

## The Status of Women and Girls during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Jordan

Women and girls have always suffered from different forms of gender bias. Females have always been depicted as marginalized, subordinate, and inferior. Gender bias has been always present whether explicitly or implicitly expressed and/or exercised. Starting from school textbooks that contain countless instances that put men at a superior position as compared to women, whether in language, illustrations, characters, and titles (Parkin & Mackenzie, 2017). These textbooks tend to reinforce the traditional gender roles of women as mothers and caregivers and of men as paid workers and breadwinners (Jackson & Gee, 2005). In addition to that, children and youngsters tend to take this stereotypical information at a very young age and thus this exposes them to create gender biased beliefs and practices about men and women in the future. Gender bias has not only had its toll over school curricula, but it has also infused into the workplace affecting the positions held by women as well as their wages and salaries. Gender bias in the workplace has been evidently seen in developing countries as compared to developed countries. Jordan is an example of a developing country that still falls short on promoting and achieving gender equality between men and women. Women and girls in Jordan still face up to today different forms of gender discrimination characterized by unequal pays in employment, limited access to economic resources, domestic abuse, etc. Unfortunately, the global Covid-19 disease has worsened and further exacerbated the situation of Jordanian women and girls who suffered a double burden during this pandemic given the fragility of women's economic resources, the weakness of their social protection, and the inadequacy of economic and public health policies (AL-Shoubaki, 2021).

In this report, we will highlight some of the challenges faced by Jordanian women and girls and the burdens that Covid-19 has had over them. We will also shed light on the actions adopted by different NGOs in Jordan in an attempt to curb the effects of Covid-19 and suggest some effective recommendations on how Jordanian women and girls can enhance their societal and economic roles, and thus work towards putting an end to gender inequalities.

Covid 19 had a disastrous toll over the whole world and jeopardized the normal lives of almost all people around the globe. Covid-19 forced people carrying the disease to isolate themselves inside their homes without seeing their loved ones for weeks and even months. What was even worse than isolation and quarantine is people losing their battle against this pandemic. Millions of lives have been lost worldwide due to Covid. While all these were very evident struggles faced by almost all people around the globe during this pandemic, women, especially married women, faced a different kind of struggle with the pandemic. Women were the front soldiers in fighting against this disease by ensuring that their homes, spouses and children are protected and safe from what was going on outside. These strong women had to maintain a balance between their work online and their domestic and care work. Despite the great efforts that women made, the period of the Covid-19 pandemic had harsh outcomes on Jordanian women domestically and economically.

Historically, Jordanian females have faced several forms of discriminatory practices on a domestic, social, economic, and even professional level. Unfortunately, gender stereotyped beliefs and practices are deeply rooted in the Jordanian system and society. According to the Women Empowered for Leadership Program (2020), the traditional gender

stereotypes have been drastically affecting Jordanian women's professional lives and have manifested themselves economically and in the workplace through the absence of women from the labor force. According to the report "COVID-19 and the Double Burden on Women in Jordan" published by "Women Empowered for Leadership Program" (Haqqi, 2020), women's participation in the labor force is consistently low throughout the years with women's labor force participation rate decreasing from 17% in 2007 to reach 13% in 2009. Furthermore, as stated by this report, women's contribution to economic life is minimal with a contribution of 0.5 points out of the 1.5% of the annual growth rate. The absence of Jordanian women from the economic cycle does not only affect women at an individual level, but it also has drastic effects on Jordanian economy as a whole. Fewer women in the workplace means lower productivity and more of a homogeneous economy dominated by men. Furthermore, lower productivity will affect the economic cycle as a whole by decreasing the aggregate level of output and negatively affecting Jordan's gross domestic product (GDP). According to the report "COVID-19 and the Double Burden on Women in Jordan" (Haqqi, 2020), married women participate less in the labor force as compared to unmarried women. Also, things become worse for working women who are married as they need to not only manage their work, but also bear the extra burden imposed by the unpaid domestic and care work.

The underrepresentation of women in the workplace is one of the many problems associated with gender discrimination in Jordan. Another face of gender discrimination in the workplace is the wage gender gap where the very few Jordanian women involved in the labor force are underpaid as compared to their male counterparts. According to a 2018 DOS report ("Gender Equality and Decent Work in Jordan", 2021), the estimated gender pay gap in the

public sector was 18 percent and 14.1 percent in the private sector. It is important to note that this system with its deeply rooted gender beliefs does not only marginalize women and set them in a secondary rank as compared to men, but it also limits the Jordanian economy from fully optimizing its human capital..

