



IMPACT OF SHRINKING SPACE ON WOMEN ORGANISING IN JORDAN

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Abbreviations

MoPIC	Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
MoSD	Ministry of Social Development
MoIA	Ministry of Internal Affairs
GID	General Intelligence Directorate
WHRD	Women Human Rights Defenders
GBV	Gender Based Violence

Quick Definitions

Shrinking (civic) space is as one where “state-sponsored or non-state actors’ (place) restrictions on the fundamental rights of civil society”¹. It identifies those rights as the freedom of assembly, freedom of association and freedom of expression.

Feminists are women who identify with the feminist theory and practice and work to ensure equal rights and access to resources and services for all women and girls and importantly. The term refers to all or any form(s) of identification as a way of life or a culture, as a political ideology and action, and part of a community group of women mostly engaged and concerned with women issues.

Human Rights Activists are the individuals, groups and bodies of society that promote and protect human civil and political rights and fundamental freedoms which are universal and recognized by the international community.

Women and Human Rights Activists they are who seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights while recognizing Women rights and the importance of the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Civil Society Organization are all community-based organizations such as community groups, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as labour unions, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, and foundations.

¹ <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/2-Suffocating-the-movement-ENG.pdf>

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ABOUT KVINNA TILL KVINNA

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is a Swedish non-profit organization that supports women in conflict affected areas to increase women's power and influence. Kvinna till Kvinna has been working in the MENA region since 2001 and in Jordan since 2005, in partnership with feminist and women's organizations, by supporting them through financial and non-financial resources.

The Foundation strengthens and promotes women's organisations in several regions around the world. We support women human rights defenders who live and work in conflict affected countries, so that they can continue fighting for women's rights.

ABOUT THE STUDY

Freedom of speech, association and assembly are crucial building blocks in a democracy. When these are violated, the civic space for human rights work is limited or even non-existent. This is the situation in many countries right now and it is the new reality influencing the ability of women organising, Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) and young feminists, specifically in Jordan. When the space for organising is closing, WHRDs and young feminists have few arenas, if any, to fight for political influence, gender equality and women's human rights.

Furthermore, there is an apparent backlash when it comes to democracy and civic space and increasing attacks on WHRDs and young feminists in the form of harassment, stigmatisation, attacks using conservative social norms and gender stereotypes, verbal abuse, and attacks on reputation online and offline.

In order to adapt to these emerging challenges and broaden the tools and targets, available to donors, civil society and WHRDs as well as identify ways to provide support, this study attempts to pinpoint the key challenges and place them within an analytical framework. This will further support propositions for coping mechanisms and recommendations. The findings are intended to strengthen the feminist approach to women organising outside the ordinary structure of women civil society organisations to continue to be relevant and advance gender equality agenda in Jordan.

In parallel, the study will also zoom in and identify whether the civic space around women organising is restrictive and is an impediment to activism especially by young feminists.

METHODOLOGY

This study, supported by Kvinna till Kvinna in Amman, consisted of a desk review, stakeholder mapping, key informant interviews and a rapid online survey.

A team of two researchers, first conducted a review of relevant literature, followed by 9 key informant interviews to allow for context and qualitative content. The survey used mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative questions based on the research questions and key findings from the desk review. It was then sent out to 48 stakeholders who are engaged and concerned with women issues in Jordan. Some stakeholders are affiliated with civil society organisations and some are independent and thus not affiliated with any organisation. 22 responses were received, and the analysis of their

answers was used primarily to validate findings as well as highlight key conclusions and analysis points linking shrinking civic space to activists and feminists organising on women's issues in Jordan.

The methodology considered first exploring these notions using the survey and then validating both the concepts of "shrinking civic space" and organised "feminists" or human rights defenders in depth through the qualitative interviews with nine key Jordanian activists in the gender space. Interviewees included those working in policy advocacy, donor programming, communities and activists whether as individuals or groups from different age groups and experiences. The validation does provide a high-level description of the trends and trajectory of the impact of shrinking space on feminist organising.

Methodological limitations:

Due to time limitations, there was no opportunity for fieldwork which would have allowed a closer validation of the key themes from regular women and regional activists who may be challenged by a different set of socio-economic, political and logistical conditions. In as much as possible, within a rapid and limited survey, the views of these women were surveyed and incorporated into the main body of the analysis.

The study team also only had time to conduct interviews with a limited number of key informants. Most of those interviewed were

people with relative voice, power, education and status – albeit most also work or are active in positions that give them unique perspectives on the lived experiences of Jordanians. The study team also sought to consult those who could speak of the conditions of women from outside of the capital and other main cities, and were always careful to explicitly question the different conditions that could occur as a result of the socio-economic variations. It is important to note too that most interviews were conducted remotely because of social distancing requirements and government guidance around COVID-19.

JORDAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT



Jordan is a small country with a complex geopolitical, economic and demographic makeup. With limited natural resources, an underperforming economy largely reliant on international assistance and a geographic location at the centre of a region in crisis. Threats to Jordan's stability come from within and without and although this small kingdom is credited with having escaped the brunt of the 'Arab Spring', the ripple effects continue to be felt at the political, economic and social levels. These include the arrival of approximately a million Syrian refugees causing government and some "traditionalists" to make claims that it was stretching the country's resources and services as well as unsettling the country's political, social and demographic makeup adding to the general discontent among Jordanians of their perceived diminished status and access to opportunity. This discourse, relied upon by the Kingdom to attract donor funding as it witnessed several waves of regional refugees - since the 1948 establishment of an Israeli state in Palestine - including several waves of Palestinian, Iraqi as well as Yemeni and Libyan refugees, has increasingly been

challenged by many economists and activists - most often younger and more global - who have seen potential in hosting influxes of refugees but accuse the government of economic mismanagement and misallocation of existing and donor resources.

The nature of the Jordanian society is unique. It constitutes a diverse and heterogeneous population and their social positions within and across the country, various social classes, ethnicity, and urban/rural locations all contribute to constituting the different social constructs. Ideologically the country is divided along Jordanian nationalist, Islamist and leftist political streams creating diverse and often contradictory allegiances within an increasingly turbulent region. However, these diverse and contradictory ideologies do not come together enough to form a political and economic identity on the national level. As the economic crisis deepens globally especially with the increasing impact of COVID-19, socio-economic and political challenges facing Jordan increase.

The government has invested little in institutional



Azraq Camp, Jordan.
Photo: Christopher Herwig

change and conflict management. It has been particularly slow in delivering political reform and prioritising steps towards economic and fiscal reform over civic and political freedoms. This has not only undermined confidence in the government of Omar Razzaz – initially celebrated as a liberal and democratic political personality. This government aversion to adopting a serious political reform agenda has restricted – if not undermined – the role of civil society and stunted its maturity into an effective partner to the state and government as well as a monitor of their performance vis-a-vis meeting the expectations and needs of Jordanian citizens.

Despite the amended Public Gatherings Law which took effect in March 2011, and which was touted as providing for more openness towards public gatherings, organisations and activists continue to seek permission to host public events or meetings from Jordan's Interior Ministry. Questions were raised about the right to organise and assemble by many activists since the cancellation of several public events without any official explanation (HRW

2019). In addition, other questions about freedom of expression in Jordan have been raised since 2018 when Jordan's cabinet sent for parliamentary approval amendments to 2015 Electronic Crimes Law that criminalise hate speech. Critics felt that the proposed amendments provided "vague" language that had implications on what is to be labelled as 'hate speech'.

Since the beginning of 2019, a new wave of demonstrations were carried out across the country to challenge what demonstrators identified as the "government's economic policies and decisions", the curtailing of activities of some professional associations (freedom of assembly and association), the imposition of what activists called "arbitrary"² gag orders and the increase of crime or violence against women under what women activists believed were "lax" government reactions and handling of the cases.

Women human rights defenders, female activists and feminists have had a recognised role in the organisation of online and public demonstrations and campaigns in the Kingdom and regionally, signalling a growing political presence with regards to political, economic and social issues that are relevant to political activists in general and more specifically on issues related to Gender-Based Violence (GBV). For a quick overview of the recent public demonstrations related to GBV cases and the ban on teachers' gatherings by the authorities see Annex 1.

This study considers the role of human rights defenders – and among them women activists and feminists – in relation to the political, socio-economic and demographic challenges and the ebb and flow of their influence within those changes. The government often alludes to the country's "unique" context, outside pressures and security concerns, to explain away its own actions, and those of its supporters and beneficiaries, which effectively aim at impeding and reducing the space in which civil society and activists can operate. Civil society and human rights activists are increasingly distrustful of those explanations from the government and are demanding a recognition of the need to push forward with a politically-inspired development agenda for the Kingdom which transcends regional and global influences as well as pressures from "interest groups" in the country which are fearful of losing their power. To add another complicating layer, organising to advocate on women's issues specifically, faces, and has to account for, the added burden of a patriarchal mentality that permeates legislation and state behaviour as well as societal and religious influences.

² <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/jordan>

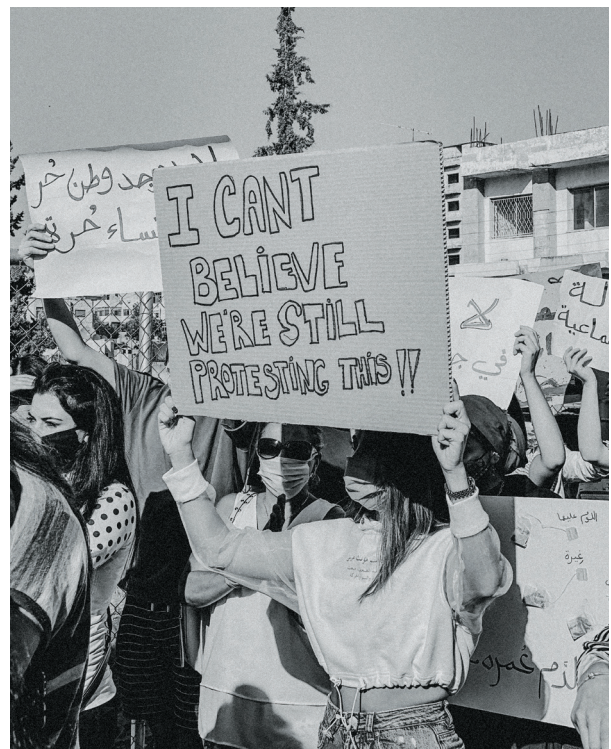
LITERATURE REVIEW

Shrinking Civic Spaces

A recent paper on politics and gender by The Transnational Institute (TI), on *“shrinking space” a framing paper*, identified the key issues and trends around shrinking political spaces and its influence on civil society organisations. The paper defines it “as a concept or framework that captures the dynamic relationship between repressive methods and political struggle, including the ways in which political struggle responds to these methods to reclaim space, and the impact this response has upon how political struggles relate to one another”³. For the purpose of simplifying terms, this study uses shrinking of spaces as a term which describes all methods authorities or powerful bodies and actors used to limit political movements and activities, and the trends around this space and how civil rights activists and organisations are navigating the space.

