



Young, Single and Employed: Jordanian Women's Voices on Impact of Work*

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There is an increasing visibility of young urban working women in Amman, Jordan. As compared to previous generations, this group is experiencing a new life cycle trajectory of single employed adulthood. Based on qualitative interviews with young women, this paper will reflect on their experiences and perceptions regarding work, social status and marriage.¹

I. The Context

Population growth in Jordan has been quite high. In terms of age structure, data reveals that up to 51 percent of the Jordanian population are in the 15-29 years age group and that 41 percent of the working population is in the same age range (Department of Statistics 1998). Indeed, Jordan, as well as some other countries of the region, are at a point in history where the largest age cohorts are between the ages of 15 and 29 years. The reason behind this is that mortality decline, as a result of improved health care has been significant, yet fertility has remained at high levels. More recently there has been a slight drop in fertility rates, a factor that will eventually

diminish the relative weight of this age group within the population of the region as a whole (Fergues, 1995, Rashad and Khadr, 1999).²

Another recent phenomenon, which Jordan shares with some countries of the region is the increase in the age at marriage for both men and women. For Jordanian women, age at first marriage increased from 17 years in 1971 to almost 26 years in 2000 (Department of Statistics 2001). This means that young adults co-exist with their elders for longer periods of time in the same household.

Social policy and economic change have influenced the life experience and available opportunities for this young generation. Both younger men and women have had more access to schooling than their elders. For women, illiteracy rates have decreased from 48 percent in 1979 to 16 percent in 2000 (UNFPA, 2004). In fact, Jordan fares well in terms of human development indicators. According to the UNDP Human Development ranking it comes at 94 out of 174 developing countries.³

In addition, changing economic structures with growth in the manufacturing industry and technology related fields have provided these women with new work opportuni-

* The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution with which the author is affiliated.

ties. Since the mid-nineties, Jordan has embarked on a slow and careful route into 'liberalization' and 'global integration'. These reforms are expected to attract both foreign and domestic investment and create jobs in the medium and long terms. The immediate costs, however, are borne by society in the short term in terms of higher prices, falling wages and rising unemployment. In fact unemployment rates for women were 28 percent compared with 11 percent for men (Department of Statistics 2000). In addition and despite the economic growth, income levels seem to have dropped. According to the World Bank, the number of Jordanians living below the poverty line increased by 12 percent in 12 years.⁴ In fact in 2001 the Jordanian population living under the national poverty line was 11.7 percent.⁵

The question that poses itself here is how will the above-mentioned factors influence patterns of women's employment in Jordan? Looking at the economic activity of women per se, overall rates are relatively low at 15 percent in 2001 (Department of Statistics 2001). However, these have almost doubled from 1979 where it was 7.7 percent. Looking at age specific economic participation, we find that 48 percent of economically active women, compared to 38 percent of economically active men, were under the age of 30 years in 1998. Also, it is important to highlight that the rate of growth of female employment exceeds the rate of growth of male employment (Economic Research Forum 1998). Therefore, despite low overall rates of economic participation, particularly as compared to other regions in the world, patterns of women's economic participation are changing. These changes might be a result of demographic change as more educated and single young women are available for employment. They could also be a result of expanding occupational opportunities available for women resulting from changing occupational structures coupled with increased household level need for women's wages.

II. Impact of Work on Young Women's Lives

In assessing the impact of waged work on women's lives, it is not only important to highlight the changes that have occurred as a result of external forces but also what has remained constant. One constant factor here is the persistence of the male breadwinner ideology. Despite the fact that some Jordanian women seem to be experiencing a new life cycle "niche" in delayed marriage and employment opportunities, women still need to depend on a male guardian throughout the different stages of their lives, be it father, brother, husband or son. Women with no male protection experience insecurity and therefore it is in their perceived interest to safeguard their familial networks and especially that of male guardianship.

Assuming that the male breadwinner and male

guardianship ideologies have not been substantially affected by women's employment how can one account for change? Here we need to listen to women's own voices which will reflect whether and how women are experiencing their altered positions within their household. In order to do this we will look at three factors: the impact of income earning on family relations, the impact of work on personal autonomy, and the impact of work on attitudes towards marriage and future gender roles.

