

The Only Constant is Change: Jordanian Youth on Driving Social Change

GenG Program Action Research
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النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
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Renaissance Strategic Center



Generation G
A New Generation

Context

This research has been conducted within the framework of the New Generation- GenG project, an initiative aimed at fostering gender-just and violence-free societies through youth empowerment and advocacy. In Jordan, one of the seven participating countries, the project is implemented in partnership with Rutgers, by the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD), and is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. **Generation G seeks to energize a renewed social movement over five years by promoting youth leadership and gender justice.** It will also enhance the dialogue between youth and policymakers to influence policies on youth and women's rights.

In the long term, the project aims to achieve the following strategic objectives:

1. Public support – a growing number of young men and women are mobilized to promote gender justice.
2. Policy changes – policymakers increasingly adopt, adapt, implement, and are accountable for gender-transformative and youth-inclusive policies and laws.
3. Civil Society Organization (CSO) strengthening – civil society for gender justice is increasingly resilient, effective, gender transformative, and youth-inclusive.

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Background

The Journey of this Research

This research, the third study within the New Generation GenG Program, continues building the evidence base around youth political participation and civic engagement, highlighting their contribution to advancing gender and social justice. The baseline study identified a critical need to deconstruct and better understand youth civic and political engagement in Jordan, particularly in relation to gender and social equity.

During the four years of implementation (2021–2025), ARDD achieved notable strategic milestones, translating youth empowerment into tangible policy influence and institutional sustainability. Its focus on investing in human capital led to the mobilization and training of over 30 young leaders in political participation, civic engagement, and gender advocacy—significantly enhancing their confidence, visibility, and influence.

This empowered cohort was supported by a robust evidence base: ARDD produced four research studies and 11 policy briefs centred on youth civic engagement, political participation, and women/youth leadership in Jordan. These outputs were validated through 11 dedicated Policy Labs and informed high-level advocacy efforts, including a Position Paper on the Cybercrime Law and targeted lobbying on the Association Law.

To ensure long-term sustainability, ARDD established a youth-led consortium of over 20 community-based organizations (CBOs) and supported three youth-led CBOs in implementing innovative, community-based initiatives promoting gender equality and development. Through these efforts, the Generation G Program has strengthened the foundation for a more inclusive, gender-just, and youth-driven civic landscape in Jordan.

Social change, and why does it matter?

For centuries, sociologists have been using change as a tool to further their understanding of societies. They would often observe the changes in behaviors and shifts in norms to understand, frame, and document what is happening in their societies. This is why the ubiquitous definition for social change is “changes in human interactions and relationships that transform cultural and social institutions.”¹

Social change is fundamental to ARDD's mission because it represents the essential process through which the organization achieves its core objectives of

¹ Erin K. Sharpe, “Social Change,” in *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*, ed. Alex C. Michalos (Springer Netherlands, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_2737.

advancing social justice through contributions to development, democracy, and human rights in Jordan and the region. ARDD recognizes that lasting impact requires more than temporary projects; it necessitates transforming the underlying social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate inequality and disenfranchisement, particularly for youth and women. For ARDD, fostering social change is synonymous with building a more just and equitable society.

Consequently, ARDD positions itself as a catalyst and facilitator of this change. By empowering youth, strengthening civil society, and bridging the gaps between citizens and institutions, ARDD works to create the conditions for sustainable, community-driven progress and inclusive prosperity. The organization's focus on social change is a strategic commitment to addressing root causes rather than symptoms, ensuring its work has a deep and enduring impact on Jordanian society.

Methodology

Research Questions

To frame the analysis and put parameters on the data collection, this research followed three main questions to explore three aspects of social change: aspirations for change, the youth's role in social change, and structurally facilitated social change.

- 1) What changes do Jordanian Youth aspire to see for a better life in Jordan, and what do these changes mean to them?
- 2) How do they envision these changes happening, and what role do they see for themselves and youth in general?
- 3) What structures could facilitate or hinder these changes, and what capacity do both youth and these structures need to be effective?

Methodology

This research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing on primary and secondary data sources. The quantitative component involved the dissemination of a survey via Kobo to ARDD's youth network and through ARDD's social media platforms. The survey received 32 responses from both male and female participants, aged between 18 and 35 years.

The qualitative component was strengthened and validated through multiple sources: a desk review of recent literature; twelve semi-structured interviews with youth affiliated with ARDD and the Solidarity Is Global Institute (SIGI) networks; and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with youth and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). These engagements explored perceptions of social change and examined the role of youth and organizations in fostering youth participation in the process of change within Jordanian society. Additionally, data from previous Generation G

research was incorporated to ensure continuity and coherence across research phases.

Finally, three Policy Labs were conducted to facilitate in-depth discussion and further validation of the research findings. This multi-layered methodology ensured triangulation of data as well as meaningful and inclusive youth participation throughout the research process.

Limitations

On a logistical level, one of the main limitations was reaching young people for interviews and focus groups and collecting data within the allocated time period. Conceptually, defining and narrowing down the concept of social change to fit the Jordanian context and the specific focus of this study presented another key limitation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Youth aspirations: what needs to change for a better future?