A May 2020 tracker on civic freedoms post COVID-19 described the situation in Jordan⁴ as “obstructed”⁵ citing in evidence a rapid series of increased restrictions on expression and association specifically but also ongoing restrictions on peaceful assembly. CIVICUS, which publishes the tracker report, uses multiple indicators to determine whether countries are open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed or closed. The top ten violations determining the ranking are: censorship, protesters detained, harassment, restrictive laws, intimidation, attacks on journalists, protest disruption, journalists detained, excessive force and criminal defamation. A rating of obstructed refers to: “Civic space is heavily contested by power holders, who impose a combination of legal and practical constraints on the full enjoyment of fundamental rights. Although civil society organisations exist, state authorities undermine them, including through the use of illegal surveillance, bureaucratic harassment and demeaning public statements. There is some space for non-state media and editorial independence, but journalists face the risk of physical attack and criminal defamation charges, which encourage self-censorship.”⁶

Using TI’s and Kvinna till Kvinna’s definitions and parameters, the legal analysis in the European Centre for Not-for-profit Law (ECNL) and the International Centre for Not-for-profit Law (ICNL), ECNL and UN Human Rights Special Procedures tracker on Jordan, among other reports, this study seeks to organise the political, legislative, structural and organisational impediments to civic action by women activists, feminist groups in Jordan. The framing paper provides for clear links between those impeding parameters and the sources of those impediments, the mechanisms they use, as well as which political or activist actors they target. To clarify the link, those parameters are applied to the Jordanian context in the *Table 1 mapping specific practices unique to Jordan* that emerge from reading analysis of Jordan’s global and regional geopolitical influences as well as internal demographic dynamics.



Jordanian women protest against the killing of a Jordanian women in 2020.

Photo: Takatoat, one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Jordan.

³ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/on_shrinking_space_2.pdf

⁴ <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=64&issue=&date=&type=>

⁵ <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/jordan/>

⁶ <https://monitor.civicus.org/Ratings/>

Table 1: mapping specific practices unique to Jordan

CONSTRAINTS	Relevance to Jordan
<p>PHILANTHROPIC PROTECTION</p> <p>By whom: Governments, funding agencies</p> <p>Mechanism: Laws and other government-imposed restrictions</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Limits domestic CSO's international funding options. Delays and vague conditions on funding can be used by the government to select which CSOs receive favour and which are denied the opportunity to work</p>	<p>Restrictions on receiving funding is one of the main constraints on CSOs; for example, according to Law No. 51, foreign funding, including any gifts, grants, or donations given to a society, is subject to the prior notification and approval of the Council of Ministers. Pursuant to an administrative requirement issued in October 2015, societies must complete and submit an extensive application form, providing detailed information about the source of the funds and the project to be funded.</p>
<p>BROAD LAWS REGULATING CSO OPERATIONS, INCLUDING REGISTRATION, LICENSING, REPORTING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY</p> <p>By whom: Government, funding agencies Mechanism: Laws, policies and procedural mechanisms</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Creates more work/ overhead for CSOs and increases barriers for compliance, enabling operations to be shut down for non-compliance</p>	<p>CSOs were governed by the Law on Societies and Social Bodies within the Ministry of Social Development which means that CSO may not have any "political goals" and are restricted from "activities of political parties." They also must have a minimum of seven members. Approval is required from the Council of Ministers for registration of any society in which a founder is a legal person or non-Jordanian and in case of registration of a foundation. The Ministry must be notified three weeks in advance of general assembly meetings, and government officials may attend the meetings. CSOs are also required to conduct due diligence on resources of funds and vendors, and failure to do so will subject them to penalties that may include detention, suspension or a fine.</p>
<p>RIGHTS TO FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION CONSTRAINED</p> <p>By Whom: Governments often through police and/or military enforcement</p> <p>Mechanism: Laws, policies and practices, often in the name of 'public order' and 'security and intimidation.</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Limits civil society's ability to openly and spontaneously to gather, mobilize, and protest. Concern over the harsh penalties and vague conditions for government intervention, will put off citizens from gathering in support of advocacy efforts</p>	<p>Notification is required 48 hours prior to an assembly, and unauthorized assemblies are illegal. Authorities may disperse or otherwise suppress assemblies on vague grounds, penalties are disproportionate and/or harsh. There is no legal protection for non-Jordanians, any spontaneous demonstration would be deemed illegal. Recently, because of the COVID pandemic, the Defence Law was activated by the government, the prime minister may declare a state of emergency in response to exceptional circumstances that "threaten national security or public safety". The law gives him the authority to suspend certain rights, including restrictions on freedom of expression and movement until this law is deactivated. It does not appear to have time limits. Violation of the law can sentence individuals to three years in prison, fined 3,000 Jordanian Dinars (\$4,200), or both. Under the April 15, 2020 decree of the Defence Law, policed freedom of speech as sharing news that would arguably "cause panic" about the pandemic in media outlets or even online can carry a penalty of up to three years in prison; in fact, "two prominent media executives, a foreign journalist, and a former member of parliament, apparently in response to public criticism, as well as three people for allegedly spreading "fake news."</p>

<p>HRDs AND REFUGEE SOLIDARITY GROUPS CRIMINALIZED, STIGMATIZED, AND DE-LEGITIMIZED</p> <p>By whom: Governments, media companies, Far Right Groups.</p> <p>Governments and private security agencies. Mechanism: Laws, propaganda, media outlets, intimidation</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Limits the nonviolent means by which HRDs and refugee groups engage politically, and undermines human rights protection</p>	<p>No information currently available</p>
<p>FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION RESTRICTED, INCLUDING ONLINE REPRESSION</p> <p>By Whom: Governments and private security agencies</p> <p>Mechanism: Laws and policies that induce censorship, mass surveillance, as well as intimidation</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Reduces the ability of CSOs to spread information and raise awareness within society, with a range of repercussions.</p>	<p>Vague terminology or legal frameworks in the laws, lack of definition of what “political activities” entail is one of the examples and it invites government discretion and potentially causes CSOs to reduce their expressive activities. It also reduces CSOs advocacy efforts.</p> <p>There are two noteworthy legal restrictions on CSOs’s speech: criminal defamation law and the prohibition against political activity. Under the first, any expression that constitutes defamation or libel of government officials is subject to sanction under the Penal Code. Criminal provisions on libel and defamation limit societies’ ability to criticize government officials. Steep penalties for hate speech and certain online expression under the Cybercrimes Law. Under the second, prohibition on “political” activities is a vague condition on CSOs since political activities are not defined in either the Societies Law or the Political Parties law.</p> <p>Feminists and human rights defenders on social media are bullied and ridiculed and, in some cases, even receive death threats. Feminists and women’s rights activists reported cases of online life threatening (which needs further investigation), but no official reports were found. Yet in one report published by a German television that was later removed, evidence was shown of death threats to a very young Jordanian activist who had asked women on Twitter to question social pressure on them to wear the Hijab and asked women to share their stories.</p>

INTIMIDATION AND VIOLENT ATTACKS UPON CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

By Whom: Religious conservatives, corporations, Far Right groups, other Public and private donors, (and indirectly through government policies)

Mechanism: Direct threats, blackmail, harassment, slander, violence, and intimidation, through In-person confrontations, lawsuits, and the Internet.

Effect on Civil Society

Presents existential threats to CSO actors and their operations, endangering their right to be free from fear

Activists interviewed and investigated by General Intelligence Directorate (GID) for working or advocating for civil and human rights is one of the governments threatening behaviour and harassment which is not directly regarded to any of the mentioned laws but claimed to be related to public security reasons.

Most of these acts are related to Cyber Crimes Law and Societies Law, but Trade Union Regulation are also manipulated by the government to cement its control of the unions. Limitations are imposed on the Unions' Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining with regard to the right of trade union activity. The Labour Law restricts workers from freely establishing and joining trade unions or practicing their labour rights. An example of government action includes teachers' strike in 2019 and which, according to reports, led to the arrest of nearly 1000 protestors during the demonstrations.

Anti-terrorism Law: concerns have been expressed by HRDs about the law's broad definition of terrorism, provisions allowing detention without access to a lawyer and without judicial review for up to 30 days, increased powers of law enforcement officials to detain, search and arrest, and exclusive jurisdiction of military courts over terrorism cases. Government introduced amendments in 2014 to broaden the definition of terrorism to include such acts as "disturbing [Jordan's] relations with a foreign state." That offense is already in Jordan's Penal Code and is regularly used to punish any criticism of foreign countries or their rulers. The government used this article to arrest Prominent Jordanian Cartoonist Emad Hajjaj in August 2020 for ridiculing the leaders of the United Arab Emirates after they signed a peace deal with Israel.

FUNDING WITHDRAWN AND/ OR LIMITED BY DONORS DUE TO RISK AVERSION AND SECURITIZATION

By Whom: Public and private donors, (and indirectly through government policies)

Mechanism: Stricter funding requirements that favour less politicized organizations and issues

Effect on Civil Society

Limits the sources of funding for CSOs, which in turn creates greater competition amongst CSOs for funds, and threatens their operations

Prior approval is required to receive foreign funding and to collect donations from the public. Funding is very much restricted to the government's development agenda and plans which are selective and exclusive to certain issues.

An example is the country's discriminatory laws which restrict transfer of nationality to children along the paternal line. The same yardstick is applied to the residency laws which also limit, restrict or problematise residency and work permits. Given that Jordan is home to one of the largest populations of Palestinian refugees, the largest percentage of cases of non-Jordanian men married to Jordanian women is of non-citizen Palestinian men. Government claims the policy is to secure Palestinian statehood and guard against demographic imbalance. Some international organisations are addressing this issue in partnership with only one or two CSOs because the issue is considered sensitive politically and culturally.