Impact of Income Earning on Family Relations

Perhaps the most revealing assessment among young women were those with previous work experience, but who were unemployed at the time of the interview. Several such women stated that when they were income earners they were more involved in family decisions and felt that they were treated with more respect than their current situation. In general, it seemed that some fathers, especially those that took part of their working daughters' wages, would involve a daughter more in discussions relating to household expenditure.⁶

In most cases it seems that mothers also treated their working daughters differently from non-working children. In several cases the working daughter is regarded by the mother as the favourite. These mothers do their utmost to provide comforts when the daughter is at home after a long day's work. These comforts include having the meal ready and sometimes, among poorer families, saving the best piece of meat for them. In general, mothers who had married young and had a different life experience from their daughters, hold respect and admiration for their working daughters. Furthermore, relations with brothers are affected in instances where money gives sisters power. This is exemplified by one young woman who was unemployed at the time of the interview:

These days my brothers keep interfering in my life. They want to know where I go and who I see. When I used to work things were different. They were hard up and I used to lend them money. It gave me so much pleasure because they could never interfere in my life and I even controlled their expenses. As soon as they tried to assume the big brother role, I would threaten to not give them any more money. One day, as I was leaving to visit a friend, my broth-

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er wanted to know where I was going. I said: 'Listen, one more question and you hand back every penny you owe me right now.' Now, things have changed. It is they who are working and I am unemployed.

There are also many young women who did not feel that income earning had any effect on their status within the household. Several even thought that they would be better off if they were not working:

Work has only brought me a headache. My mother expects me to do all the housework after I return from work. She thinks that since she always cared for us now its my turn to care for her. She does not realise that I am exhausted and accuses me of being lazy. All my father cares about is my money. One month I could not give him any and he screamed: 'damn you and your money.' He did not talk to me until I gave him money the following month. My married

sisters continuously expect me to lend them money and give them presents. When I don't they accuse me of being stingy. Work has brought me nothing.

In short, the impacts of income earning on the role and status of young women differs from household to household. Indeed the two conflicting case studies above are both based on low-income families where young women's pay is limited. Income earning sometimes increases status, and at

other times increases subjugation. Perhaps these differences have to do with parents' adaptations to their dependence on daughters wages. Some parents, resign themselves to this fact and gratefully acknowledge their daughters' contributions, while others see this as a threat to their positions as household heads and become more authoritative. In higher income households the dependence on daughters' wages is not an issue and therefore does not pose threats to the position of males. In these cases, daughters' education and occupations become the determining factor in status. In other words, the types of daughters' education and occupations become a source of prestige for the male head. Therefore, among some middle and upper income households, an increased status for daughters connotes increased prestige for male family members within society.

Impact of Work on Personal Autonomy

The working conditions of the women interviewed varied considerably. For some, particularly those in manufactur-

ing, working conditions are strenuous with long working hours and commuting time. Others, for example those in the teaching occupations, might have better conditions. But almost all working women believe that their wages are low. In addition, very few working women were in conditions where they are receiving benefits or social security - even some of those in professional jobs. Many of the working women had little knowledge of their rights as workers; and those who did were disinclined to demand these rights. No working woman in the sample survey belonged to a trade union or any form of NGO. There is also in an absence of governmental regulatory measures for labour rights enforcements in the workplace. Work place relations also inhibit women from demanding any rights. Often, employers and male supervisors act as the fathers or older brothers and, therefore, young women remain timid in asserting any of their rights. In other words, patriarchal power relations are transferred from the home to the workplace, which acts as a deterrent to women's empowerment.

Despite the above, and compounded by the fact that very few women reported great satisfaction from their working conditions, many derive some form of self esteem and an amount of pride. Many state that despite their low wages, work is a better way in spending their time. As for their wages, those who do not control their income rarely perceive it as such and gain an amount of pride in "helping" their families. Those who control their income enjoy being able to shop, whether for themselves or others, without seeking permission.

The overwhelming impact that transpires from most working daughters, however, is an increased amount of personal autonomy whether through physical freedom or through establishing social relations outside their immediate community, usually through the workplace. When young women were asked to compare themselves with those who are not working, the immediate answer was that they are more confident and that work provides them with the opportunity to leave home, make friends and breakaway from the monotony of their restricted lives and often heavy domestic responsibilities.