Domestically, Jordan witnessed an increase in domestic violence against women during the Covid-19 pandemic (“Impact of Covid-19 on Women and Girls in Jordan”, 2020). According to the report published by the “Arab Women Organization of Jordan” (“Impact of Covid-19 on Women and Girls in Jordan”, 2020), Jordan witnessed 7 murders of women during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has amplified the issue of domestic violence as women were stuck at home with their abusers, and thus were more likely to be exposed to violence. Aside from increasing rates of domestic violence, the unpaid care workload falling mainly on Jordanian women has doubled during the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the article entitled “COVID-19 and Women’s Economic Empowerment: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Jordan’s Recovery” (“COVID-19 and Women’s Economic Empowerment: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Jordan’s Recovery”, 2020), women spend 17.1 times more time than men on unpaid work (vs. a global average of 3.2), while men spend 6.5 more time on paid work than women (vs. a global average of 1.8). It is also possible that these rates would have been much higher during the times of crisis given the school closures (increased childcare demands), suspension of market services (lack of access to market substitutes to household production, and hence increased demand for domestic production of goods and services), higher vulnerability of the elderly and risk of illness (increased elderly and ill care demands).

The implications of the Covid-19 pandemic had a double effect on married women, especially women with school age children who struggled to find time to balance between their paid work and unpaid work, which was characterized by taking care of their children who stayed home for months due to school and nursery closures. This in turn has affected women's physical and mental well-being.

Economically, there has always been a huge gap between men and women's wages in almost all countries around the globe. In Jordan, the wage gap is hugely significant between the two genders. Unfortunately, gender discrimination exists in every corner of women's lives and infuses into their workplace to negatively affect their financial, economic, and employment status. According to the report entitled "Covid-19 and the Double Burden on Women in Jordan 2020", women's labor force participation rate has declined from 17% in the year 2010 to reach 13% in the year 2019 (Haqqi, 2020). Facts and figures are even worse for married women where the Jordan Job Diagnostics reports that married women are 12.5% less likely to participate in the labor market and are also 9.6% less likely to be employed (Winkler & Gonzalez, 2019 as cited in "Covid-19 and the Double Burden on Women in Jordan in 2020", 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic was expected to jeopardize and worsen women's economic participation. The "Covid-19 and the Double Burden on Women in Jordan 2020" (2020) report expected that the pandemic will result in the loss of 1.7 million jobs including 700,000 jobs held by women. According to "COVID-19 and Women's Economic Empowerment: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Jordan's Recovery" (COVID-19 and Women's Economic Empowerment: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Jordan's Recovery", 2020) with the

increasing pressure and burdens that the pandemic had over women, women had a higher tendency to quit their jobs, experience falling productivity and lack of job motivation in addition to the physical and mental struggles that women had to pass through.

Amid such a global crisis, several different NGOs in Jordan supporting women's empowerment, adopted quick actions and measures to aid the most vulnerable women socially and financially. In this section of the report, we will highlight how Miss Randa Naffa, co-founder and manager of Sadaqah NGO in Jordan, views gender discrimination in her country and what her colleagues in Sadaqah have been doing to promote gender equality pre and during the period of Covid-19. Sadaqah is a non-governmental organization which aims to create friendlier working environments for Jordanian women. Its role is to advocate for nationwide compliance with Article 72 of the Labor Law that consists of creating friendlier working environments for employed women and increasing the number of daycares within private workplaces as specified within the law. Miss Naffa focuses on the deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs adopted and practiced by the Jordanian society as well as the Jordanian government. Miss Naffa feels ashamed of how her government treats women in a way that amplifies the gender stereotypical beliefs in society and keeps women subordinated, marginalized, dependent, and fragile. According to Miss Naffa, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Jordanian government created a social aid fund that would financially support day-laborers. Ideally, the social aid fund would help working men and women who are in need, realistically, however, the government did not consider working women or take them into account as if there aren't any female headed households in the Jordanian communities. It is really saddening how gender discrimination between men and women exists at the level of the provision of social services and financial

aids. Not only were working Jordanian women disregarded in social aid programs funded by the government, but also Jordanian ministers did not put in any effort so as to improve women's conditions. TV, radio, advertisements, and social media platforms were all dominated by men as if the Covid-19 pandemic harms only males. The above practices reinforce the belief that women come in second place as compared to men and allow for further marginalization of women at work. After a brief overview of how gender bias manifested itself during the pandemic, Miss Naffa discusses the structural reasons that she believes play a role in keeping women and girls marginalized. Miss Naffa strongly believes that the legislative environment is the main instrument to change reality and promote gender equality between men and women. She believes that addressing the structural barriers behind gender inequality in Jordan is much easier than tackling the cultural and societal elements. However, history had taught Sadaqah's female activists that laws cannot change overnight. Therefore, to induce a change and promote gender equality, Sadaqah members have adopted the principle of changing the public discourse and raising awareness on issues, such as the importance of women's economic participation, the presence of female-headed households and equal pay for men and women among society members. When asked about the reasons behind the low economic participation of females, Miss Naffa lists the below reasons:

1. There are not enough daycares in Jordan. In addition to that, the existing nurseries are not easily accessible and affordable. Furthermore, daycares are not considered a public entity in Jordan, thus they are not offered any governmental funds.

