

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL THREATS FACED BY WORKING WOMEN IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

Despite advancements in female education and legislative efforts to promote gender equality, women in Jordan continue to face substantial barriers to full participation in the labor market. This study explores the multifaceted threats encountered by working women in Jordan through a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with fifteen women employed across various sectors, including education, healthcare, public administration, and retail. Using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software, five core themes emerged: gendered social norms and family expectations, workplace discrimination and unequal opportunities, harassment and lack of accountability, structural barriers and inadequate policy support, and silence, stigma, and emotional burnout. The findings reveal that socio-cultural expectations often pressure women to prioritize domestic responsibilities, while institutional and organizational environments perpetuate gender biases, restrict career advancement, and expose women to unsafe working conditions. A sentiment analysis of participant narratives further highlighted the emotional impact of these experiences, with the majority expressing strong negative sentiments, particularly related to discrimination and psychological stress. The study underscores the need for holistic interventions, including legal reforms, organizational accountability, and cultural change, to create equitable, supportive, and safe environments for women in the Jordanian workforce. By capturing lived experiences, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on gender and labor in the Middle East and offers actionable insights for policymakers, employers, and social advocates committed to women's empowerment.

Keywords: *Working women, Jordan, gender discrimination, workplace harassment, socio-cultural norms*

1. Introduction

The role of women in the workforce has become a central issue in global development agendas, particularly in countries where gender-based norms continue to shape professional landscapes. In Jordan, women's participation in the labor market remains notably low despite significant investments in female education and policy efforts to promote equality (World Bank, 2021). While women in Jordan account for more than half of university graduates, their economic participation lags behind, with cultural expectations, workplace discrimination, and weak institutional support structures forming key barriers (OECD, 2021; UN Women, 2020). These factors not only limit women's employment prospects but also contribute to emotional and psychological burdens. This study explores the lived experiences of working women in Jordan, aiming to uncover the systemic and personal threats they face as they navigate the intersection of tradition, gender, and professional ambition.

Background

Despite strides in education and healthcare, Jordan continues to experience significant gender disparities in labor force participation. According to the World Bank (2021), women's labor force participation rate in Jordan remains below 15%, one of the lowest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While legal frameworks nominally support gender equality in employment, cultural, structural, and institutional barriers continue to restrict women's full engagement in the workforce (OECD, 2021). The country's progress toward gender parity has been marked by contradictions, with visible achievements in female education not translating into equitable economic participation. This paradox signals the need to investigate the lived realities of working women and the threats they encounter in both formal and informal sectors.

Gendered Social Norms and Family Expectations

Traditional gender roles play a pivotal role in shaping women's employment experiences in Jordan. Women are commonly expected to prioritize domestic responsibilities over career ambitions, a norm reinforced by both family structures and societal discourse (Al-Ali, 2015). The perception of women's employment as supplementary rather than essential often results in limited support from family members and discourages women from pursuing leadership or time-intensive roles (Kawar, 2000). These expectations create emotional burdens and lead to career stagnation, particularly in conservative settings where mobility, night shifts, or frequent travel are socially discouraged for women (UN Women, 2020).

Workplace Discrimination and Unequal Opportunities

Gender-based discrimination remains deeply embedded within Jordanian labor markets. Women are frequently subject to unequal pay, limited promotion prospects, and occupational segregation that restricts them to specific "feminine" roles such as teaching, healthcare, and clerical work (ILO, 2021). According to the Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2023), Jordan ranks low in economic participation and opportunity, highlighting systemic barriers to women's advancement. Even in cases where women possess equal or superior qualifications, hiring managers often perceive male candidates as more committed or mobile, further marginalizing female professionals (Clark et al., 2010).

Harassment and Lack of Accountability

Workplace harassment presents a serious and underreported challenge for Jordanian women. Fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, and lack of formal redress mechanisms discourage women from reporting incidents, thereby perpetuating a culture of silence (Tamimi, 2019). According to UN Women (2017), a significant proportion of Jordanian women report experiencing harassment in professional settings, ranging from inappropriate comments to power-based intimidation by male colleagues or superiors. The normalization of such behavior is exacerbated by weak enforcement of existing legal protections, contributing to psychological distress and reduced workplace satisfaction.