So, employment has expanded young women's social freedoms. And here we have to add that physical freedom is closely linked to young women's psycho-social development and their dependence on male protection particularly in public spaces. Girls actually learn to fear being alone in certain places from a young age. Furthermore, young working women, are at a junction in their lives where their chaste reputation is of paramount importance. In fact, many young women expressed their discomfort when walking to and from work and their trepidation from unwanted attention. Therefore, public

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spaces in Amman today remain ideologically constructed as male spheres and where women continue to regard themselves as vulnerable. In this context, it is of great significance that many young women feel that work has brought them an increased measure of social and physical autonomy.

Many young working women acquire friends and gain social networks at work, which is in itself a major gain for them. Women may form groups and after working hours go out to lunch together or shopping especially on pay day. They organise each other's birthdays and jointly attend engagement or wedding parties. These networks are fully autonomous from their immediate families. However, it has to be mentioned here that this social freedom must adhere to normative conservative standards of conduct. Indeed, young women's social activities are usually pre-negotiated within the household where parents should know the exact whereabouts of daughters.

Having looked at young women's physical and social freedom, we now turn to young women's personal aspirations and how attitudes towards women's social freedom affects them. Most young women have individual hopes and aspirations. These range from the seemingly simple ability to be able to go swimming to more complex ambitions such as wanting to become a politician.

The context behind this is that the acknowledged stages of Arab women's lifecycles excludes youth and single adulthood. Therefore, since youth itself is squeezed out of Arab women's life courses, young women learn to suppress their personal hopes and aspirations even if at a deep level they continue longing to realise them. Although the majority of this revolves around romantic ideals, a lot of it relates to the actual limitations on their social freedom, as revealed by the following cases:

I used to be a basket ball champion at school and my teachers recommended that I join the national Jordanian team. My parents, of course, refused. Since finishing school I have not played any sport. I have such an urge to exercise that sometimes I lock myself in my room and just jump till I'm exhausted.

My dream is to learn to drive and own a car. Do you drive? What kind of car do you drive? Can you take me for a ride?

The happiest days in my life was when I used to sing with the college music group. Singing for me is so natural. I am born to sing.

So despite the fact that many young women have gained some social freedoms they remain restricted in realising many of their expanded aspirations. The irony is that

these usually consist of things they are exposed to at school, on television or, in the case of the women who wants a car, on the street on daily basis. One factor here is that such aspirations are particular to their age group. Parents - fathers and mothers alike - have a different life experience and are likely to misunderstand and consequently block their daughters' desires. Most young women understand this gap between themselves and their parents and rarely attempt to challenge it.

Finally, it is in this way that work for many young women becomes a way of expressing themselves. Therefore, despite the fact that young women's working conditions are not satisfactory or the fact that their wages are too low to assert themselves within their households, employment opportunities remain of paramount importance at this stage in their lives. For many, it represents a symbol of their desires to become independent adults, as well as a means for filling their free time.

Impact of Work on Attitudes Towards Marriage and Future Gender Roles

Generational differences mean that parents' and daughters' attitudes towards marriage have developed in divergent ways. Generally, daughters want to be able to choose their partners and they idealize the notion of love within marriage. Most of the young women interviewed prefer to marry non-relatives so that they will have new lives outside of their communities. This contrasts with parents' attitudes where marriages are arranged and security and reputation rather than love are important. This is causing increasing conflict in households, as the following young woman explained:

My colleague at work wants to marry me. His father is dead and he does not have many male relatives. He came and visited my father and brothers four times. On two occasions his mother came and brought us gifts. Until now my father has rejected his demand. Lately, even my uncles interfered and confirmed to my father that in our family, no girl is given away to strangers. Meanwhile, I have been refusing the suitors from my family. As a result I have embarrassed my father in front of the rest of the family, as he has to give reasons for my refusal. Young people today should know each other. Unlike our parents who had no choice and had their marriages arranged at a young age, we get married to be happy.

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As for work after marriage, the attitudes of young women was diverse. At one level, workforce participation appears to positively affect young women's attitudes towards work after marriage. However, when attitudes towards work after having children are approached, the women's perceived 'natural' role as mothers takes precedence. A number of working women stated that ideally they would like to continue with their work until their first child. Even those who thought that women should not withdraw from the workforce as a result of motherhood would qualify themselves:

As long as a woman fulfils her duties as mother and wife she should be able to continue with work.