<p>SPACES FOR CSOs REDUCED AS THEY ARE CAPTURED AND CO-OPTED BY OTHER ACTORS</p> <p>By Whom: Private interest groups, lobbyists, GONGOs, and CSR initiatives</p> <p>Mechanism: Discrediting and legitimizing certain CSOs through media and other sources</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Impedes the financial lifelines of CSOs as well as their spaces for political engagement</p>	<p>Historically Royal NGOs are perceived to serve government controls over the activities within the civic space and donor funding. For example, the Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW) is a semi-government body formed by royal decree and patronised by HRH Princess Basma is tasked to formulate the government strategy on women and coordinate with civil society on the implementation of that strategy. Other Royal NGOs include Jordan River Foundation (JRF), King Hussein Foundation (KHF), National Council for Family Affairs (NCFA) among others.</p> <p>Large NGOs with royal or VIP patrons, traditionally receive the largest portion of international funding, maintain influence through relationships with the government and are given control over channelling services and smaller funds to Community Based Organisations (CBOs)</p>
<p>CSOs EXCLUDED FROM THE BANKING SYSTEM, DUE TO RISING COUNTERTERRORISM MEASURES</p> <p>By Whom: Banks (and indirectly through government policies)</p> <p>Mechanism: Government definitions on terrorism and stricter banking requirements</p> <p>Effect on Civil Society Limits the sources of financing for CSOs, in turn threatening their operations</p>	<p>On April 6, 2017, the Council of Ministers issued a resolution, which stipulated that Societies and Not-for-Profit Organisations (CSOs) would become subject to the provisions of the Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Law No. 46 2007. The decision was made pursuant to Article 13(g) of that Law, which authorises the Council of Ministers to include any “other” entities. Pursuant to the decision, CSOs are expected to comply with all provisions of the Law and put in place all measures required by it. Although the decision by the government is seen as “legitimate”, it is seen as placing added burden on access to funding for civil society and placing restrictions on freedom of association.</p>

Information on Jordan is collected from interviews, news updates and reports including below⁷

⁷ Reports: The International Center for Not for Profit Law (ICNL) Civic Freedom Monitor Report on Jordan.
- Jordan: State of Emergency Declared Government Promises to Respect Rights in COVID-19 Response
- Jordan: Free Speech Threats Under Covid-19 Response New Penalties for ‘Causing Panic’ About Pandemic
- What the Arrest of a Prominent Jordanian Cartoonist Says About the State of Satire in the Arab World

FEMINISM, FEMINISTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

One of the most foundational definitions that challenged the assumptions of this study is the definition of a “feminist” or “feminism” within the context of Jordan. Hence, it is essential to study women’s movement and activism, both theoretically and organisationally and refer that analysis to the international definition of feminism and its manifestations in the activism of feminists and/or human rights defenders.

To that end, the study targets activists in Jordan who identify as feminists or apply a gender lens when working on human rights issues. According to the UN Declaration, human rights defenders (HRDs) “are those individuals, groups and organs of society that promote and protect universally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms”⁸. Based on this definition, they are those who “seek the promotion and protection of civil and political rights as well as the promotion, protection and realisation of economic, social and cultural rights”⁹. Women rights are human rights and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women is fundamental human right.

In the region, women activists are divided ideologically and politically. Some women activists are aligned with liberal or left-wing organisations; others have been part of the Islamist/fundamentalist groups. Understanding this division is essential to comprehending the different views of what patriarchy is and how oppression against women is systemised. Some women reject religion as patriarchal; others view religions as the unquestionable right to belief. Some women reject traditions and customs which they believe foster honour killing and restrict women’s mobility outside of home and others find identity, solace, and strength in cultural traditions. In theory, women’s social positions have implications for

their consciousness and activism and therefore the divisions of ideologies and socio-political structure influence their activism and organisations.

Activism for women’s rights in the Middle East has been described as similar to that existing “in other regions of the global South, such as Latin America and East Asia”¹⁰. An activism that is concerned mainly with the limited access to paid employment and under-representation in the political system. It generally acknowledges women status as “second-class citizenship” that is inscribed in family law and reflected in patriarchal cultural practices and norms.

For the purposes of this study, the word ‘feminist’ describes activism and “lifestyle” in support of women’s rights, interests and freedoms with the acknowledgment of the systematic oppression against women.

Therefore, for the sake of this analysis, the definition of “feminists” firstly refers to women who identify with the feminist theory and practice to ensure equal rights and access to resources and services for all women and girls in Jordan and importantly – and in order to relate it to Jordan - it also includes activists who identify with feminism as a way of life or a “lifestyle”.

A study by Valentine M. Moghadam, a feminist scholar and activist, explains that despite these ideological differences or diversities, Arab women activities prioritise two main issues: underrepresentation in the economic and political domain; and discriminatory family laws. These two characterise the shared collective experience with oppression across Arab countries.¹¹ This study terms or describes the work by women of the region and for women rights as “*feminist praxis*” referring to “*feminist attitudes and behaviours*” in the work to

⁸ UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 8 March 1999, A/RES/53/144, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f54c14.html> [accessed 11 September 2020]

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ Moghadam Valentine M. Women, Structure, and Agency in the Middle East: Introduction and Overview to Feminist Formations’ Special Issue on Women in the Middle East. *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Women in the Middle East (Fall 2010), pp. 1-9. Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press *Feminist Formations* is a peer-reviewed journal which publishes interdisciplinary and multicultural feminist scholarship in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies linking feminist theory with teaching and activism.

challenge gender hierarchy and patriarchal cultural norms. These attitudes and behaviours are not merely or necessarily political in nature, but more of actions and reactions taken by (mostly) women activists in Jordan against oppression.

In this study, through key informant interviews and a rapid survey, these elements were unpacked, tested and measured to arrive at an analysis of the challenge of organising and activism of the Jordanian “women’s movement” today considering the influences and pressures imposed on civil society which are contributing to a decidedly shrinking civic space for organising.

Women’s movement in Jordan: Depoliticisation and Demobilisation

One of the essential literatures on women’s and labour movements in Jordan are the studies conducted by Dr. Sara Ababneh, a Jordanian academic. She looks at the challenge of organising around labour issues in Jordan through applying a distinct gender lens to the analysis. She provides a historical study of the women’s movements and its politics, discourse and representation.

According to her analysis,¹² the movement has never been able to organise as a women’s movement driven by a common ideological framework but as a worker’s movement dedicated to social and economic justice or essentially a workers’ movement rather than a feminist movement focused on women’s issues. She also stresses the argument that the **legislative de-politicisation** of civil society action as Jordan’s laws only allow the registration of civil society organisations at the Ministry of Social Development and deny CSOs the right to work and organise on political issues, has meant that the women’s rights agenda is not seen as a national political agenda but a social/development one.

Historically, this movement, just like every women’s/ feminist movement, has been challenged with the patriarchal politics of the state. According to Ababneh, the “narrow definition of politics [that] is highly patriarchal in that it excludes the personal from the category of the political”¹³, and as a result,

she explains, “patriarchal hegemonic notions of the political as inherently nonpersonal have become normative” (P. 89). The normalisation of the forced separation between women’s movement and the political affairs on the national level has always limited women’s activism. Yet, Ababneh stresses that women’s movement and activism in Jordan helped support thousands of women over the years, and it did so despite all of the challenges of the discourse which often **depoliticises** women’s oppression and seeks to mitigate it through individualised projects, development and social charity work.

In a book, titled *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East*, Laurie A. Brand, who studied women’s movement in relation to the Jordanian state, or what she describes as the “*political liberalization*” historical process of the Jordanian state¹⁴. She specifically claims that the role of women and women organisations needs to be analysed in relations to two main essential and influential factors: the nature and extent of women’s organising prior to the beginning of the liberalisation of the state; the nature of that organisation’s relationship to the state¹⁵. She recounts how a historical reading demonstrates how the state apparatus was involved in **demobilisation** of women and the obstruction of their efforts to organise into political bodies. She cites the fate of women organisations such as the WFJ, was very tight to “*regime preferences*”, which was another historical challenge that is always based on political development. An example is when the state was mostly using these bodies of organisation such as the Women’s Federation in Jordan (WFJ) for appearances in the UN meetings, but then locally criticised its importance and influence and threatened to dissolve it (Brand, 151).

This paper accepts the analytical linkages and influences proposed by Ababneh and Brand to the evolution of the women’s movement in Jordan in order to provide a historical framing of restrictions that have been imposed on the movement since its inception. In addition, and through the study conducted for the paper, we are able to look further down the line to the constraints identified by informants, and reported in the news, on the activities of the civil society organisations, individuals and groups which are involved in advocacy on women’s issues in order to provide further analyses of the constraints and restrictions on their ability to organise as a “feminist” movement

¹² Ababneh, Sara, 2020. The Time to Question, Rethink and Popularize the Notion of ‘Women’s Issues’: Lessons from Jordan’s Popular and Labor Movements from 2006 to now. *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 21(1), 271-288.)

¹³ Ababneh, S, 2016. TROUBLING THE POLITICAL: WOMEN IN THE JORDANIAN DAY-WAGED LABOR MOVEMENT. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 48(1), 87-112. doi:10.1017/S0020743815001488

¹⁴ Historical Analysis: Jordan: Women and the Struggle for Political Opening by Laurie A.Brand, published in *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East*, Gender, Economy, and Society, 2003.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Young Jordanian women organizing to learn and plan interventions to advocate for women's rights in 2021.
Photo: Ahel, one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Jordan



Young Jordanian women organizing to learn and plan interventions to advocate for women's rights in 2021.
Photo: Ahel, one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Jordan

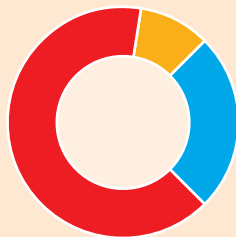
SHRINKING SPACE RESTRICTS FEMINISTS IN JORDAN

The key question to this study was to determine whether the shrinking civic space for organising in Jordan is impacting the work of feminists or human rights defenders working on gender issues. This study assumes firstly that there is a "shrinking" civic space, as per the parameters identified in the table on shrinking civic space (see Literature Review and Table 1), secondly that there is a group of like-minded feminists or human rights defenders organising themselves to advocate on a feminist or women's rights agenda in Jordan

The respondents were first asked if they believe they have enough space for organizing and advocating for women issues, and almost 65% of respondents reported that they do not have that space and 25% believe that they have.

Do you think that you have enough civic space to organise and advocate on women's rights in Jordan

20 RESPONSES



■ **25%** Yes
 ■ **65%** No
 ■ **10%** Not sure

Only 10% (2 respondents) were not sure (please see chart footnote). **A Gender and democratisation development specialist** working with a donor, who asked for anonymity, said that although it appeared that civil society activities continued with government sanction, “a sense of taboo still exists when it comes to the rights of women”. The specialist pointed out that it was evident that women’s issues were treated as if they were “trivial or a nice additional right not an inherent human right.” Furthermore, issues that target women’s rights are always presented as “sensitive”, which the specialist believed implied that women’s rights issues should be “pursued in private and not a clear public agenda priority.”

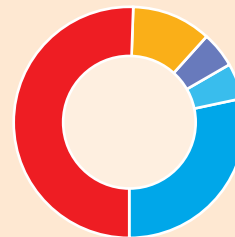
The second respondent, Laila Naffa of the Arab Women’s Association in Jordan, also feels that the civic space in Jordan is not free enough to allow for advocacy on all the pressing women’s right issues “especially critical and sensitive issues”, but she said that it has been open to advocacy on women’s political participation for example, which is seen as less culturally sensitive.

Respondents were also asked to select among several key statements to further explain their assertion, and over 50% of the activists who believe they do not have the space to organise think that the “culture of Eib (shame) and traditional conservatives empower the state to curtail the space for activism on women’s rights”. Other important factors were also identified by the activists such as the government’s control over such spaces

(27.8%), and the Islamic conservatives empower the state to curtail the space for activism on women’s rights (11.1%). Curiously, despite key informants and relevant literature referring to security and demographic concerns as a strong contributing factor to the shrinking civic space in Jordan, respondents to the quantitative survey did not identify it as a contributing factor.

