



## Women, Youth, and Leadership: Lessons Learned

GenG - New Generation Program

Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Briefs Series

Policy Brief -8

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### About the Brief

This policy brief explores the evolving dynamics of leadership among youth and women in Jordan, positioning leadership as a central enabler of civic and political participation. It draws on insights from the *Youth Civic and Political Participation Policy Lab* -organized by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) in collaboration with the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan -particularly the 8th session, *Women, Youth, and Leadership: Lessons Learned*, held in October 2024. This session served as a validation space, building on

discussions from the first three Labs (February–May 2024), where twenty students of political science and law examined topics including: 1) *Social Norms and Political Processes*; 2) *Women's Leadership in Jordan*; and 3) *Youth Social Capital*. The session also integrated preliminary findings from the 2024 Gen G research on inclusive leadership, exploring how leadership traits and practices can support youth and women's meaningful engagement across public, private, and civil society sectors.

## Sectoral Leadership and Its Role in Shaping Civic and Political Participation

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping civic participation and strengthening the relationship between citizens and institutions. Participants in the Lab session highlighted that the concept does not only refer to the practice of guiding individuals or groups, but also to promoting inclusiveness and equitable opportunities, particularly for more marginalized groups such as women, youth, and people with disabilities (PWDs). For Lab participants, Jordan has the pressing need to reimagine leadership across public, private, and civil society sectors, emphasizing group well-being, more inclusive approaches, and a commitment to social justice. The discussion showed that leadership dynamics differ significantly across sectors. In particular:

- In the **private sector**, leadership tends to be characterized by task-oriented and innovation-driven traits. Generally, efficiency and results are prioritized, pushing leaders to focus on individual goals rather than broader societal responsibilities.
- In the **public sector**, leaders tend to prioritize community service and wellbeing. This reflects a more structured approach, where navigating bureaucratic challenges and maintaining impartiality is central to the role, as

*“the public carries greater responsibility”*

*(Lab Participant)*

- In the **civil society** sector, the priority is to create a collaborative and familial atmosphere, where teamwork and inclusiveness are at the center. This type of leadership encourages participation and collective decision-making, which contrasts with the more hierarchical structures often found in the public and private sectors. To put it in one participant's words:

*“For me, civil society is much closer to people”*

*(Lab Participant)*

Despite these differences, some stressed *the universal nature of leadership*, which transcends the boundaries of public, private, and civil society roles. Bridging these differences and emphasizing more community, team-oriented approaches, while fostering universal traits like accountability and integrity may hold the key to reimagining leadership in Jordan as both sector-specific and inclusive.

## Balancing Leadership Traits for Inclusive Public Engagement

Youth participants in the Lab engaged in a dynamic discussion about the essential traits of effective leadership, recognizing that often emotional intelligence, empathy, and flexibility are viewed as *feminine*, while decisiveness and assertiveness are more *masculine* and aligned with the data collected in the research. Exploring these gendered perceptions of leadership, participants reconsidered this traditional categorization of certain traits with either *masculinity* or *femininity*, suggesting instead that effective leadership stems from the balance between relationship-oriented and task-oriented skills, *feminine* and *masculine* approaches. “*A successful leader should care for relationships and be task-oriented at the same time,*” remarked one participant, advocating for this more nuanced approach that goes beyond gender stereotypes. To put it into the words of one of the participants: “*We should no longer categorize these traits as masculine or feminine*”.

## Barriers to Participatory Leadership: What Holds Women and Youth Back

Despite growing efforts to promote inclusivity and overcome strict categorizations, significant barriers remain for women and youth aspiring to leadership roles in Jordan. The session confirmed that discrimination and socio-economic constraints continue to limit participation, particularly in male-dominated environments. Accordingly, some of the most entrenched challenges that continue to be perceived as supporting inequalities in youth and women's leadership were discussed by participants:

- **Social norms:** women and youth face persistent exclusion, rooted in deeply ingrained societal expectations that exclude them from the public sphere and leadership opportunities, a dynamic that also undervalues diversity and inclusivity, limiting their full potential as agents of change and decision-makers. Although many changes occurred in terms of gender equality and opportunities, social barriers remain pervasive across all sectors, limiting access to social capital<sup>1</sup> Experiences and the possibility to leverage them.
- **Economic barriers:** economic issues create additional obstacles for women and youth leadership and participation. The lack of societal trust in youth leadership, combined with limited access to resources and opportunities for skill development, further marginalizes youth leaders.
- **Generational divide:** participants also highlighted the need for change in societal attitudes towards youth and its impact on opportunities for participation and leadership. In particular, they emphasized the importance of creating a more supportive environment for young leaders, including established leaders, that acknowledges the importance of youth and women's perspectives in all aspects of public life. The environment should eliminate discrimination to support them to fully realize their potential, in private, public, and civil society sectors and formally create better conditions for their participation as active agents of change.