It is apparent, therefore, that the redistribution of gender divisions of labour is not in question for the young women. What is in question is women's perceived gender roles and ensuing dual roles and responsibilities. In addition, behind all this is the persistence of the male breadwinner ideology. According to most women respondents employment after marriage is largely dependent on their husband's consent. There is a general belief that if a husband provides his wife with her needs then it is his right to keep her at home.

Another group of women thought that it is family financial needs that should determine whether or not married women work. For example, young women thought that a mothers' employment is legitimate when it is 'for her family' or 'to help her husband.' Moreover, actually needing to work was not the ideal situation for many women. As one working woman stated:

I work hard now and I am usually tired. May God send me a husband that is able to support a family.

In contrast, when women were asked whether women with an independent income have more status and personal power within their households, the majority answered in the affirmative. Many young women had ready examples from their lives to substantiate this positive relation. One young woman recounted her neighbours' example:

It is obvious that a married woman with her own income will have a more equal relation with her husband. Our neighbour had an abusive husband. We all knew how badly he treated her. Then she started her own little sewing business at home and became successful. Now he is a different man. He respects her and consults her on everything.

Most of the young women interviewed regard their interests as bound by male protection for their future security and this includes continuous deference to male authority.

One of the consequences of the importance of male protection, however, is that the women themselves are likely to undermine the significance of their income earning or drop employment altogether in order to maintain the practical as well as emotional security derived from male consent. Therefore, a distinction should be made between young women's independent thinking and actual behaviour vis-à-vis marriage and income.

III. Conclusions

The opportunities for waged employment has transformed young women's lives in a number of ways. Although working women remain bound by the social contract of male guardianship and protection, they have expanded choices in education, employment and marriage options. As young women live for more years as adults with their families, with delayed marriage, the families have to adapt to this. Nevertheless it is at the individual level that the greatest transformations can be detected. It is the young women's increased sense of self esteem as well as their increased ability through wages to realize shared goals with their households, which in itself is an empowering factor. Young women had also gained, in a conservative society, a certain amount of physical autonomy in freedom of movement as well as establishing separate social networks, which would have been unthinkable only a generation ago.

The most striking conclusion here is that that young women have been transformed from dependents to economic assets. Indeed, female employment has provided individuals and families with avenues to improve their lives whether work was motivated out of survival or self assertion and whether wages were spent for the collective household unit or individual expenses. This in itself must have the potential to influence women's future status in society in general. Therefore, we can say that young working women in Jordan have embarked on a process of public participation and personal empowerment through their work.

END NOTES

1. This article is based on a PhD research project. The study utilised both qualitative and quantitative tools. A quantitative survey was based on questionnaires administered in face-to-face interviews in 14 locations across the city of Amman with 302 households. The questionnaire was administered to women working, unemployed or non-working below the age of 25, who were single, and not enrolled in education at the time of the interview. In addition to this, 40 households from this survey were revisited for more in-depth semi-structured interviews. This was with young women and, depending on household circumstances, other family members as well. The interviews explored family relations, income distribution and manage-

ment. This article is based on those qualitative interviews. For more on overall research see Kawar 2000.

2.The Arab region's youth to population ratio is one of the highest compared to other regions of the world. This is reflected in unemployment rates where only every third young person works in the region. Indeed youth unemployment rates in the Arab Region were 25.6 percent, the highest among all regions (ILO, 2004). According to the *UNDP Jordan Human Development Report* of 2000 Jordanian youth are disproportionately affected by unemployment as 60 percent of the total unemployed are below the age of 25.

3.This human development index measures a country's achievements in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income. Source:http://www.undp-jordan.org/jordan_hdr/sound-bites.html

4.Source. <http://www.mercycorps.org/items/1026>

5.Source. http://www.undp.org/hdr2001/indicator/cty_f_JOR/html

6.The annual average household income of the sample survey was JD 5,150 (approximately \$7300). The average monthly income of working women interviewed was JD105 (approximately \$155). There is reason to believe that the average household income was under-recorded.

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