Choose the statement that most closely explains your answer

18 RESPONSES

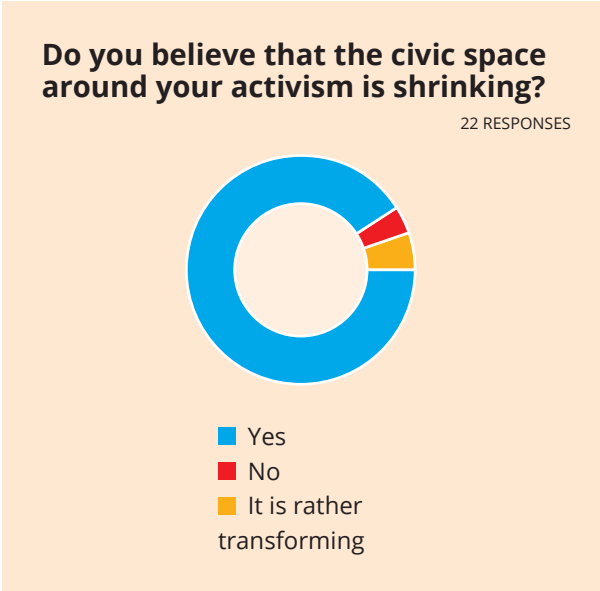


■ **27.8%** Jordan controls and limits the civic space for activism on women's rights
 ■ **50%** Culture of Eib and traditional conservatives empower the state to control
 ■ **11.1%** Islamic conservatives empower the state to curtail the space for activism on women rights issues

While five respondents (27.7%) reported that they do have the civic space to organise around women issues, their explanation appeared to assign that extra civic space margin specifically to their own organisations’ status and relationship with the government, rather than the general state of freedom to organise within the existing civic space. In their responses to a follow-on question aimed at validating their initial assessment of civic space, it became apparent that they believed their organisation (or them personally) have established the credibility (with government) that allows them more space to organise.

A senior gender expert interviewed for this study expected that variable when asked about the space allowed for civil society actors. The expert, who asked for anonymity, said that personal relations and networking influence the relationship between successive governments and human rights defenders. “Personal relationships rather than institutional relationships” become the modus operandi” and in the expert’s opinion determines how much space is allowed for organising. “The personality plays a huge part, if you are liked and a friend of the governing body at that time, you could have more of an open space than others.” What has been undoubtedly confirmed by activists,

donors, semi-government officials and feminists in Jordan in both the quantitative survey and interviews, is that the trend is decidedly towards more restriction and that civic space in Jordan is in fact shrinking.



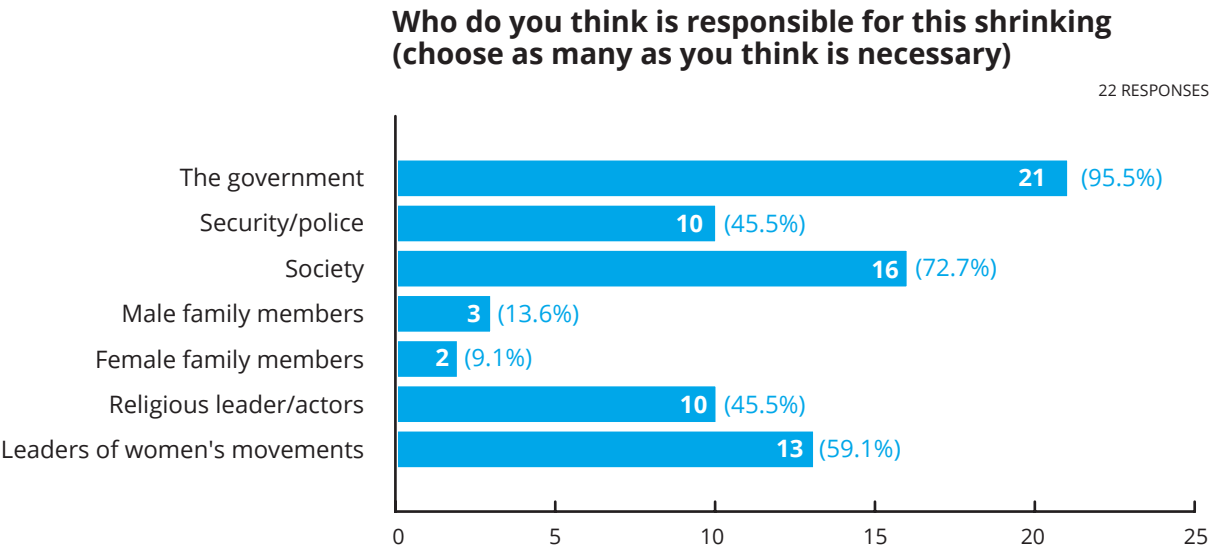
Just over 90 per cent of respondents described the civic space around their activism in Jordan as “shrinking”. When asked to identify who is responsible, almost unanimously the respondents blamed the government first with 95.5%. Society was placed second with 72.7% of the vote, and the leaders of the women’s movement were placed in third place with 59.1 % of the vote. Security forces and religious leaders/actors received equal blame

for restricting the civic space around women’s issues with 45.5% of the vote. Although family was seen as an important influencer, with the vote blaming male members more than female members, the percentage that saw their influence as a contributing factor remained comparatively low around 13.6% (male) and 9.1% (female).

Both survey and interview responses highlighted a multitude of state and non-state actors that also contribute to the shrinking space around civil society in Jordan. Although their role was not fully researched at this time to confirm claims of their role, it is important nevertheless to identify the breadth of actors that are seen collaborating - intentionally or unintentionally - to support the state’s agenda.

“Non-state actors include Islamic conservatives, international actors who hold the gender equity agenda including donors such as EUD and UN agencies which abide to the state’s rules by not touching certain topics that anger the state or are considered political” summarises a **senior development expert from a European INGO who requested anonymity**. “State actors would include security entities and ministries that implement an agenda linked to the interests of such entities such as Ministry of Interior Affairs, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Ministry of Social Development” and finally “semi-state actors such as JNCW and other royal organisations.”

Further investigation of the trend showed that



GOVERNMENT AND STATE ACTORS

observers of the civic space and the women's rights defenders in Jordan are describing a trajectory in government dealings with civil society is indicative of a more serious intent than forcing a "shrinking" civic space for organising.

In interviews conducted for this paper, some refer to the civic space in Jordan as "closing", mimicking the experience of Egypt, which again refers to a trajectory of increased government restrictions on activists and "changed" civil society. These changes, that can include a change in regulations governing the work of civil society organisations, impacts organisations funded by donors primarily. A key feature that differentiates a "shrinking" from a "closing" space is that the latter points to a change rather than shrinkage by shifting power from civic to political actors and therefore changes the dynamics and decision-making to impact the development agenda, spending priorities and long-term economic planning. This concept will need further investigation in more substantial qualitative research as some indicators identified in this paper could also be used to argue that what has affected civil society in Jordan is not a "shrinking" of space for activism but a closing of that space.

Interviewees almost consistently said that restrictions being imposed by state actors on civil society could be serious enough to indicate a "closing space" which would indicate a hijack of the civic space by politicians (usually the government or their friends in parliament). Another concern is the unrestricted and unchecked "discretionary authority" the government appears to have to determine who or what civil society organisation group is at the receiving end of its restrictive measures.

"It is a closing space for civil society," says the senior gender expert. "I think that although the government says we value them (civil society), they reach out to them and include them in meetings. When it comes to decision-making, they (government) are closed to them and they don't accept their input."

Dr Salma Nims, Secretary General of the Jordan



Dr. Salma Nims, Secretary General of the Jordan National Commission for Women (JNCW)

“I see us moving towards the Egyptian model. People are afraid to speak especially under the defence law. The blanketing of the media over the Teachers’ Syndicate is a case in point.”

National Commission for Women (JNCW) concurs and goes one step further likening the "shrinking space" in Jordan to the trajectory that is being witnessed in Egypt where space for civil society action and advocacy is very tight. "I see us moving towards the Egyptian model. People are afraid to speak especially under the defence law. The blanketing of the media over

the Teachers’ Syndicate is a case in point."

The lens by which activists view the role of civil society and their ability to work within the space available does appear to be impacted or influenced by an emerging generational separation line. While most of the commentators came from positions of influence after years of experience, younger, most idealist activists have taken a different viewpoint of the shrinking civic space and how it impacts their activism.



“I do not think that this space [already] needs to exist; as Arab feminists, I believe, we create those spaces with our activism. We work to reclaim these spaces because they are taken away from us...Yet, of course, having access to such spaces is not enough because they are still very tight and risky to navigate. As an activist, you need to have awareness and knowledge, too.”

Banan Abu Zain Al Deen, Co-Founder of Takatoat, one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Jordan.

Banan Abu Zain Al Deen, the founder of *Takatoat* and an activist who, with a group of other emerging gender activists in Jordan, led several campaigns on women's rights most recently protesting the case of Ahlam¹⁶ agrees that the civic space is “tight” but insists that these spaces are to be reclaimed. She explains by saying: “I do not think that this space [already] needs to exist; as Arab feminists, I believe, we create those spaces with our activism. We work to reclaim these spaces because they are taken away from us...Yet, of course, having access to such spaces is not enough because they are still very tight and risky to navigate. As an activist, you need to have awareness and knowledge, too”, Abu Zain Al Deen says.

Therefore, **Abu Zain Al Deen**, joined ranks with other colleagues, to push forward with their brand of “feminist activism” as a process of reclaiming spaces for women's activism. Their view embraces the approach that political feminist ideology highlights resistance to authoritative structures and powers as an integral part of their activism.

SOCIETY, CULTURE AND RELIGION

Respondents, as shown in the graph above, identified society as the second most important determinant of civic space action on women's rights. “I see the real struggle is with the society, cultural and tribal norms and conservatism rather than laws and policies” said Lina Nasereddin, a young activist who identifies herself as a liberal feminist.

Gender experts and policy makers agree. The recent outcry by women's rights activists over the killing of Ahlam by her father was tempered by what many described as the “negative mindset” in

society towards women claiming their right to have relationships or select their husbands. “They (critics) took the issue on a personal level rather than looking at the institutional level” the senior gender expert pointed out adding that society “forgot that it is an issue of murder”. What society, and government as part of that society, became focused on was their fear of activists changing “the family ethics” and the “patriarchal power dynamics.”

Abu Zain Al Deen concurred with the senior expert and said that she was questioned after the Ahlam demonstrations about the purpose of challenging

¹⁶ Anger as ‘father kills Jordanian woman, drinks tea besides her corpse’

the patriarchal system and the use of the Arabic word "Abawi" - Arabic for Patriarchal which has a connotation associating the term with the role of fathers as heads of families - which some felt implied a challenge to the current familial power structure and roles in Jordan.

"I feel it is really at the end of the day an issue of power dynamics. Patriarchal because they think I am a man and I make the decisions, age dynamics, because the older generation wants to control the youth and even, from what social class you come from," the senior gender expert said.