As part of the first research question, we asked young people to describe their vision of a future Jordanian society to see which aspect of the current Jordanian society needs to be changed. The answers were various. Which could indicate a youthful vision of change covering an abundance of issues that need to be tackled; however, after clustering their answers, there were three main issues brought up during the interviews and FGD that serve as an umbrella for the change they aspire to see in the future:

- 1) Reforming the education system
- 2) Economic reform
- 3) More meaningful participation in political life

Starting with the education system, young people believe that reforming the education system in Jordan is needed for a prosperous future and thus a prosperous Jordan. For instance, they observed that there is a significant gap between the curricula offered by schools and universities and the demands of the job market, which has been confirmed by experts and other studies alike². Moreover, as the global job market transforms at an unprecedented pace, driven by technology and innovation, traditional curricula often remain static, leaving

² Ibrahim Banat, "Addressing Skills Mismatch in Jordan's Labour Market through Entrepreneurship Education," *SPARK*, 2024, <https://spark.ngo/addressing-skills-mismatch-in-jordans-labour-market-through-entrepreneurship-education/>; Roya News, "Unemployment Rate Highest among University Graduates: Labor Market Expert," Roya News, 2023, <https://en.royanews.tv/news/59759>.

graduates with skills that are outdated or misaligned. This inadequacy creates a generation of job seekers who are academically qualified yet professionally uncompetitive, fueling a cycle of frustration and unemployment as they find themselves unprepared for the very jobs that are in demand. One female participant during the FGD highlighted: *“Youth do not know their role in society; after Tawjihi (Jordanian senior year), they enter any major according to their GPA, and because of that, many young people do not succeed in their majors. And finally, when they graduate, they won’t find a job, because they were not taught any practical skills during university”*.

Data from the Jordanian Department of Statistics validates these perceptions: in 2024 unemployment among university graduates (with a bachelor’s degree or higher) reached 25.8%³, making university graduates the majority of unemployed people in Jordan⁴.

One participant expressed his desperation about the gap between education and the job market, saying that “I have to give up my morals and principles and do these

³ Jordan News Agency (Petra), “Unemployment Rate Declines Slightly to 21.4% in 2024,” Jordan News Agency - Petra, March 2025, https://www.petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=69167&lang=en&name=en_news.

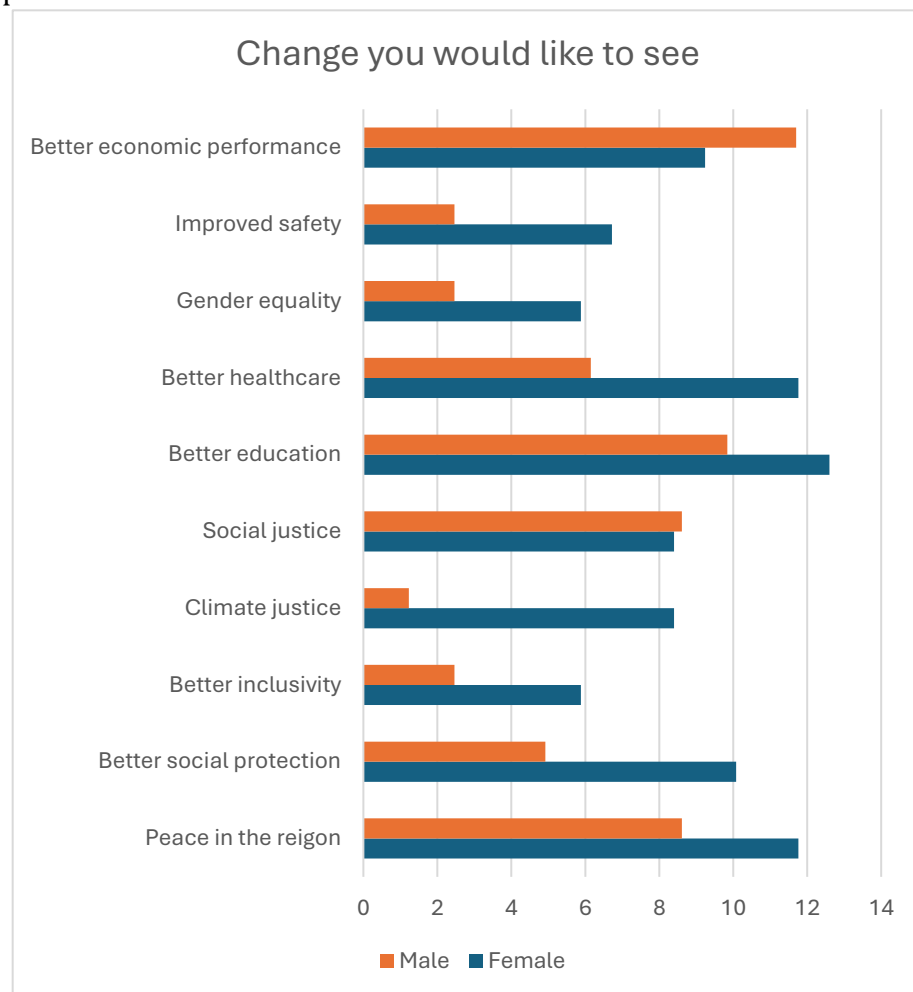
⁴ Roya News, “Unemployment Rate Highest among University Graduates: Labor Market Expert.”

TikTok lives to get an income.” This indicates not only the scarcity of opportunities but also the growing disconnects between young people’s aspirations and the realities of the labor market, expectations shaped by an education system that no longer aligns with economic opportunities.

It is interesting to note that women advocated for a change in the education system more than men. Other than their various testimonies in the interviews and FGD, 78.7% of women called for better education in the survey, in comparison to 61.5% of men⁵.

While respondents agreed that awareness is the foundation of change, the extent of awareness among this generation of youth was heavily debated. On one hand, some participants believed that young people today are highly aware due to the accessibility of information on virtually any topic. On the other hand, others argued that this overabundance of information has led to saturation and paralysis, hindering youth ability to critically evaluate and apply knowledge effectively.

