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Two Societies, One Struggle: Reimagining Fatherhood and Female Leadership in Egypt and Jordan

Introduction

Despite vast differences in geography, population size, and political trajectories, the lived realities of young women in Egypt and Jordan reveal a striking commonality: the enduring influence of family structures shaped by deeply rooted cultural norms, religious interpretations, and mounting economic hardship. Whether in Cairo or Amman, families remain both gatekeepers and potential enablers of women's public participation.

This policy brief examines how evolving family dynamics—particularly the roles of fathers and male relatives—are shaping young women's access to leadership in both countries. It draws on insights from bilateral consultations with gender and leadership experts convened by ARDD between April and June 2025 under the "She Leads" program. These consultations reflect a growing recognition that gender equality in the Arab world cannot be achieved without rethinking how family and fatherhood are understood and practiced.

At the heart of this inquiry lies a key paradox: while young women are entering education and professional spaces in unprecedented numbers, their leadership pathways remain constrained by private sphere dynamics. Decisions about autonomy, mobility, and self-expression are often negotiated—or controlled—within the family. The same religious, cultural, and economic logics that confine women to the domestic sphere can also create openings to renegotiate male roles, transforming them from disciplinarians to allies, from passive providers to active champions of girls' ambitions.

In both Egypt and Jordan, the past two decades have seen gradual but uneven shifts in these roles. Fathers and male siblings are increasingly offering emotional support, moral encouragement, and even mentorship—changes often shaped by education, displacement, or exposure to digital and transnational gender discourses. Digital platforms, in particular, have become arenas where gender norms are both challenged and reinforced, offering spaces for contestation and reconstruction.

This policy brief identifies promising practices, challenges, and opportunities to reframe fatherhood as a driver of gender transformation—leveraging cultural continuity to advance equality. While the sociopolitical contexts of Egypt and Jordan differ, their gender struggles are deeply interconnected. Both societies are navigating how to adapt traditional family roles to modern aspirations, and this adaptation—if guided strategically—can unlock the leadership potential of a new generation of young women.

The recommendations that follow build on existing cultural foundations, drawing on models of positive male engagement and gender-sensitive family frameworks. They offer a roadmap for institutions, civil society, and development actors committed to advancing gender equality in leadership—transforming the family not as a barrier to overcome, but as a partner in change.

This policy brief is part of the "She Leads" project, a joint project of Plan International Netherlands, Defense for Children - ECPAT the Netherlands (DCI-ECPAT), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), and Terre des Hommes the Netherlands (TdH), targeting social norms in formal and informal institutions in East Africa, West Africa, and the Middle East. As an implementing partner with Terre Des Hommes regionally, the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) works towards increased sustained influence of girls and young women (GYW) within the decision-making processes in the MENA region."

Dynamics Influencing Women's Leadership Pathways

Contextual Overview and Evolving Family Roles

Across both countries, families are navigating rapid socio-cultural, economic, and technological shifts. Within this landscape, fatherhood roles and male engagement in girls' lives are evolving. Over the past two decades, fathers and male siblings have increasingly taken on more varied—and in some cases, supportive—roles, providing emotional, psychological, and moral support to girls and young women pursuing leadership pathways.

In Jordan, while challenges persist, there is growing recognition of positive fatherhood models rooted in local traditions and values. Many fathers are moving from authoritative figures to active mentors and supporters. These changes, however, are uneven, shaped by differences in education, family culture, economic status, and social class, as well as by migration and displacement. Social media plays a complex role, serving as a "third space" where perceptions of gender roles and parenting norms are both challenged and reinforced.

Importantly, both Jordanian and Egyptian societies have strong cultural traditions that value the family unit and respect women's roles within it. When interpreted positively, these foundations can serve as a springboard for women's leadership. In some communities, enabling family environments have produced successful female leaders who now inspire the next generation, demonstrating that with the right support, women can excel at the highest levels.

Socio-Economic Pressures and Gendered Responsibilities

Despite progress, socio-economic realities continue to place disproportionate burdens on women, particularly within households. Women and girls often carry invisible emotional and labor responsibilities beyond what is expected of men. Economic hardship—worsened by inflation and job scarcity—has driven many women to work, not only from ambition but also from necessity. In such contexts, educational and career paths for girls are frequently shaped by economic survival rather than personal aspiration.

In both Jordan and Egypt, systemic pressures have also given rise to harmful practices such as economic exploitation and gender-based violence. These underscore the urgent need to strengthen protective mechanisms so women and girls can grow and lead in safe, equitable environments.