Dr Nims also sees in the reaction to Ahlam's case among society a clear demonstration of the influence of conservative elements on government. "Security and the role of security forces was paramount, but in reality, if you look more closely, we can see that they (security) allowed a demonstration protesting the killing of Ahlam to happen. Most of the negative influence came from Islamic and conservative powers using their influence and relationship with the state," she elaborated.

Criticism and attacks by some

journalists and social media users of the protests of Ahlam, on the flip side, have forced many public discussions and debates in the media on what patriarchy is about. **Abu Zain El Deen** points to this positive outcome "if you look at social media nowadays, you will see how many videos were created by young women and also by men that explain what patriarchy is. Did you ever imagine having such discussions over a taboo subject? We, the feminists who protested, have triggered this".

The controversy around the protests also received international media attention highlighting the protesters' rejection of patriarchy as a framework for

legislation and societal attitudes governing women's lives in Jordan, but also emphasizing their belief that their calls to end patriarchy do not immediately translate into ending the social and cultural meanings of fatherhood.¹⁷

Respondents to the survey appeared to confirm these views. Asked if they thought that there is a culture or mindset pushing against women activism and feminism in Jordan, over 90% of the respondents confirmed that there was.

"If you look at social media nowadays, you will see how many videos were created by young women and also by men that explain what patriarchy is. Did you ever imagine having such discussions over a taboo subject? We, the feminists who protested, have triggered this".

Says Dr. Nims

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND PRACTICES

An essential question to this study was whether the civic space is shrinking in terms of political and human rights activism in general or is it specific to activism around women issues. The answer to that question also provides an insight into whether respondents considered the legal framework around freedoms to be intentionally designed to police and restrict the civic space or to only provide a governance framework

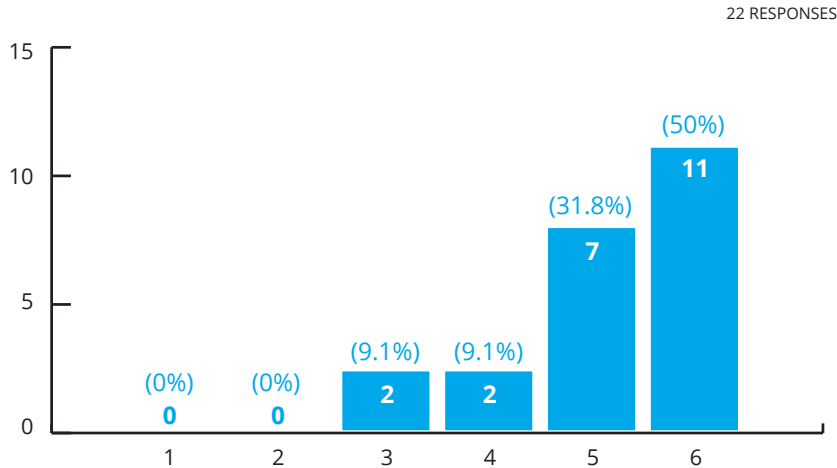
Therefore, the respondents were asked on a scale from 1-6, (1= completely disagree, 6= I completely agree), whether they agree that the civic space is

shrinking for all human rights activists (see the graph below). Over 80% of them agreed that the shrinking civic space does not only restrict activism around women's rights, but also restricts any demands for freedoms of speech, expression, and assembly. This confirms that the existing legislative framework is in fact policing and restricting all civil/political rights and freedoms rather than just providing an acceptable governance framework.

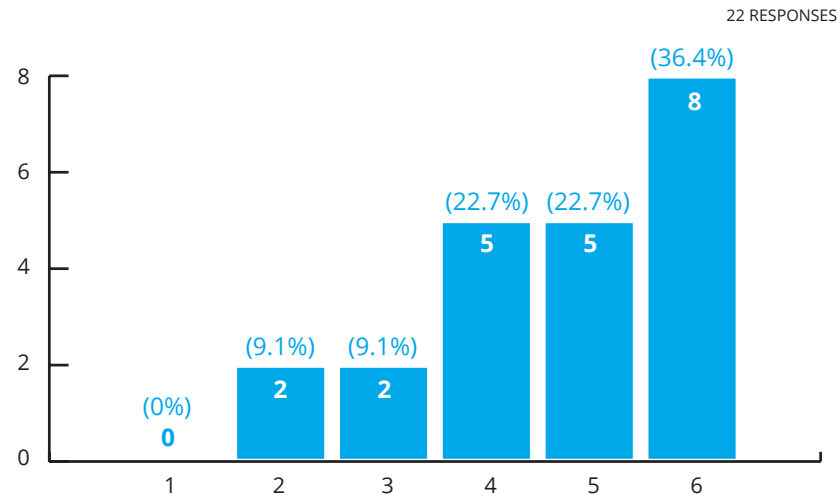
Asked if the respondents believe that the package of legislation around freedoms and civil society in Jordan consolidates the power of the state and other

¹⁷ Article titled 'Ahlam screams: The demonstration that led Jordanians to discuss Patriarchy. «الأبوية» مصطلح أردنيين لمناقشة مصطلح

The civic space is shrinking for all human and political rights activists, not only for activists on women's rights and freedoms.



The legislation in Jordan consolidates the power of the state and non-state actors in controlling civic space and the rights and freedoms of activists.



non-state actors in controlling and policing the civic space. On a scale from 1-6 (1= I completely disagree- 6= I completely agree), about 80% generally agreed with that statement, 36.4% of those completely agreed with it. Yet, 18.2% of the respondents disagreed. (see the graph above).

Legal experts agree that the legislation in Jordan does provide the tools that can strengthen the hand of government in controlling the civic space (see parameters of shrinking civic space in Jordan (Table 1) in order to restrict freedoms of speech, assembly and assimilation for civil society using multiple legal instruments and/or instructions.

“**Legislation consolidated the power of the state and non-state actors in controlling the civic space and the rights and freedoms of activists**” says the senior development expert

“Legislation consolidated the power of the state and non-state actors in controlling the civic space and the rights and freedoms of activists” says the senior development expert. Apart from the laws that deal with civil society organisations directly, the expert noted, there are less obvious legislative tools that the state also uses to restrict other important actors to civic

space activity. “There are laws (that impact) trade union activity, there is the Labour Law which restricts workers from establishing and joining trade unions, the Law on Public Gatherings where a governor must approve demonstrations or public meetings in advance instead of only being notified, and finally,

Anti-terrorism Law and its broad definition of what constitutes a terrorist act that could be used for prosecuting peaceful political speeches or assembly.”

Legal commentators who agree that there are clear legal instruments used to restrict the civic space also claim that the problem is deeper and more complex than the letter of the law.

The real determinant is the way the government subjectively and selectively uses those laws to create access, deliver favours and take away “privileges” or punish those who don’t fall in line.

“It is all in the hand of the government. The laws

that govern freedoms in Jordan, have an inbuilt discretionary authority for the government. They can approve or disapprove without having to explain. The government said that it improved the process for grant approval. That is fine but at the end, they can determine whether you receive funding or not.”

“The big problem is that the government has a huge discretionary authority and it uses it at will. When I want, I let it pass, when I want, I reject. When I want, I send them to court. When I don’t want to, I don’t send them to court,” said **Dr Ayman Halaseh**, a human rights lawyer, academic and gender expert.

FEMINIST IDEOLOGY AND LABELLING

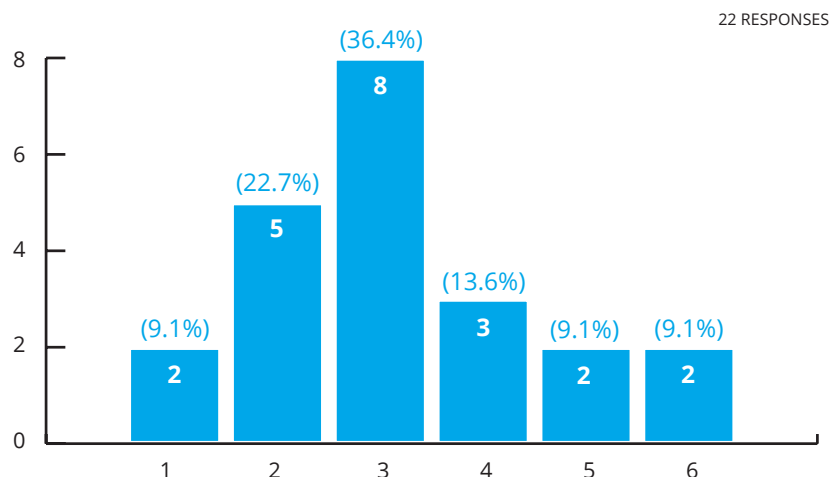
As stated earlier, a research question that defines the activism around women issues in Jordan as linked to an organisational form of feminism, is indeed a challenge. That challenge is two-fold: whether it can be used for a realistic assessment of the operational impact of the women’s movement and whether it is achieving a feminist agenda in Jordan.

As such, analysing the women’s movement in Jordan in relation to the global feminist movement primarily requires an acceptance or an acknowledgment, from the movement leaders, that they do see themselves as feminists. It also requires an investigation into whether women’s issues in Jordan are seen by

prominent figures in the field as “feminist” issues as per the global implications of such a label and against the backdrop of Jordan’s socio-economic and political context.

The survey sought to unpack these questions by asking the respondents - all with recognised connections to women’s activism in Jordan whether as activists (albeit it within their roles as policy makers, donors or human rights defenders and academics) – they define themselves in terms of their activism (see chart 1 below). Almost 60 % of the respondents chose to be identified as human rights activists/defenders and only 27.3 % identified as feminists.

Feminism is the appropriate label for activists working on women’s issues in Jordan



Abu Zain Al Deen identifies as a feminist and deliberately called for a feminist revolution during the latest demonstrations protesting the killing of Ahlam. She said of her choice: "I am a feminist because I believe that feminism is a way of life, a social act and behaviour. Feminism is actually the bigger term which includes the political and the social act. Feminism has a clear path and a comprehensive approach that calls for women equality anywhere. I believe it is more inclusive than any other type or definition of activism."

Thus, do women's rights activists and experts believe that feminism is an appropriate label for activists working on women's issues in Jordan? A large percentage of respondents appeared to sit on the fence with regards to this question (36.4% and 13.6%), while a small percentage were on both sides of the question (2%).

Dr Nims, who also defined herself as an intersectional feminist, understands that the concept of feminism has become "problematized" in Jordan and similarly in the Arab Muslim world, but she argues that the reason feminism hasn't become more relevant as a label in Jordan is because in her opinion, "a successful feminist movement would require to be part of a broader political movement. We haven't arrived yet, but we shouldn't be looking for another term."