One participant noted: *“When it comes to change, we keep motivating our youth to change something every day, and when change is easy, we lose focus. Today, one young person will go to a training about politics, the next about women empowerment, the next about climate change, then he will go to social media to blame the government for not having an opportunity.”*



⁵ Statistical comparisons between males and females are based on **weighted data** (Male weight = 1.23, Female weight = 0.84) to account for unequal group sizes (Male: 13, Female: 19). Note that weighted percentages **cannot be summed** across options, as individual respondents could select multiple answers and weights alter the denominator.

This leads to the issue of the ephemeral nature of engagement with social issues, which is often linked to the reliance on foreign assistance and questions of local ownership in how these issues are addressed.

“Because all initiatives and projects are donor-based, many critical issues are treated as a ‘trend’; once the funding is over, the trend is over, thus caring about this issue is ultimately over”. A participant

Climate change was repeatedly stressed as an example of the “trendification” of social issues, as many claimed that people only care about climate change because it is “where the money is” these days. While this is a valid issue, many young people claimed that they do not only care about climate change because of the funding and were interested in the issue even before it became a “trend”. This claim can be backed up by the fact that the foreign assistance regarding the environment has dramatically decreased between 2018 and 2023; according to the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation reports of foreign assistance in 2018, the funding for environmental-based projects was 1.8%⁶, and it reached 0.3% in 2023⁷ yet young people are still engaged for climate justice and are aware of the implications of such natural event on their future. One participant noted: *“All our problems lead back to climate change; social, political, and financial problems are because of the climate, even problems in the family, the climate controls us.”*

On the other end of the spectrum of economic problems, **the economic disenfranchisement of youth is perceived as a pressing issue that hinders young people’s engagement in any manifestation of social change.** Young people have the highest rates of unemployment; according to the Jordanian Department of Statistics, in 2024, around 64.3% of the unemployed population was aged between 15 and 29⁸. Moreover, many young people believe there is a structural problem with youth economic empowerment projects, especially those reliant on training. Two participants highlighted that many training programs offered for young people are outdated and lack depth and substance: *“In Aqaba, young people are still being offered ICDL⁹ courses,”* says one of them, even though most of this generation of young people is already tech-savvy, on account of the era in which they were born. This misalignment between what young people need

⁶ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, *Foreign Assistance Committed to Jordan in FY 2018* (2018), https://mop.gov.jo/ebv4.0/root_storage/en/eb_list_page/foreign_assistance_fy_2018.pdf.

⁷ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, *Foreign Assistance Committed to Jordan in FY 2023* (2023), https://mop.gov.jo/ebv4.0/root_storage/en/eb_list_page/foreign_assistance_report_2023.pdf.

⁸ https://jorinfo.dos.gov.jo/Databank/pxweb/en/DOS_Database/START_12/EMPALL1/table/tableViewLayout2/

⁹ ICDL stands for “The International Computer Driving Licence”

and what they are offered is further skewed when it comes to young people outside Amman, as the opportunities are fewer as per the geographical gap.

It is worth noting that 63% of survey respondents answered “improved economic performance” when asked about the change they would like to see. This answer came in second place after education, but in contrast to education, more males (69%) than females (57.7%) focused on economic improvement. This comes as no surprise since masculinity and manhood in Jordan relate to responsibility and financial support, or as highlighted by the IMAGES survey: “Men are more likely to say that they first felt they were men when they started working, regardless of age, or when they started taking on the monetary responsibility for their family¹⁰.”

As for political life, **there were several aspects that young people wanted to change, starting with the structure and effectiveness of political parties.** Many expressed deep dissatisfaction with what they perceive as a lack of genuine inclusion and inconsistency between rhetoric and practice. One participant noted: *“You tell me that we want to become democratic, multi-party, inclusive, and pluralistic and that political parties are rooted in positive political thought, but when I join a party, none of that is implemented.”*

Two of the participants referred to an incident that occurred in the parliament in 2024, when an MP was expelled due to internal party conflicts¹¹. This event feeds the perceived instability and fragility of political participation through political parties.

Respondents also reported **perceived**¹² Societal stigma associated with joining a political party:

“Parties can cause problems; any young person would be scared to join a party or even think of joining one; parties are always perceived to be anti-government. This is why parties should work towards raising awareness about their work and school of thought, so young people can be encouraged to join.”

Despite their dissatisfaction with the political system, young people demonstrated a critical and nuanced understanding of political participation. They highlighted

¹⁰ UN Women et al., *Understanding Masculinities: International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) - Jordan* (Jordan, 2022).

¹¹ It is alleged that the MP had committed disciplinary violations, noting that the violations included his failure to coordinate with the party and its political bureau, as well as complaints related to financial matters.

¹² We stress on the perceived nature of this stigma because being part of a political party is protected by law as According to Article (16.2) of the Jordanian constitution: Jordanians are entitled to establish societies and political parties provided that the objects of such societies and parties are lawful, their methods peaceful, and their by-laws not contrary to the provisions of the Constitution. And, according to Article (4.C) in the Political Parties’ law: It is prohibited to harass students of higher education institutions due to their party or political affiliation or activity.

that when opportunities for engagement exist, they remain hesitant to take part. For instance, when the age of candidacy for running for municipalities was lowered to 25, no young candidates came forward. Participants also described how youth themselves often undermine one another during elections, in addition to the ridicule young people face when running for elections from young people themselves:

“Even in elections, young people were attacking each other, participating in defamation campaigns, and fighting each other”.