Yet resilience is evident. Many Jordanian families embrace their daughters' educational and leadership ambitions, supported by values of mutual respect, community responsibility, and tribal honor codes. Such environments foster ecosystems that encourage young women to lead.

Cultural Norms and Social Barriers

While there have been improvements in mobility and public participation, traditional social norms still limit young women's agency. Discussions with fathers in both countries revealed that restrictions—especially on overnight travel or assuming leadership roles—are often justified by concerns over safety, societal judgment, and cultural expectations, rather than outright opposition to women's potential. Misinterpretations of religious texts and fears of reputational harm further entrench these barriers.

The social fabric in both Jordan and Egypt presents a complex mix of constraints and opportunities. Certain traditions and familial dynamics can restrict agency, but there are growing pockets of support. In Jordan, tribal traditions—often viewed as barriers—can be reframed to support women's leadership, drawing on historical examples of women in governance. In Egypt, many families, particularly those valuing education or civic engagement, actively champion their daughters' aspirations.

Although some patriarchal norms are still reinforced by mothers, a significant number play a transformative role in nurturing their daughters' ambitions and challenging traditional expectations.

Leadership Perceptions and Systemic Gaps

A persistent challenge in both contexts is the perception that women's leadership and rights agendas are "foreign imports" rather than integral to national development or local values. This misconception fuels tokenism, particularly in public institutions, where women's leadership is sometimes symbolic rather than substantive.

In Jordan, however, the emergence of highly capable women across government, civil society, and the private sector shows what is possible when community norms and institutional structures align in support of women. These leaders often credit enabling family environments—including fathers who actively invest in their daughters' potential—alongside schools and communities that value competence over gender.

In Egypt, while women's leadership visibility is increasing, challenges remain in conservative settings where leadership is perceived as incompatible with traditional female roles. Success is more likely when families, educators, and religious figures endorse women's leadership within culturally respected frameworks.

Both countries face systemic barriers, including gaps in educational curricula, particularly in digital literacy, artificial intelligence, and critical thinking for girls—skills essential for future leadership. Policy implementation gaps also persist, with many gender-related recommendations remaining unfulfilled due to weak institutional mechanisms or limited political will.

The Role of the Tribe and Internal Male Engagement

Traditional social structures in both Jordan and Egypt play a defining role in shaping gender norms, though they manifest differently. In Jordan, tribal affiliations remain influential in social and political life. While sometimes restrictive, they can also enable women's leadership, especially when aligned with tribal prestige. Some leaders have drawn on historical precedents of female authority to advocate for equity today.

In Egypt, social organization is less tribe-centered, particularly in urban areas, with norms shaped by urban–rural divides, extended family networks, religious institutions, and community leaders. These actors can either reinforce or challenge gender norms depending on the context.

In both settings, fathers hold a pivotal role in shaping girls' leadership potential. Meaningful male engagement can shift family dynamics, challenge restrictive norms, and foster supportive environments. This requires not only external interventions but also internal reflection among men on how cultural, emotional, and societal forces shape their behaviors.

Encouraging men to critically examine the roles of fear, tradition, and societal expectation can promote healthier models of masculinity and greater household gender equity. Emotional awareness, open dialogue, and shared decision-making within families emerge as essential elements for cultivating young women's confidence, autonomy, and leadership capacity.

Recommendations

These are the key recommendations that emerged from the discussions to foster a more equitable society in Jordan and Egypt, emphasizing the pivotal role of fatherhood models and broader male support and engagement in enabling girls and young women to achieve leadership roles.

I. Cultivating Supportive Family Environments through Engaged Fatherhood

- **Promote Positive Parenting Models:** Develop and implement national programs that offer skills training for both fathers and mothers, emphasizing healthy communication, emotional support, and shared responsibilities within the family unit. These programs should specifically encourage fathers to actively participate in their daughters' lives, from daily care to educational and personal development decisions, fostering close and supportive relationships that build confidence and foundational leadership skills.

- **Strengthen Family Dialogue and Decision-Making:** Initiate community-based "Parents' Power" activities and workshops that encourage entire families to participate collaboratively, fostering open dialogue and shared decision-making processes. This approach ensures that young girls witness and experience inclusive leadership within their own homes, equipping them with the foundational skills and confidence necessary for future leadership roles.