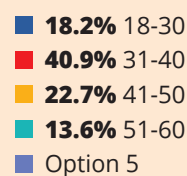
She believes that "we cannot shy away from a term because it is a disfigured term by those who are afraid of its impact." "What we need to work on is actually this understanding of the diversity that can be held under the term. Feminists are being demonised, accused of promoting a Western agenda to appease the donor community. It is upsetting that leftists keep calling Jordanian feminists as followers of white feminism and Colonialism. Also, at the other extreme, Islamists keep labelling us anti-religion and anti-family values. It is as if Arab women are not expected to be able to think for themselves or develop their own perception and interpretation of what feminism means".

As younger activists, in interviews, had proposed that the older generation of activists were not as committed to the feminist ideals and brand of activism, the results were grouped according to different age groups to try and identify whether that perception was accurate.

The results of the age filter didn't show a generation divide in adopting the label. Also, in interviews, **Dr Nims** and **Abu Zain Al Deen**, who represent two different generations of women activists, agreed on the feminist label and embraced it within the local Jordanian context.

Age group

22 RESPONSES



Dr Wafa Al Khadra, an academic, gender expert and council member of the **National Human Rights Commission in Jordan**, is of the school of thought that believes that feminism is an imported concept that does not fit in with our context. The term, she said, describes an alternate "conceptualisation, theorization and contextualisation" to the Jordan context, and any attempt to replicate it exactly in Jordan would be a "coercive" effort and not in tune with "our urgent and emergent necessities and context."

"We missed out on our context and 'homegroundedness' of our priorities and nuances by being driven solely by the internationalization of our cause, concerns and caveats" she explained.

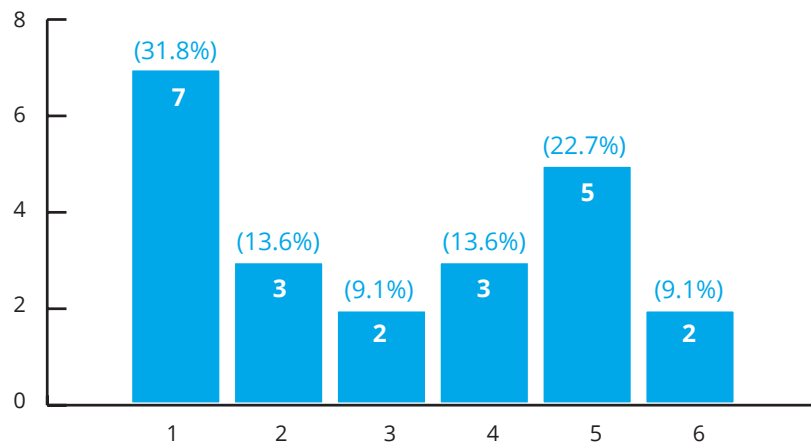
The survey directly addresses that opinion by asking activists whether they agree or disagree with the notion that the feminist label necessarily implies Western values and history which makes it irrelevant to the Jordanian context.

Just over 30% of the respondents rejected the notion that feminism immediately connotes Western values that do not apply to the Jordanian context. A further 13% were closer to that view than the view that rejects feminism as an imported ideological construct. Nevertheless, a considerable 32% agreed (9.1%) or almost agreed (22.7%) with **Dr Khadra** that feminism is not relevant to the Jordanian context. A further 22% sat in the middle of the opinion scale.

Dr Abla Amawi, Secretary General of the **Higher Population Council in Jordan** and former **UN Women Director in Egypt**, may more accurately represent the view in the middle - which does not necessarily reject the label but nevertheless does not feel it is necessary to describe their involvement

Feminism is a label which connotes western values that is not apply for the jordanian context

22 RESPONSES



in women's issues as "feminist". "I don't think that the label of 'feminist' connotes Western values necessarily or contradicts our context either. To me, I approach gender issues from a human rights perspective without labelling it and as such, being a

human rights activist on issues related to a group's rights, and here it is women, is a universal issue and not Western or Eastern". This view appears to be more in tune with the majority vote in favour of a human rights defender label.

A DIVIDED MOVEMENT

The historical “divisions” within the women’s movement and the inability of its leaders to agree on a singular uniting agenda, has often been pointed to as one of the reasons behind the slow pace of reform in Jordan on women’s issues. Over 60% of the respondents to the question on what the contributing factors to a shrinking civic space in Jordan (above) pointed the finger at the leaders of the women’s movement, and 94% of respondents to the question on whether they thought the women’s movement in Jordan was organised said it wasn’t.

Do you believe that the women's movement in Jordan is organized?

18 RESPONSES



■ 5.6% Yes
■ 94.4% No

“As a movement we are still divided, politically we are of different backgrounds and social and income groups, our issues are seen as elitist” confirmed Dr. Nims.

Asked to respond to statements to explain the weakness of the movement, the majority of respondents agreed that larger national NGOs are to be blamed as they restrict the space for small or community based CSOs and deny them the opportunity to organically grow based on their own assessment of their needs and priorities.

Many reasons have been identified by related literature which looked at the weakness and lack of organisation of women’s movement in Jordan. Hence, the study summarized these main reasons and asked the respondents to identify as many as they believe are relevant to explain the lack of organisation in Jordanian women’s movements. The statements below detail the results:

Larger national NGOs restrict the space for small or community based CSOs	10
Civil society in general is not mature	9
Laws and legislations are restrictive	7
Not enough knowledge and skill among activists	6
Donors feed the division	6
Women are not committed to their own causes	5
State tactics to create division	2

Dr. Al Khadra who agreed with most of those above-mentioned reasons, also identified the challenges around leadership and said the overriding reason behind this is an “absence of thought leaders in this landscape”.

Dr Al Khadra, in a scathing criticism of large national CSOs, pointed to what she said is their disconnect from the communities they are expected to represent. “They thrive through competition rather than collaboration, through exclusion and fragmentation rather than inclusion.” Dr Al Khadra maintained. “They use smaller community-based groups, invite them to lunch or conferences and solicit funds (from donors) based on their supposed relationships with those community networks but they never deliver on their promises. There is real pain at the community level.” Dr Khadra added that rural women or CBOs would often be dropped from the implementation of the initiatives after funding is secured or the proposed services or small funds/grants for local projects would not materialize.

Apart from the disconnect with community groups at the governorates level, critics of the movement have also pointed to a disconnect with the younger generation of activists and the failure to build dialogue bridges with emerging leaders. **Dr Nims** cites an example with the latest protests over Ahlam’s murder and the domestic violence debate in general. “The established activists were demanding that the youth coordinate their public statements with them so that we would have the same slogans, but I thought it was unfair. Why should we impose our vision on youth?” “We need to bridge the gap and we have to stop being elitists with these youth.”

The senior gender expert thinks that there would be real benefit in building bridges with the emerging young leaders but also cautions that they (the youth) also need to be more realistic in their expectations and build bridges that transcend their “egos”.

A large percentage of respondents also blame civil society’s “lack of maturity” (50%). **Dr Nims** confirms that civil society organisations working on women’s issues could be considered not well defined, but she blames that on the state of the political space around them which she believes is equally nascent and weak. She says that the women’s movement was stunted when it was moved from being a political movement to being an NGO-dominated movement more focused on a social agenda. That transfer reduced the emphasis

on the thematic areas and refocused them on funding and projects.

According to interviewees, the competition over funding is affecting the authenticity of the civil society organisations (33% of the respondents agree). “I don’t want to say they don’t believe in women’s issues, but when they decide to become active, their effort gets lost in the inter-fighting over funding and other associated dilemmas”. What **Dr Nims** is essentially saying is that the women’s movement is driven by funded time-dependent “projects” rather than a clear women’s rights or feminist agenda.

Dr Nims points to a curious development with the former government of Omar Razzaz (when this study was being conducted) which she says has further reduced the civil society’s focus on creating coalitions and planning advocacy campaigns. Because Dr Razzaz and some of his team members are considered “similar” to some of the civil society leaders and “come from our space”, a “form of nepotism” has emerged where civil society’s leaders, including those of the women’s organisations, are utilizing the personal relations or the access they enjoy on a personal level to achieve results. “The nepotism that you see in other issues now is happening in our space. I now achieve something because I spoke to (naming one minister or another, or even the Prime Minister himself all by first name). This happened with me as well with many other women CSOs when coalition building, and planning advocacy campaigns became redundant or were not prioritised.”

“I think that the Jordanian feminist movement is still developing. Many Jordanians suggest that they are a group of elite women and men who are striving to spread Western values and rely heavily on foreign funds,” Naserddin says.

“I think that the Jordanian feminist movement is still developing. Many Jordanians suggest that they are a group of elite women and men who are striving to spread Western values and rely heavily on foreign funds,” **Naserddin** says. “Till we can find ways to connect with society and show that we are part of it, there will be no real change.”

The senior gender expert believes that there is a need to embrace the diversity of opinions

and ideological references and allow that diversity to be positively redirected towards creating a stronger leadership of the movement, but the expert feels that there is no effort to go down that route. “On the Personal Status Law, they started working against each other. On Al Wasseyeh al Wajebeh (mandated will) they weren’t willing to work with each other. If they all - Islamists and otherwise - were willing to sit with each to agree on one view they would be forceful, but so far they are not willing to do that.”

UNCLEAR MOVEMENT FRAMING: A POLITICAL, SOCIAL OR DEVELOPMENT ISSUE



Jordanian women protest against the killing of a Jordanian woman called 'Ahlam' in 2020.
Photo: Takatoat, one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Jordan.

Dr Nims, who has been head of the policy-making semi-government JNCW for nearly six years now has gained a reputation for her persistence in pushing women's rights issues with the government and speaking her mind on current political issues. She, nevertheless, believes that the women's rights movement has not taken its place within the national political movement and has not been able to mainstream women's rights within the political dialogue and activism in Jordan yet. "We are not at the core of the political 7erak," laments Dr Nims.

"We should create a political interaction with the 7erak siyassi (political movement), We have to work with political parties and (professional) associations. We never did. We never meet with a professional association when we work on a law. Never meet with a political party. We need to open that dialogue over the common issues so that it becomes part of their agenda". "We have 42-48 political parties, if at least

a third worked with us and adopted our agenda, we would achieve transformative change".

Dina Batshoun, a feminist, educator and a researcher, said that she believed that the women's movement in Jordan "is not systemized or politicized, meaning that it does not partner with any political parties. For example, I have never been officially affiliated with any political institution."

Batshoun is part of a community of young activists who formed a feminist reading group called "Qira'at Nasaweyyeh" (Feminist Readings) which looks at feminist writing from around the world and relates it to the Middle East and Jordanian context. Having that political and theoretical affiliation, she maintained, "provides support and continuity; it builds on past experiences and efforts in order to move forward."

Lacking that political grounding, as pointed out by both **Batshoun** and **Dr Nims**, the movement in Jordan is unable to systematically build itself into a viable and influential movement.

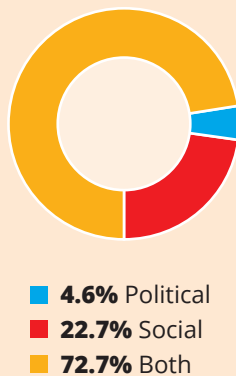
Dr Nims believes that focusing the work of the women's movement within the socio-economic sphere and within a development framework involving only civil society organisations, has restricted the scope and breadth of women's rights activism in Jordan and has kept it "piecemeal and not transformative." "When I think of civic space, I think of transformative action. What we have now is service-oriented and we are not able to transform reality."