Despite the intersectional challenges, youth and women today are more and more able to navigate the complexity of internal barriers and succeed at various sector levels. However, the path to leadership requires resilience, adaptability, and support systems that foster capacity-building and mentorship. Addressing these challenges will require not only legislative reforms but also shifts in societal attitudes and institutional support to create a more inclusive leadership landscape in Jordan.

## Restoring Trust in Institutions: Youth Perspectives on Political Leadership

The Lab participants underscored the importance of accountability and empathy for leaders in political institutions, though differing views emerged on how the latter should be applied. According to participants, while empathy is vital it should not compromise a leader's capacity to make difficult decisions or uphold accountability in service of the community they represent, given their pivotal role in bridging community needs with institutional responsibilities. Other participants highlighted instead how empathy and assertiveness are not necessarily two opposing forces but complementary tools that must be carefully balanced. For women and men MPs, resorting to this balanced approach is a fundamental strategy to build trust and respect within their teams, their electors, and other institutional representatives. Alongside this, other strategies include establishing transparent communication channels, fostering diversity within institutional groups, and leveraging social capital opportunities to ensure all voices are equitably heard, in particular that of women and youth. As previously seen, leadership today is a much less rigid construct: in the youth's view, such a blended approach can also enable MPs to build trust while making tough decisions, allowing them to better address structural barriers, promoting inclusivity and having a real impact for a more equitable and ethical-political engagement.

## Ethical Leadership: A Possible Way Forward Towards Democratic Participation

The conversation around the importance of a blended, universal approach able to balance assertiveness and empathy, task-oriented attitudes, and community well-being led participants to start envisioning possible ways forward for leadership and participation in Jordan. Strong emphasis was put in this sense on enhancing ethical leadership, an approach that, by prioritizing the collective over personal gain, can represent the cornerstone of effective participation. Starting from the idea of the *universality* of leadership, ethicality involves a balance between empathy and decisiveness, with leaders exhibiting transparency, mutual respect, and a strong moral compass, whether they operate in the private, public, or civil society sector. This approach, participants said, is critical for creating sustainable, long-term progress, particularly in sectors where leaders must consistently engage with diverse groups and uphold the public good.

## Recommendations

### *To the Government:*

- **Establish Comprehensive Leadership Development Programs for Women and Youth:** Design and implement tailored programs that combine technical expertise with soft skills. These programs should address the specific barriers faced by women and youth in different sectors, including cultural, institutional, and structural challenges. Key components of the programs can be sector-specific training, mentorship, peer support networks, inclusive leadership modules, and continuous monitoring and feedback frameworks to ensure the programs adapt to evolving needs and challenges.
- **Implement Gender-Inclusive Legislative Reforms:** advocate for sensitive legislation to ensure fair representation of women and youth in decision-making bodies (i.e. *Leadership Quota*: a minimum % of leadership positions for women or youth across sectors)<sup>2</sup>. Reforms should focus on revising policies to achieve gender parity in leadership roles and addressing discriminatory practices in hiring, promotions, and workplace cultures across both public and private sectors.

### *To Private, Public, and Civil Society Sectors:*

- **Promote Neutral Leadership in Training Programs:** moving away from strict categorizations, training programs should focus on equipping

women and men with a diverse set of skills that includes both empathy and accountability and the ability to value diversity in leadership styles, helping to create inclusive environments where different approaches are respected and encouraged.

- **Create Cross-Sector Leadership Exchange Platforms:** collaborative platforms in the form of forums or workshops, collaborative projects, and peer learning networks, can support leaders from different sectors in sharing best practices, challenges, and innovative approaches to leadership.

### *To Youth:*

- **Redefine Leadership Beyond Stereotypes:** Embrace and promote a leadership model that balances empathy with assertiveness, rejecting outdated gendered traits and encouraging diverse leadership styles among youth.
- **Build Supportive Spaces for Young Leaders:** Advocate for mentorship, inclusive networks, and access to resources that empower youth, especially young women, to lead in public, private, and civil society sectors.
- **Push for Ethical and Accountable Leadership:** Champion ethical leadership rooted in transparency, collective wellbeing, and accountability to strengthen civic trust and youth participation across all levels.

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

- 1 For a comprehensive understanding of social capital and women in Jordan, see: Policy Brief 7, Exploring Ways to Develop Youth Social Capital in Jordan.
- 2 In the last twenty years, Norway, Iceland, and the EU implemented different legislative mechanisms that ensure a minimum percentage of board members in publicly listed companies are women.