- **Study, Document and Leverage Enabling Family Environments Behind Women Leaders:** Conduct in-depth research on the family structures, parenting approaches, and home environments that have contributed to the success of Jordanian and Egyptian women leaders—paying particular attention to the role of fathers, patterns of supportive communication, and inclusive decision-making within households. Translate the identified success factors into a set of best practices and integrate them into the design and implementation of parenting, leadership, and youth development programs to help cultivate and widen the next generation of empowered young women.

II. Supporting Shifting Social Norms and Male Perceptions

- **Engage Male Leaders and Influencers:** Launch targeted awareness campaigns and dialogues involving community leaders (e.g., municipal officials, tribal elders, religious figures) to challenge traditional norms that limit women's roles and to champion women's leadership. These initiatives should highlight the societal and economic benefits of women's full participation, reframing gender equality within a developmental and human rights framework that resonates with local values.

- **Foster a Culture of Respect and Support for Women's Leadership:** Implement programs aimed at reshaping societal awareness, particularly among males, to actively recognize, value, and promote women's leadership capabilities. This includes showcasing successful women leaders from diverse sectors and challenging dismissive attitudes towards women in political and public spheres.

- **Address Harmful Practices and Perceptions:** Develop comprehensive strategies to reverse the "culture of shame and fear" that restricts girls' autonomy. This involves building girls' confidence and negotiation skills within the family context, enabling them to assert their agency and pursue leadership aspirations, alongside providing state-backed mechanisms to protect women from familial pressure and exploitation (e.g., related to inheritance or drug abuse).

III. Empowering Girls and Young Women through Comprehensive Support

- **Build Leadership Competencies of young women through Training and Coaching**: Establish structured programs that offer capacity building and leadership development for girls and young women. These programs should include structured training and coaching delivered by certified leadership coaches to provide comprehensive training that systematically builds competencies across a tiered framework. This framework focuses on empowering young women to *Lead Themselves (Self-Mastery), Lead Their Immediate Spheres (Interpersonal Influence), and then to Lead Their Broader Ecosystems (Strategic Impact).*

IV. Strengthening Institutional Frameworks and Evidence-Based Policies

- **Integrate Gender-Sensitive Education:** Advocate for realistic and sustained reforms in educational curricula to embed principles of gender equality, human rights, and critical thinking from an early age. This includes fostering healthy dialogue and decision-making skills among youth, essential for future leaders.

- **Promote Women's Leadership in Public Sector:** Implement top-down directives and develop mechanisms within government ministries and legislative bodies to foster a culture that actively supports, promotes, and integrates women into leadership roles at all levels, moving beyond symbolic participation.

- **Utilize Data-Driven Advocacy:** Ensure that all policy recommendations and advocacy efforts are grounded in data and real-world success stories. Highlight the economic benefits of women's increased participation in the workforce (e.g., impact on GDP), demonstrating the tangible value of women in leadership.

- **Contextualize and Innovate:** Develop policy recommendations and programs that are deeply rooted in the Jordanian and Egyptian cultural context, leveraging existing strengths and historical precedents (e.g., women's historical roles in tribal societies where they held leadership positions). Avoid generic approaches and focus on practical tools and implementation that resonate locally.

- **Enhance Coordination and Integration:** Foster greater coordination between formal government bodies and informal community structures, and promote systemic integration across different sectors (e.g., education, social services, media) to ensure a cohesive approach to advancing gender equality and women's leadership.

V. Strategic Communication, Terminology, and Research

- **Leverage Media & Reframe Terminology:** Utilize traditional and social media platforms, including AI-driven tools, to raise awareness, challenge stereotypes, and promote positive narratives about women's roles and leadership achievements. Strategically frame discussions around human rights, social welfare, and national development goals (e.g., SDGs) to avoid polarizing terms like "feminism" that may trigger resistance, thereby facilitating broader acceptance of women's leadership.

- **Standardize Terminology & Conduct Targeted Research:** Establish and disseminate a unified guide for gender equality and women's empowerment terms, targeting researchers, academics, and policymakers across Arab states to promote consistent understanding and correct misconceptions, supporting evidence-based policies. Simultaneously, conduct comprehensive research and publish specialized scientific papers focusing on youth and leadership movements, exploring ways to integrate young men and women into civic and political participation, and analyzing regional transformations. Disseminate these findings widely to provide reliable data for informed decision-making.

- **Safeguard Girls and Young Women in Digital Spaces:** Develop and implement evidence-based strategies to protect girls and young women from technology-driven Gender-Based Violence (GBV). This includes fostering digital literacy and media resilience programs that equip them with the skills to identify, report, and safely navigate online platforms and social media, thus promoting their secure and empowered use of internet technologies.