The senior gender expert agrees that women's rights issues have not taken their rightful place on the agendas of political parties, but lays blame on the political parties themselves who, the expert said, manipulate women's issues to serve their political agendas with their constituents or political networks. "Political parties use women as pawns to recruit or show off," the expert proposed. "Liberals use women's issues to show off to the international community, but they essentially don't believe in the issues nor help them along. Islamists recruit among the conservatives with it."

When asked to respond to a survey question on how activists saw women's rights and freedoms in Jordan, a majority of 72.7% said they saw them as both political and social. Almost a quarter 22.7% said that they saw them as purely social. A small percentage of less than 5% saw women's issues as purely political. These percentages give a strong indicator that women's issues remain predominantly categorized as "social", therefore confirming a research finding that the state's historical controls over the women's movement in Jordan have contributed to depoliticizing the issues around which women's groups organise, and limiting the participation of movement leaders with political agendas.¹⁸

Activists on women rights and freedoms in Jordan view their issues as...

22 RESPONSES



"Depoliticization" has its roots in the way the state dealt with the emerging women's movement in Jordan and the political links between that nascent women's movement and the leftist and Palestinian political parties of the times.

In what was seen as a state "tactic" to contain the so called "Palestinian" or "leftist" influence on the activities of the women's movement, Jordan's state actors lent their support to civil society organisations that focused on what was described as "national Jordanian development priorities" rather than engaging in resistance politics and political movements working to counter Israeli occupation of Palestine. In time, this emphasis on Jordan's development priorities became synonymous with implementing government-prescribed priorities.

This was articulated clearly in the mandate given to the donor funding approval committee formed by

the Prime Ministry. The committee was tasked to ensure that the activities under the funding request "are in line with the development objectives" of the state. This invariably meant more restrictions on civil society's advocacy space and choice to set its own agenda for change. In a recent Civicus report, **Ahmad Awadh** of the Phoenix Research Center is quoted as pointing this out: "The fundamental idea behind preserving the independence of civil society is to enable it to operate with a different vision from the government's vision, and this added value to the existence of civil society,"¹⁹

"There is a glass ceiling" said **the development expert, who leads several projects on feminist action in Jordan**, "women who advocate on women's issues don't often come from that traditional formula of a rentier state i.e tribal and big Jordanian families, so a woman who is from a large and well-known tribe would not be found working as an advocate for women's rights typically. The Rentier State has put a glass ceiling on everyone based on a power formula that is understood by everyone."

But this "glass ceiling" along "origin" politics appears to be diminishing with the younger generation of activists as they come to embrace both identities organically and naturally in translation of their political ideologies and commitment to women's rights simultaneously. According to **Batshoun**, her Palestinian origin formulated her activism in its early stages because of the political implications of the Israeli occupation but when her activism took her to women's rights, she started to see what she describes as a connection between "political matters and feminist and women issues."

"They are all part of the bigger notion of social change, women's issues are inseparable from politics. As a feminist all women issues everywhere are of interest for me. Our shared experiences as women living in Palestine and Jordan make it a responsibility, we all share to be active and demanding. Of course, occupation and its patriarchal forces perpetuates a deeper struggle for Palestinian women, and it is more complicated of course, especially with less prioritizing of community issues at the expense of the national struggle for liberation."

¹⁸ Ababneh, Sara, 2020. The Time to Question, Rethink and Popularize the Notion of 'Women's Issues': Lessons from Jordan's Popular and Labor Movements from 2006 to now. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(1), 271-288.)

¹⁹ <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/jordan/>

INCREASED RISK AND SUCCESSFUL DETERRENT STATE TACTICS

The alienation of civil society actors, whether as individuals or registered groups, that do not fall into line is seen as a form of punishment and an unofficial tactic of imposing restrictions on civic space and the ability to organise around issues including women’s rights issues.

Dr Halaseh sees that the government is using whatever legal or administrative instruments under its authority to tighten its control and further limit the space in which civil society organisations or individuals can manoeuvre. The state will take steps to punish them and end their activities altogether if it feels it is necessary to curb their activities.

“What is more worrying is that they are using existing - yet unrelated - laws to limit the movement of those who they consider as opposition. It is amazing that they use, for example, the anti-corruption laws to punish people who oppose them for example in the case of the (Teachers’) syndicate. They basically

” Dr Nims explains: “Clearly there are two levels of shrinking space: one is targeting all political movement and that trend is becoming very clear, while the other level is directed at feminists or women’s rights activists/defenders. As a result, what we have is double closure. Like in Palestine when we say that women suffer from GBV and occupation. In reality, in Jordan, the feminists in Jordan who are really active are also political activists.”

can really damage them. They can detain them, take control of their assets and bank accounts” he explained.

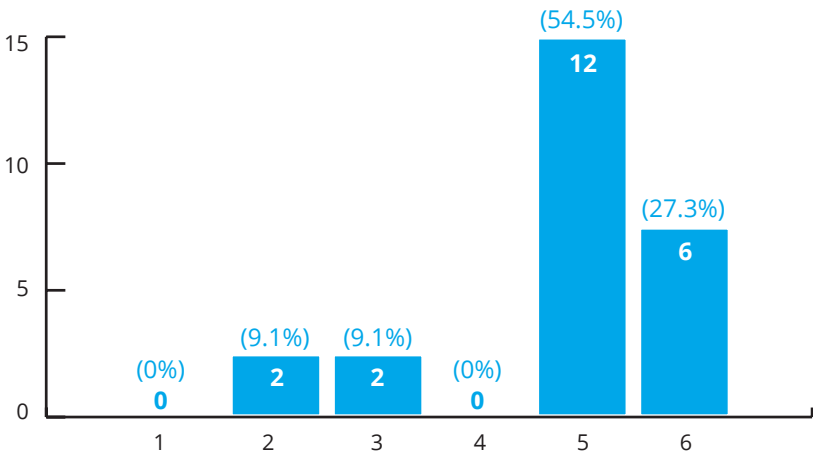
There are opportunities for more control for the government as a result of defence laws associated with COVID-19 emergency (as shown in Table 1), but according to legal experts, the promise of plugging into more resources has cultivated a mindset among government officials that donor funding should go to the government and not civil society, especially not the civil society it disapproves of. “The thinking is that primitive.”

Respondents to survey questions, both individual activists or those who belong to registered civil society organisations, felt that there is a risk to working on women’s issues and freedoms in Jordan. See graph below (1= I completely disagree, and 6= I completely agree).

More than 70% of the respondents agreed or

The penalties for breaking the law on political and civic activism act as a deterrent for activists

22 RESPONSES



completely agreed with the statement that there is a risk to working on women's rights in Jordan. While about 30% disagreed.

Most (81.8%) of the respondents surveyed also believed that the kind of tactics used by the government to penalise civil society and women rights activists can in fact successfully deter activists from organising.

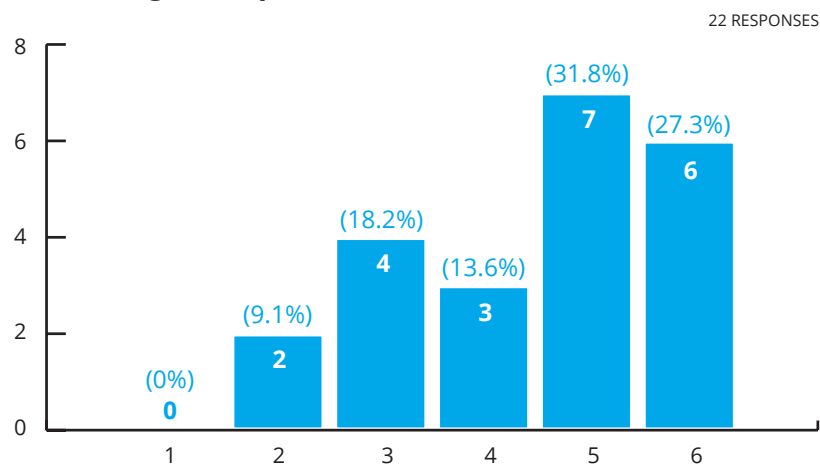
The development expert believes that civil society actors falling under or even observing state intimidation of civil society actors begin to control their own activities without prompting triggering "Self-censorship" adding that the lack of legal

protection for activists, "forces them to surge-coat their criticism or contradict each other instead of working together to organise for a cause and that applies to the women movement."

With this in mind, **Dr Nims** explains: "Clearly there are two levels of shrinking space: one is targeting all political movements and that trend is becoming very clear, while the other level is directed at feminists or women's rights activists/defenders. As a result, what we have is double closure. Like in Palestine when we say that women suffer from GBV and occupation. In reality, in Jordan, the feminists in Jordan who are really active are also political activists."

DONORS AGENDAS AND CONSTRAINTS

Donors and funders have a contributing role in creating a shrinking civic space.



Over half of respondents (27.3 % and 31.8%) believe that donors have added to a shrinking civic space in Jordan. The reasons for seeing donors as culprits are diverse. Some point to a donor agenda which they believe is imposing priorities for funding that are out of sync with the country's real needs and priorities and therefore turning activism into a business. Others believe that donors select favourite civil society organisations to fund closing opportunity to new or emerging activists, others see donors furthering government agendas and avoiding conflict with it over taboo subjects, and finally, some believe that donors themselves are not coordinating their efforts and therefore create contradictory activities on the same issue.

Dr Al Khadra criticises donors for referring their agenda to what she called "an international humanitarian discourse" that essentially "limits the space for organising on women's issues instead of expanding these spaces." she said.

She says that this donor approach encourages an emerging trend where "so-called feminists in our part or the world.... thrive through manoeuvring and operating, by exclusion of the real constituency and stakeholders.... to validate their NGOs and "activism" rather than to deal with the root cause of the problems".

"I am really shocked with the cars, the drivers and the houses the NGOs and their CEOs possess.

Their social status is an indicator of how they are benefiting from their business of activism. It is a business because it created a social marker for the funded.” Donors, she said “need to rethink their ethics and politics of how to design a (program) of sustainable funding and aid in this regard.”

Dr Nims agrees that donors have an adverse role that needs to be revisited. “They are becoming biased for certain. They have preference for some people over others. There are people who are receiving huge funding and it appears to be linked to their access to government. Restrictions on funding recipients or funds going to large CSOs or Royal NGOs, **Dr Nims** believes, is crowding out the civic space and denying access to “grassroot organisations” who, she said, often have better networks among communities and/or are more committed activists but are not

members of registered organisations.

The development expert accepts that donors are one of the non-state actors that contribute to a shrinking civic space in Jordan. “They do so by abiding to the state's agenda and staying away from funding certain topics that might be identified as sensitive topics to the government sometimes.”