This dynamic underscores a broader challenge: how the perception and practice of political life in Jordan continue to discourage meaningful youth participation.

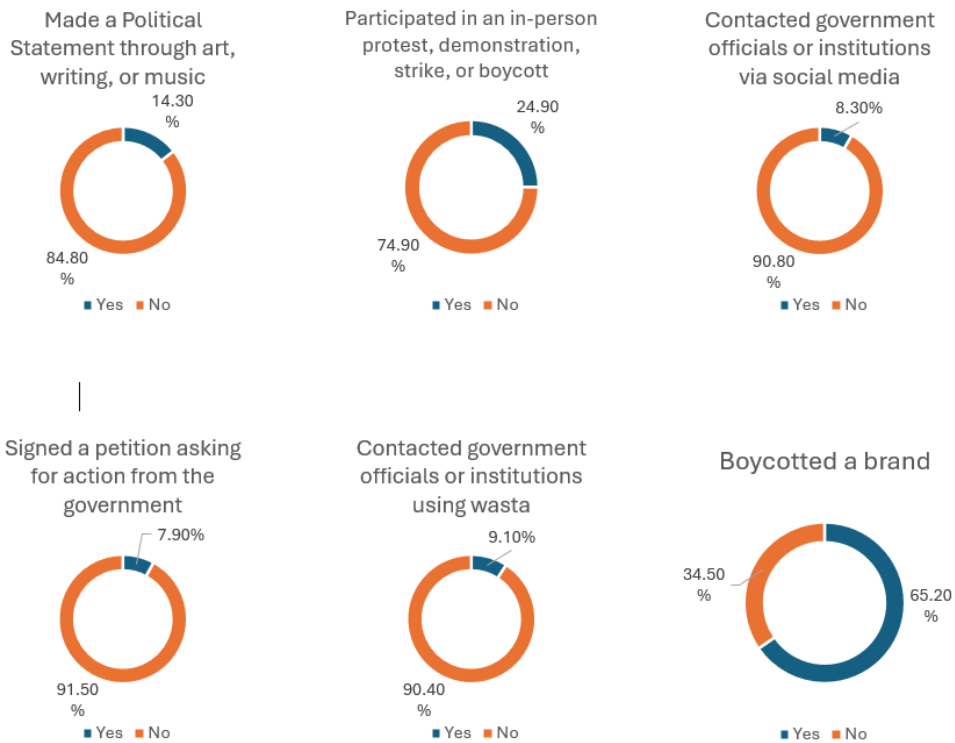
This is further corroborated by data from the eighth wave of the Arab Barometer survey, where youth were asked: “To what extent are you interested in politics?” and the overwhelming majority (77.5%) answered uninterested (22%) or very uninterested (55.5%)¹³; this sentiment was shared by men and women. In addition, when youth were asked if they participated in any form of activism, the majority answered no to most activities except for boycotting, where 66.2% of participants answered with “yes” (see figure 2 below). Boycotting can be seen as the least confrontational form of activism, as at its core, it is an individual act of resistance that eventually turns into a group effort as more individuals join in.

This comes in direct contrast with what respondents mentioned in interviews about collective action. As all of them consistently emphasized the importance of collective action in driving social change. However, this also reveals a conceptual gap: while youth value the idea of collective action, many seem to misinterpret collectivism, associating it primarily with family or tribal solidarity rather than with shared action among youth as a social group.

Ultimately, Jordanian youth agree that change will improve their future, but the question lies in how they envision this change and how it will occur. **Many believe that change is possible but complex**; they also seem unable to see a clear strategic pathway for achieving meaningful change and progress.

¹³ This data was obtained from the Arab Barometer’s eighth wave survey. It was analyzed using SPSS, the cases were selected according to country (Jordan) and age (18-30) to get information relevant to the current study.

Figure 1: In the past year, did you do any of the following? (Arab Barometer 8th wave)



Empowering the Future: Jordanian Youth's Role in Driving Meaningful Change

It is often argued that youth are an integral component of any social movement. They bring a unique blend of digital fluency, moral clarity, and a long-term stake in the future, allowing them to challenge outdated systems and mobilize for a more just and sustainable world. Yet, recognizing their potential is only the first step; the true catalyst for progress lies in answering a more active and empowering question: **how can young people contribute to processes of change?**

Among participants, the responsibility for driving social change was a point of debate, distributed between what **young people, older generations, and the government each do**. Young people stressed the need for collective action; they did not assign responsibility to one group alone. For example, while they believe that older generations must be more open to young people's ideas, they also recognize that they still need to enhance their negotiation skills and learn how to promote change without overly challenging the status quo. One participant highlighted how she managed to convince her parents to vote for her preferred candidate in the 2024 elections by approaching the subject from a financial

perspective, as she knew her parents would not be receptive to rhetoric about “individual rights.”