2. The existence of a weak transportation system in Jordan: A study conducted by Sadaqah NGO 2 year ago showed that 47% of Jordanian women are out of the labor force because of the Jordanian transportation system.
3. The significant wage gap existing between males and females in which the wage gap reaches 27% in the private sector for the same job performed. Given this fact, women and girls feel demotivated to enter the job market.

The above listed obstacles tend to overlap with each other at all times, and thus make it almost impossible for women and girls to enter the workplace.

Miss Naffa pointed out that most women in Jordan work in the informal sector where women are not covered by any social security programs provided by the Social Security Institution. Unfortunately, most of the Covid-19 responsive programs were offered by the social security institution. So, women working in the childcare sector were not benefiting from any kind of governmental assistance. Add to this, the burden of domestic and care work that has piled up during the lockdown given that children were staying at home. Not only were the women working in the childcare sector negatively impacted by the pandemic, but also women and girls in the educational sector. As reported by Sadaqah NGO (Naffa, 2021), a large number of female teachers have been laid off when the endemic first started spreading in Jordan. Given the above facts and figures, Sadaqah NGO was tempted to immediately implement some serious measures so as to help women at both local and nationwide levels. Sadaqah members were primarily concerned about women in the fragile sectors that were not given any attention by the governmental officials. According to Miss Naffa, 90% of people who work in the childcare



sector are women. Furthermore, nurseries were one of the first sectors that closed during lockdown while other sectors remained open. The prolonged lockdown forced some nursery owners (who are mostly females) to shut down their businesses as they were not able to keep up with the high fixed costs that they were incurring each month, such as electricity and water. Therefore, the childcare sector was Sadaqah's primary concern.

The actions that were first adopted by Sadaqah NGO were related to establishing a well-defined organizational structure with well-thought-out, logical, right, purposeful and promising demands that were communicated to the public through pressing movements on the streets. During the pandemic, Miss Naffa pinpoints that Sadaqah NGO was able to create new organizational groups calling for the reopening of children nurseries and schools in an attempt to mitigate the burdens that the pandemic had over women, especially working women. Furthermore, Sdaqah has been working hand in hand with Jordanian female farmers to establish a union for working females in agriculture. Miss Naffa adds that Sadaqa members also had movements to promote freedom of public opinion on social media platforms and combat cybercrime, especially electronic crimes against women. Sadaqah members formed compressive groups that exerted pressure on the government in which they demanded to have the nurseries open as soon as the number of cases started to decrease. Sadaqah members succeeded in fulfilling this demand where childcares and nurseries were among the first sectors to reopen. To directly help nursery owners and care workers, Sdaqah created an online listening campaign to evaluate their needs. Sadaqah was able to provide some support funds to a certain number of nurseries by communicating with national and international donors for

direct cash assistance. Sadaqah was also focused on helping men and women working in the agricultural sector to be included in the labor law and thus benefit from the social security benefits. Sadaqah also succeeded in this demand and now agricultural workers in Jordan are covered by the social security program. Miss Naffa feels that all that they have done is a fraction of what they are planning to do in the future in an attempt to promote greater gender equality and establish fairness among all society members, females and males.

A lot of measures have been undertaken by the Jordanian government as well as several different women NGOs to help mitigate the burden of Covid-19 on the most vulnerable groups, especially women. The aid given was characterized by the government expanding the cash and in-kind transfers as well as the social security network (“COVID-19 and Women’s Economic Empowerment: Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Jordan’s Recovery”, 2020). The previously mentioned report states that although a lot of help has been provided for vulnerable groups, these actions cannot have effective outcomes unless they include a gender responsive recovery. Gender responsive recovery measures include the following (“COVID-19 and Gender: Immediate Recommendations for Planning and Response in Jordan”, 2020):

- Measures for reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work through gender egalitarian work-life balance
- Gender inclusive and integrated crisis management and response through ensuring women’s and women organizations’ effective representation in response and recovery decision-making mechanisms
- Implementation of gender responsive social protection whereby income support and social protection measures take into account household dynamics and women’s

vulnerabilities, prioritize female-headed households and deliver transfers directly to adult women members

In conclusion, one might say that Covid-19 was also gender biased in its detrimental effects. Jordanian women suffered terribly from the pandemic at all levels. Domestically, women were faced with double burdens to maintain a balance between their online work and care and domestic work. Socially, many women, such as female nursery owners were not benefiting from the social security aid. In addition to that, some women were laid off as a result of many businesses shutting down and minimizing their workforce to endure the losses that Covid-19 has brought up. Despite these drastic outcomes, several different women's NGOs, including Sadaqah, took the initiative to alleviate some burdens endured by women by ensuring the fast reopening of nurseries, including the agricultural workers in the labor law, and providing cash assistance to working women, etc. It is indeed inspiring to see how Jordanian women and feminist activists worked hand in hand to help other women and girls rise and overcome the hard times that they passed through. It is also very important to note that actions should not only be taken during times of crisis but on a continuous basis to ensure that women will always be empowered whenever and wherever they are.

## References

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