosters growth and collaboration. Support female entrepreneurs by offering financial support, training, and resources to help women start and grow their own businesses.

### *For Youth*

- **Challenge Stereotypes and Normalize Leadership:** Engage actively in reshaping societal perceptions by supporting and promoting women's leadership as a normal and essential part of political and community life.
- **Support Collective and Inclusive Action:** Participate in organized civic initiatives that foster teamwork, equity, and democratic values -essential tools for advancing women's rights and broader social justice.
- **Promote Awareness and Education for Equality:** Advocate for educational efforts -formal and informal -that highlight the value of women's participation in leadership and politics, starting from your own schools, universities, and communities.

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).

## References

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