A common narrative among the older generations portrays young people as enchanted by Western civilization, allegedly abandoning their own traditions, customs, values, and moral codes. Some media narratives reinforce this perception, suggesting that young people are eager to completely uproot the social system and replace it with “western” ideals, undermining what is romantically perceived as the foundation of Jordanian society: familial ties, respect for elders, cultural traditions, and religious morality. This broad generalization is often attributed to the widespread use of technology, specifically social media, as they believe it is a form of “cultural invasion.”¹⁴

Such rhetoric makes it increasingly difficult for young people to navigate the delicate balance between striving for meaningful change for a better future and disrupting the status quo. Moreover, these claims overlook a fundamental truth: young people are not a monolith. Their views are diverse, and framing any dissenting youth perspective as a “foreign agenda” is not only inaccurate but also dangerous. It strips young people of their agency and intellectual capacity to critically engage with their surroundings and to formulate nuanced, contextually grounded analyses of their environment. To further challenge the overgeneralization and “cultural invasion” allegations, data from the Arab Barometer show that 66.2% of young people in Jordan consider themselves as “somewhat religious” while 30.8% describe themselves as “religious”. Moreover, 45% of young people believe the laws in Jordan should be “equally based on Sharia and people’s will”. This is further indication that young people are not seeking to abandon their religious or cultural identities in pursuit of “freedom,” contrary to certain narratives.

Similarly, the Arab Youth Survey¹⁵, which polled 3,600 young people across the MENA region, found that family and religion remain key to personal identity, with 54% of respondents identifying them as the most important elements of who they are. However, young people also display a reflexive attitude recognizing that these institutions are not perfect. While they value religious institutions as part of shared identity, they also believe that these institutions can evolve and serve the greater good. Regarding family, one FGD participant highlighted that it took her

¹⁴ راشد المعاينة، “العادات والتقاليد الأردنية صراع الأجيال بين حرية الشباب وقيم الآباء.. تقرير تلفزيوني،” الحقيقة الدولية، 2024، <http://factjo.com/news.aspx?Id=218369>; إسراء خليفات، “الفجوة بين الأجيال.. لماذا تزداد مع مرور الأيام؟”، جريدة الدستور الأردنية، 2011، <https://www.addustour.com/articles/907206>; توفيق عابد، “حوار الأجيال بالأردن.. تكامل أم صراع ثقافي؟”، الجزيرة نت، 2014، <https://shorturl.at/eXTYs>; غدير سالم، “صراع الأجيال: بين الآباء والأبناء”، الرأي، 2018، sec. أبواب، <https://alrai.com//article/10453144/> أبواب/العاصمة/صراع الأجيال-بين الآباء والأبناء..

¹⁵ Asdaa-BCW, “Living a New Reality: Arab Youth Survey,” 2023, https://arabyouthsurvey.com/wp-content/uploads/whitepaper/AYS-2023-Whitepaper_English.pdf.

time to realize that her parents were not always in the right about everything, and that questioning their beliefs does not always mean challenging their entire worldview.

From a more critical perspective, it is important to acknowledge that young people are still discovering who they are, uncertain about their political leanings, and often lack the skills to articulate and negotiate their ideas. This is why support and understanding from older generations are essential to help youth gain confidence in expressing their needs and views. This sentiment was particularly echoed by female participants, as they felt they often need to negotiate every decision and that without family support, their participation in political or civic life becomes even more difficult.

"I am still young, I am still figuring out who I am, I cannot always be the hero who knows everything". A female participant

Encouraging intergenerational dialogue, especially within families, is therefore vital to strengthening youth participation in the process of change. Both generations share similar visions for the future and agree on the need for reform. Young people need older generations for their experience and social capital, while the older generation relies on youth for their innovative ideas and growing technical skills.

By fostering intergenerational alliances, societies can challenge the misconception that meaningful social change is dangerous or undermines family structures. Through open dialogue, shared activism, and collaborative learning, such alliances can create safe and empowering spaces where all generations collectively envision and work toward transformative social progress.

The existence of safe spaces for young people to discuss their vision for the future is crucial to the process of social change. At the government level, building a relationship of reciprocal trust between the state and young people is essential for fostering safer environments for civic and political engagement. For many young Jordanian, however, the government is perceived as a rigid and distant entity, one that is difficult to approach, let alone influence.

According to the Arab Barometer, many young people believe they cannot influence government decisions through formal bureaucratic channels. When asked which actions would be most effective in influencing national government decisions, respondents were given 8 options. The most frequent response selected by **24.6%**¹⁶ was **"use family connections with government officials,"** followed by **"nothing is effective"** at **16.7%**.

¹⁶ Among the countries surveyed, Jordan was the second highest in choosing contacting family connections as the most effective influence on national government decisions

“There is mostly a huge amount of misinformation regarding government decisions due to rumors and miscommunication, which constantly undermines public trust.” A participant noted.

This lack of trust, which is hindering the process of social change, can be attributed to several factors, the first being the perceived lack of communication between the two parties. In 2023, 57% of Jordanians aged 18 to 35 reported that the government does not provide adequate information regarding its public policies¹⁷. Consequently, the Jordanian government established the Ministry of Government Communication in 2022¹⁸. Following this initiative, public trust in government rose to 65% in 2025, the highest level recorded since 2011¹⁹. This shows how effective communication channels between the government and citizens can rebuild trust and drive positive social transformation.

Another source of mistrust stems from the uncritical application of a neoliberal Western-oriented understanding of democracy to Jordan’s socio-cultural context. Data shows that 30.7% of Jordanian youth believe that access to basic needs is the pillar of democracy²⁰, a view more prevalent among women than men²¹. This indicates that limited access to basic resources continues to constrain youth, especially women, from viewing democracy in terms of freedom of expression and meaningful participation in decision-making processes. The dominant definition of democracy tends to emphasize its political dimensions: political participation, freedom of expression, and electoral participation²². While this definition is valid, in the Jordanian context, where unemployment and poverty remain widespread, such model represents a “political democracy”. In contrast most Jordanians conceptualize democracy in more economic terms²³.

after Mauritania. Other countries had Protesting and virtual campaigns as the most chosen option.