The senior gender expert also points to the lack of coordination among donors who she says follow their own competing priorities, allowing the civil society to compete for their attention sometimes with competing activities for the same issue in order to get the money. “had there been more unity in the donors’ vision and priorities, civil society could have been helped to have an organised or long-term vision for their priorities,” the expert said.

EMERGING ROLE OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media provides a relatively new platform for women’s activism and that platform was mentioned again and again in interviews as becoming a critical part of the work of civil society in Jordan. But the emerging influence of social media tools used by civil society to raise awareness of issues or raise alarm over state interference or bullying by non-state actors, has been undermined or criticised. Criticism is mostly for what is seen as social media’s short attention span, limited influence on policy making and the opportunity it provides for unattributable bullying from opponents of women’s rights or certain activists.

“It gives women activists more of a voice but is it reaching or impacting decision making?”, I feel it isn’t very effective. You raise awareness of issues, create momentum but it is very reactive to a specific issue at that specific time without long term planning or having an advocacy strategy to reach not only the decision maker and citizen,” the gender expert argues.

Dr Nims is also conflicted over the role of social media tools. “The new space, the electronic space, now is a very contested space. A place for fighting and conflict.” she says. “You find yourself more

on the defence rather than offense. We are really constrained.”

This is the space where non-state actors, such as the Islamists and conservative nationalists are able to most freely target women activists, according to interviewees. A complicating factor is that slander cases would have to go to the State Security Court, which according to Dr Nims, “goes against the grain of what we are.” “We need a civil law to go after slander cases. Currently such complaints are persecuted under the electronic crimes law which is seen by most activists as unconstitutional means to limit freedom of speech for political activists, thus I won’t press charges as I would be validating a law that I am politically against. The fact that people use pictures and slander really restricts women from being active. It is a form of political violence that aims to deter feminist activists. It gives those on the attack privileges outside the law that are becoming larger and subjective.”

In Jordan, 75% of adults use social media (mostly Facebook and Twitter) on a daily basis. The government has tried to curb the open access social media has provided activists through proposed amendments to the cybercrimes law and other legislation.²⁰

²⁰ <https://www.icnl.org/post/report/the-right-to-freedom-of-expression-online-in-jordan>

COPING MECHANISMS

Civil society groups, organisations, and activist individuals working within the women's rights/ space, as well as the human rights space in general, have developed multiple coping mechanisms to counter - or at least limit - the meddling into their initiatives. These mechanisms allow these civil society actors to continue to work at an acceptable level although many of those tactics also mean unfair negotiation and even containment by the state.

Two key coping mechanisms emerge from interviews:

ESTABLISHING PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWER BROKERS

The more established groups or individuals employ a strategy of building personal relationships with key influencers within government or within the state structure including Parliament, Senate, Police and the GID and non-state actors like key corporate businesses and international donors. These relationships are seen as a shortcut to receiving the approval of the government/state of their civil society activities and allows for a wider - albeit negotiated - civic space. These "patrons" provide protection to the civil society partner, allow for a higher ceiling on activities and safeguard the funding channels. However, on the flip side of that formula, these relationships help the government impose restrictions through a soft and non-threatening approach or allow donors to dictate the agenda of issues to be raised by civil society. While many of the advances achieved in the women's rights space, and civic space in general, came through this coping mechanism, it effectively restricted the maturity of civil society from growing organically into independent institutions of civil society.

NOT REGISTERING AND REMAINING INDEPENDENT

An emerging coping mechanism, more popular with the younger activists, is not to register as a formal group and limit the activism to specific issues as they emerge. This mechanism restricts the government/state's ability to interfere by using its legislative tools or administrative instructions governing the activities of formal civil society groups or organisations. It is also less dependent on funding and therefore is not hostage to a donor's agenda or funding restrictions. Historically, donors were averse to funding informal groups or individual activists but, according to interviewees, donors are becoming increasingly aware that informal groups or individual activists need opportunities to pursue advocacy efforts on certain issues. Funding has therefore been channelled to the groups or individuals through association with registered organisations in some cases or as consultants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

MESSAGES FROM ACTIVISTS INTERVIEWED TO STRENGTHEN FEMINIST ORGANISING

- **Actively seek** an open dialogue and communication around ideological differences, and to bridge the cross-generational dialogue within the movement.
- **Create more spaces and opportunities** for intellectual and knowledge-based exchanges that can enrich the women's movement; give room for common strategizing as well as enable a better understanding for each other's points of views.
- **Adopt an intersectional feminist approach** in order to embrace the diverse social and political identities, and combine them to create unique modes of critique and resistance.
- **Build a task force** supported by women and civil society leaders in order to share ideas and support among the network of feminists and activists. **Unlearn the traditional methods** of a pure NGO approach and build new tactics, tools, and resources that are sensible and efficient for the local context.
- **Prioritize community-based approaches** and localised issues, and invite religious and social leaders to collaborate to resolve those uncontested and common values.
- **Learn from success and failure**, review the work in order to set the priorities straight.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONOR AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

- **For donors:** it is important to have contextual knowledge, preferable country offices to better understand the dynamics and the politics within the movement.
- **Encourage a community-based approach** which is informed by community needs and methods of organisation instead of having a set agenda built on external tools and methods. Consult with women's rights organisations to enhance understanding.
- **Invest in grassroots movements** using flexible funding mechanisms
- **Promote and encourage solidarity** among women's rights activists by listening to them, supporting safe spaces, and networking. Remember to not take the lead, but to instead support the leaders that are already there.
- When possible, and in dialogue with WHRDs, **be a door opener** to governmental and international power structures.
- **Ensure transparency and clear criteria** to lessen the competition for resources and funding within the movement.



Layla Naffa, Head of Arab Women Organisation's Programmes,
one of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations in Amman,
Jordan

ANNEX 1

Most recent related political and civil society developments

In September 2019, the killing of Israa Ghrayeb:

Palestinian women in Palestine as well as their supporters in cities across the globe – most notably Berlin and Beirut - marched in protest against domestic violence after the brutal beating and murder of 21-year-old Israa Ghrayeb by her relatives. Protesters launched the feminist #Talaat movement (in English: women rise up). The protest highlighted the double jeopardy of Palestinian women who not only suffer under Israeli occupation of their lands and denial of free political will, but also patriarchal social constructs that turn a blind eye to oppression of women up to and including outright violence and murder. The protesters carried slogans like "There is no freedom without free women", and "Free homeland, free women", to highlight the "national struggle" against occupation and underline the point that domestic violence is often perpetuated or exacerbated by the occupation. Because this movement was labelled a "feminist" movement, it received support and sponsorship from other feminist groups globally. Especially in Jordan, where feminists and human rights defenders were engaged in an online campaign and conversation emphasizing that Israa's case is not the first of its kind in Palestine, but an unfortunate example of the systematic oppression against Arab women.

Fatima's case

Fatima's case was a tragic chronicle of domestic violence and physical, psychological, and social abuse that went on for 13 years. In the last of these violent episodes, the husband gauged Fatima's eyes out in front of her children in punishment, causing her permanent blindness. The case happened in the town of Jerash, an hour outside the capital Amman. Hundreds of women and men demonstrated on 16 November 2019 to express anger, frustration and mistrust in the legal instruments and protection mechanisms in the country which failed to afford Fatima and women like her any protection²¹. A sit-in under the theme "Enough" was organised by the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) and supported by other women's groups "to demand comprehensive mechanisms to protect women from violence, including harsher sentences for the aggressors", Salma Al Nimis said to the Al-Monitor²². "Enough" was also joined by young feminists who had organised the "Talat" movement to create awareness of the links, across countries, of experiences of female oppression and violence, and the responsibility of societies and governments everywhere. An online campaign "#TalatInJordan # طالعَات_بِالأردن"²³ was launched at the same time to demand real protection for Arab women everywhere. As part of the campaign, feminists from Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, and even from Saudi Arabia shared "real stories" of violence against Arab women.

Ahlam's Case

In July 2020, Hundreds of people gathered in front of the Parliament building in the capital Amman to protest the cold-blooded murder of Ahlam by her father in the Amman district of Safut. "Screams of Women" and "Screams of Ahlam" became the label under which a series of protest activities were undertaken. Despite COVID-19 restrictions banning gatherings of more than 20 people, protestors took to the streets to draw attention to the brutal killing of Ahlam, whose father "reportedly beat her to death in the street with a brick before sitting next to her body with a cigarette and a cup of tea"²⁴. A grainy video of the murder, recorded by one of the neighbours, was shared on social media and highlighted the brutality of the murder as the victim Ahlam was heard screaming for help while her brothers were apparently keeping people away until she died. Protests erupted over the brutality of the murder and for the first time, included protestors from diverse backgrounds who joined the march to the Parliament, demanding law makers make changes to the Penal Code to law, particularly to Articles 99 and 340 which allow a lesser sentence for the murder. Hashtags like "Ahlam Screams" and "Jordanian Women Scream" were trending on Twitter with over 3,000 and 8,000 tweets, respectively, as of the evening of July 22²⁵ according to a report by Al-Monitor.

²¹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/jordanians-protest-against-violence-against-women.html>

²² <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/jordanians-protest-against-violence-against-women.html#ixzz6YIVATOH3>

²³ <https://www.aljazeera.net/programs/aja-interactive/2019/11/17/%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%83%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B7%D9%88%D9%86>

²⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/jordan-honor-killing-women-protests-laws.html>

²⁵ *ibid*.

The evolving “politicisation” and “activism” of the feminists and human rights defenders in 2019 was not limited to women’s issues alone, but also included participation in national level protests on issues that are not immediately seen as a gender priority, most notably the wave of protests in response to the government’s decision to the closure of the Teacher’s Syndicate offices and suspending their activities for two years pending an investigation into apparent “financial” mismanagement of the Syndicate’s resources.

Closure of the Teachers’ Syndicate

The introduction of Emergency Defence laws to fast-paced government decisions in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic brought with it wider authority for the government in curbing freedoms. Therefore, the government’s decision on July 25, 2020 to unilaterally take over the headquarters of the independent 100,000 strong Teachers’ Syndicate, suspend its activities for two years, and detain its leaders, triggered widespread protest to challenge the government’s action. In response, the authorities used the “emergency state” and the ban on gatherings “to forcibly disperse public protests against the arbitrary closure of the country’s Teachers Syndicate and mass arrests of its leadership” and protesting teachers, according to a report by Human Rights Watch²⁶. The protesters reported that police blocked “half of Amman”, and the “Darak” (the Gendarmerie) forcefully, sometimes with physical encounter, cleared mostly peaceful protests across the country to prevent protesters from reaching assembly points. The government is also suspected of restricting Facebook live streaming on some days during the protests²⁷, and also preventing the online campaigns in support of the teachers’ cause. Human rights defenders, teachers and activists from all walks of the civic and political space, including feminists and women’s rights activists, took an active role in organising and supporting the protests.

²⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/27/jordan-arrests-forced-dispersal-teacher-protests>

²⁷ *ibid.*

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