¹⁷ Center for Strategic Studies and International Republican Institute, “State of Democracy in Jordan Public Opinion Survey | May-June 2023,” October 13, 2023, <https://www.iri.org/resources/state-of-democracy-in-jordan-public-opinion-survey-may-june-2023/>.

¹⁸ <https://mogc.gov.jo/Default/Ar>

¹⁹ Maria Weldali, “Public Trust in Government Rises to 65%, Highest Level since 2011 – CSS Poll,” Local, *Jordan Times*, May 4, 2025, <https://jordantimes.com//news/local/public-trust-government-rises-65-highest-level-2011---css-poll>.

²⁰ Arab Barometer, *Arab Barometer Wave VIII*, September 2023, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/surveys/arab-barometer-wave-viii/>.

²¹ 38.4% among women and 27% among men

²² Merriam-Webster, “DEMOCRACY,” in *Merriam-Webster*, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>.

²³ *Economic Democracy* is: “that everyone should have an equal say in the just distribution of a country’s wealth among the citizenry - not just the unelected, or the

As discussed earlier, young Jordanians are an economically and financially disenfranchised group, and their preference for economic democracy over political democracy is clear. For instance, according to the World Value Survey²⁴, young Jordanians (ages 16-29) prioritize economic stability and security above abstract democratic ideals (Figure 2). For many, survival takes precedence, rendering political democracy a “luxury” rather than a necessity or something to be pursued once economic democracy is achieved.

“The predominant economic system (referring to capitalism) is one of the reasons that change is harder, as the focus now is on surviving capitalism rather than political thought”. GenG participant

Figure 2: Political Versus Economic Democracy

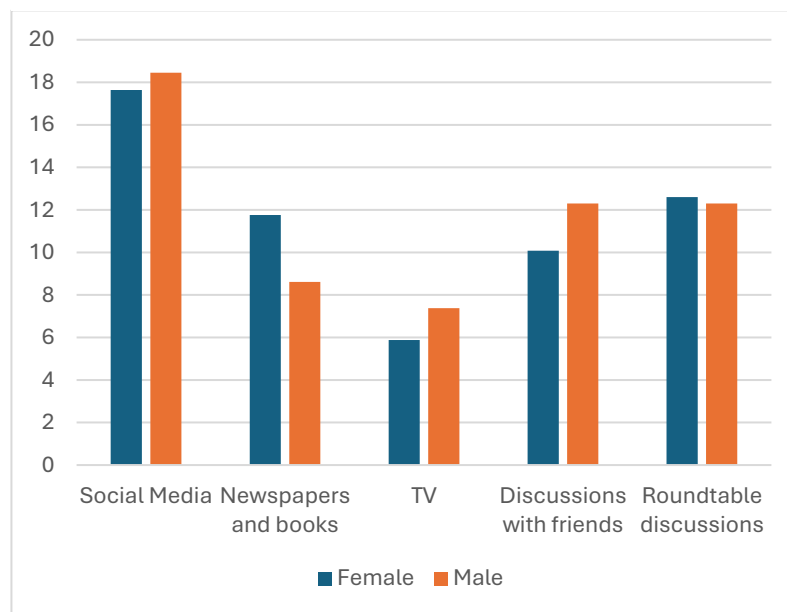


elected few, who represent the wealthy non-working classes, who in turn run the economy as a dictatorship.”

²⁴ C. Haerperf et al., “World Values Survey: Round Seven - Jordan,” 2020, <https://doi.org/doi.org/10.14281/18241.1>.

On a different note, social media plays a crucial role in the process of social change, especially when it comes to the role of youth. According to our survey, 17.64% of females and 18.45% of males chose social media as their primary source of information (Figure 3), and during interviews, almost all young people chose social media as their primary source of information. This was further corroborated by data from the Arab Barometer, as 60.5% of Jordanian youth chose social media as their primary source of information to follow the breaking news as events unfold. When social media is a primary news source and critical thinking skills are underdeveloped, as shown in Figure 3, young people struggle to accurately receive, process, and analyze information about their society and the world.

Figure 3: What is your primary source of information?



Relying on social media as a source of news is inevitable, as Internet usage in Jordan has surged over the past decade, rising by 118.72%²⁵. While social media has given anyone with a phone and internet connection access to an unlimited amount of information, the algorithmic nature of social media tends to trap people in echo chambers of their own perceptions and opinions.

Based on the selective exposure theory proposed by Paul Lazarsfeld in "The People's Choice"²⁶, individuals tend to seek out information that aligns with their pre-existing opinions, a behavior further reinforced through group interactions that protect and strengthen shared predispositions. More mass communication theorists²⁷ expanded on this, arguing that mass communication often reinforces existing beliefs rather than challenging them, and that people naturally gravitate toward groups that reflect their own views to avoid opinion change. In today's digital landscape, machine learning algorithms and recommender systems²⁸

²⁵ According to a survey conducted by the Department of Statistics titled "[Information Technology Use at Home](#)" in 2013 only 41.4% of the population used the internet, this number increased in 2022 to reach 90.55%.

²⁶ Paul Lazarsfeld et al., *The People's Choice* (Columbia University Press, 1944).

²⁷ Joseph T. Klapper, "What We Know About the Effects of Mass Communication: The Brink of Hope," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (1957): 453, <https://doi.org/10.1086/266744>.

²⁸ Michael A. DeVito, "From Editors to Algorithms: A Values-Based Approach to Understanding Story Selection in the Facebook News Feed," *Digital Journalism* 5, no. 6 (2017): 753–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2016.1178592>; Deepjyoti Roy and

automate this process by curating content tailored to users' past interactions, including likes, comments, and even how long they linger on a piece of content, effectively performing selective exposure on their behalf. This creates comfortable, self-reinforcing virtual spaces that cluster like-minded users, leading to the formation of echo chambers²⁹ that further entrench individual and collective ideologies.

When ideologies become stagnant, people find comfort in maintaining the status quo, which means any attempt to change is met with defiance, even if the proposals for change are logical and strive for community or nation-level development. This, in turn, lessens the trust that people have in entities striving for change, including the government. And it is no surprise that young people are the ones who consume social media the most³⁰.

Moreover, many young people cited ChatGPT as a source of information; as a rising technology, it is heavily prone to misinformation and disinformation. The generative nature of ChatGPT and other generative AI chatbots poses a risk to how people search for and analyze information. These chatbots are prone to "hallucinations," which are instances where the chatbot would produce incorrect or misleading outputs that look factually accurate, including quotes, studies, citations, or references to non-existent sources³¹. The overconfident tone of these chatbots makes it easier to believe without critically analyzing the responses.

Despite its polarizing nature, social media remains essential to how young people engage in social movements. Digital activism is a crucial mode of political and social expression; a responsibility that youth have assigned themselves. In fact, a majority of interviewees (7 of 13) identified "raising awareness" as their primary role, a task now inseparable from digital activism.

Young people in Jordan face economic disenfranchisement, distrust in formal institutions, and a shrinking civic space. In this context, many view raising awareness, particularly through digital activism, as the most accessible, and sometimes only, way to drive social change.

Mala Dutta, "A Systematic Review and Research Perspective on Recommender Systems," *Journal of Big Data* 9, no. 1 (2022): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40537-022-00592-5>.

²⁹ Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2017).

³⁰ According to the 8th wave of the Arab Barometer 24.7% Jordanian youth aged between 18 and 24 use social media up to 10 hours a day and 25.3% of them use social media more than 10 hours a day. These percentages are not seen in other age groups.

³¹ OpenAI, "Does ChatGPT Tell the Truth?," OpenAI Help Center, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://help.openai.com/en/articles/8313428-does-chatgpt-tell-the-truth>.

"I see that Jordanian society is greatly influenced by existing customs and traditions, but we are now greatly influenced by social media and globalization, which have greatly limited the role of customs and traditions." A GenG Participant

Social media has given young people a platform to amplify their voices and expand the range of issues they can safely address. This is especially significant given that social conventions and habits, often cited by youth as barriers to participation, particularly for women, are now being challenged by the forces of globalization and digital engagement. The participant continued: *"Social media has also provided a relatively free space for young people to express their opinions on local issues such as unemployment, education, and human rights. It has also contributed to popular and societal pressure on some policies and decisions."*

Despite its importance to young people, it is apparent that the way they relegate and limit their role when it comes to social change to raising awareness is reductive and shows that, despite the broadened horizons of social media, they are still apprehensive of participation and engagement and do not see themselves as agents of change. When asked about their role in change, young people almost always answered with individual-level activities that do not require collective action (see table 1).

A perceived lack of agency leads many young people to conclude that macro-level change is the responsibility of others. This outlook confines their own role to micro-level actions like awareness-raising and conference participation, avoiding direct challenges to the status quo. This mindset is both a cause and effect of their low trust in formal institutions, which the next section analyzes by assessing which organizations have the most significant and intentional influence on youth.

Table 1: What is your role in change?	
Women	Men
Raise awareness	Raise awareness
Write articles	Write articles
Influence the family to vote for the preferred candidate	Influence the family to vote for the preferred candidate
Small initiative to teach English through conversation	Participates in conferences
Give advice	Voice my opinions
Volunteering	Be aware of the entities I need to address to express a new idea or a concern
Not taking a bribe even if everyone around me is doing it	Develop effective communication skills to be able to express my opinions effectively
Sign petitions	Employed in a CBO
Use social media to disseminate information and raise awareness about topics that matter to me	Empower young influencers on social media

Structures and Youth: Agency versus Structure

There is a tense, often ambivalent relationship between young Jordanians and social structures and organizations. On one hand, young people overwhelmingly believe that collective action is vital to the process of social change, explicitly stating that "*individual work could lead to a lack of progress*," but on the other hand, and as seen in the discussion above, young people perceive change through individual effort; raising awareness, writing articles, etc.

A significant trust deficit persists among youth, who perceive existing institutions as short-lived and disconnected from community values. While young men often question the organizational capacity of these institutions, young women tend to emphasize gaps in geographic reach and training opportunities. Notably, survey data indicate a strong preference for structured, neutral platforms like UN initiatives; most young Jordanians chose the United Nations' Youth Delegate Program as the organization with the greatest capacity to drive change. This preference can be attributed to a lack of confidence in the sustainability of local programs and organizations, as was highlighted repeatedly throughout the data collection.

Moreover, youth engagement is currently hindered by a universal lack of funding, effective training, and sustained institutional support. Youth participation is often transactional; they are keen to contribute with skills and time but expect organizations to provide tangible resources, skill development, and legitimacy in return. The call for organizations to "*stop exploiting young people through volunteering and internships*" reveals a demand for more respectful and reciprocal partnerships.

Ultimately, youth view organizations not as ends in themselves, but as a necessary infrastructure to achieve their goals. They are pragmatic: they will engage with CSOs, INGOs, and even political parties if these structures provide the training, funding, and platform needed to translate their individual conviction into collective, scalable action. The relationship is functional but fraught, with youth relying on organizations while simultaneously criticizing their limitations and demanding they become more responsive, resourceful, and less exploitative.

On a different note, young people place the most trust in tribes rather than formal institutions like the government and civil society. While they admit to an intergenerational divide within their families, they still place a significant amount of trust in them. According to the Arab Barometer, 59% of young people trust their tribal leaders. This is notably higher than the 47% who trust civil society. Trust in the government is lower, with only 40% trusting the Council of Ministers. The lowest levels of trust are reserved for parliament; a mere 25.5% trust their elected representatives.

This high trust in tribal and familial structures is not merely social; it is profoundly political. Families and tribes act as crucial mediating institutions, serving as a safe intermediate layer between individual youth and the threatening, often alienating, processes of formal political change. They provide a trusted framework through which young people can navigate, or avoid, direct engagement with state institutions. This mediating role helps explain the trust hierarchy revealed by the data: youth rely on tribes and families precisely because they buffer against the perceived risks and ineffectiveness of the formal political sphere, making them not just trusted social units, but essential political intermediaries.

Conclusion & Recommendations

To sum up, young Jordanians do not perceive change as a linear path but as a contested field defined by a series of dualities: **agency vs. structure** (their actions vs. systemic barriers), **discourse vs. materiality** (raising awareness vs. economic survival), and **innovation vs. tradition** (new ideas vs. cultural preservation). Their perception is not wrong, but a highly **calculated pragmatism** that leads them to adopt low-risk, high-visibility strategies (digital awareness) while remaining deeply skeptical of their ability to influence the fundamental structures that govern their lives.

To address **the first research question** of what changes Jordanian youth aspire to see for a better life and what these changes mean to them, the following recommendations are proposed. They directly target the three key areas youth identified, education, the economy, and political participation, and articulate the deeper significance of these changes for their future.

Recommendation 1

To the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, in partnership with the private sector: Bridge the gap between education and the job market by integrating practical, future-oriented skills into curricula.

Youth aspire to an education system that provides not just a certificate, but genuine readiness for the workforce and for life. For them, this change means breaking the cycle of frustration and unemployment. It signifies a future where their education, whether academic or vocational, is directly linked to dignified employment and economic stability. A critical part of this transformation is dismantling the stigma around physical labour and championing the skilled trades. By putting equal effort into pathways that lead to hands-on, essential careers, we empower a generation to find professional purpose not just in offices, but in building, creating, and maintaining the very foundations of our society, thereby transforming their sense of hope.

Recommendation 2:

To Political Parties and the Independent Election Commission: Reform internal structures and public outreach to become more inclusive, transparent, and youth-friendly.

Young people desire a political sphere where participation is meaningful and safe from stigma and internal instability. For them, this change means moving beyond disillusionment with a system where their voice has weight. It represents the ability to engage in shaping their country's future without fear of ridicule or ineffectiveness, fostering a sense of genuine agency and collective purpose beyond individual or family-based networks.

To address **the second research question**: how Jordanian youth envision change happening and the role they see for themselves, the following recommendations focus on bridging the critical trust and communication gaps they identified. These proposals aim to transform their perceived role from individual awareness-raisers to effective collaborators in social change by fostering intergenerational dialogue and rebuilding trust with formal institutions.

Recommendation 1:

To Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community Leaders: Develop and fund structured intergenerational dialogue programs that create safe spaces for negotiation and shared learning.

Youth envision change happening through collective action, but feel stifled by accusatory rhetoric and a lack of family support. For them, this change means gaining the skills and confidence to articulate their ideas without being perceived as challenging their cultural identity, thereby transforming their role from isolated individuals into empowered, respectful collaborators who can bridge traditional and modern perspectives.

Recommendation 2

To the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship and the Ministry of Culture, in partnership with educational institutions: Launch a national digital and media literacy initiative that equips youth with critical thinking skills to navigate information and counter echo chambers.

Young people see digital activism as their primary tool for change, but recognize their struggle with misinformation and stagnant ideologies. For them, this change means moving beyond superficial awareness-raising to becoming savvy, critical consumers and producers of information. It represents the ability to deconstruct narratives, build compelling arguments, and engage in political thought, thereby strengthening their capacity to be genuine agents of change in the digital sphere.

To address **the third research question** about the structures that could facilitate, or hinder change and the capacities required for effectiveness, the following recommendations target the critical trust deficit and resource gaps identified by youth. They propose transforming the relationship between youth and institutions from a fraught, transactional one into a strategic, capacity-building partnership that leverages existing trust networks.

Recommendation 1

To Local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and International NGOs (INGOs): Co-design long-term, resource-equipped partnerships with youth that move beyond transactional volunteering to offer tangible skills, sustainable funding, and legitimate platforms for action.

The current structure of short-term, under-resourced projects hinders change by eroding trust and capacity. For these structures to be effective, they need the capacity to provide meaningful, not exploitative, support. Youth, in turn, need to develop strategic skills to translate their individual awareness into managed, collective projects, building a track record of credible impact that can restore trust in local organizations.

Recommendation 2

To Municipalities and Governmental Bodies: Formally engage with tribal and familial structures as trusted intermediaries to co-facilitate civic education and local development projects.

These traditional structures can facilitate change by providing a trusted bridge between youth and the state, countering the alienation caused by formal institutions. For these structures to be effective, government bodies need the capacity to recognize and collaborate with these intermediaries respectfully, while tribal and family leaders need capacity-building in inclusive governance to ensure they amplify, rather than suppress, the diverse voices of youth within their communities.