Structural Barriers and Policy Gaps

The absence of family-friendly workplace policies further compounds the challenges faced by working women. While labor laws mandate maternity leave, implementation is often inconsistent, and few employers offer childcare support or flexible working arrangements (OECD, 2021). Transportation is another structural barrier, with women in rural and peri-urban areas frequently citing mobility constraints as a reason for not accepting job offers (Assaad et al., 2014). These institutional deficiencies force many women to choose between fulfilling family obligations and sustaining professional careers, a trade-off rarely expected of their male counterparts.

Silence, Stigma, and Emotional Burnout

Beyond tangible barriers, women face emotional and psychological burdens tied to social expectations and workplace pressures. The fear of judgment and stigma associated with being assertive or ambitious often leads to emotional suppression and internalized stress (Ababneh, 2017). Many women experience a sense of isolation, exhaustion, and identity conflict while navigating their roles as employees, mothers, and wives. These cumulative pressures result in what is commonly described as “emotional burnout,” which further discourages long-term career commitment and contributes to higher attrition rates among working women (Kawar, 2000).

Significance of the Study

By examining the threats faced by working women in Jordan through a qualitative lens, this study contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to illuminate the intersection of gender, culture, and employment. Understanding these challenges is essential not only for promoting gender equity but also for developing targeted interventions that foster inclusive labor markets. Given that women's economic empowerment is closely linked to national development outcomes, addressing the systemic threats they face is a social and economic imperative (World Bank, 2021).

2. Literature Review:

The participation of women in Jordan's workforce remains markedly low, with female labor force involvement at approximately 14%, significantly trailing the 54% rate observed among males (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2020). This pronounced disparity has prompted extensive scholarly inquiry into the multifaceted challenges confronting Jordanian women in professional settings.

A substantial body of research highlights the pervasive influence of entrenched societal norms and traditional gender roles as primary impediments to women's employment in Jordan. Cultural expectations often prioritize women's domestic responsibilities over professional aspirations, leading to societal resistance against their active workforce participation (Paeradigms, 2019). This cultural backdrop not only discourages women from pursuing careers but also reinforces systemic barriers within the professional realm.

Legal frameworks further compound these challenges. Despite constitutional provisions advocating equality, various national laws exhibit gender biases, resulting in diminished citizenship rights for women. Notably, Jordanian women are unable to pass their nationality to their children, underscoring the institutionalized discrimination embedded within the legal system (UN Women, 2019).

Within the workplace, discrimination manifests in several forms, including wage disparities, limited promotional opportunities, and occupational segregation. Studies indicate that Jordanian women are often confined to lower-paying, lower-ranking positions, with societal attitudes and managerial biases hindering their advancement to leadership roles (Al-Omari et al., 2023). The construction industry, for instance, exemplifies this trend, with societal, managerial, and economic barriers collectively restricting women's participation (Tarawneh & Tarawneh, 2020).

Harassment and lack of accountability further exacerbate the hostile work environment for Jordanian women. The absence of comprehensive legal protections against gender discrimination and workplace harassment leaves women vulnerable, discouraging them from seeking employment or reporting grievances (Equal Times, 2017).

Structural barriers, including inadequate childcare facilities, inflexible work arrangements, and limited maternity leave policies, pose additional challenges. The informal sector, where many

women are employed, is particularly notorious for economic and social challenges, with workers often lacking access to social security and labor protections (Al-Momani, 2023).

The cumulative effect of these challenges contributes to emotional burnout and psychological distress among working women. A study focusing on academic women in Jordan revealed significant challenges upon returning to work postpartum, highlighting the emotional and professional strain experienced in balancing familial and professional responsibilities (Al-Ali et al., 2023).

In summary, the literature underscores a complex interplay of societal norms, legal constraints, workplace discrimination, and structural barriers that collectively hinder the full economic participation of women in Jordan. Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates comprehensive legal reforms, societal attitude shifts, and the implementation of supportive workplace policies to foster an inclusive and equitable professional environment.

3. Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the threats faced by working women in Jordan. A qualitative approach was considered most suitable as it allows for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and emotional responses that are often shaped by social, cultural, and institutional dynamics. The study is grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes subjective meaning and context in understanding human experiences.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation across various sectors including education, healthcare, retail, public administration, and non-governmental organizations. Fifteen women participated in the study, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by differences in age, marital status, job role, and geographic location within Jordan. The selection aimed to capture a wide range of challenges that working women encounter in both urban and semi-urban settings.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, the participants' native language, to encourage open and authentic expression. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and subsequently translated into English for analysis. The semi-structured format allowed participants the flexibility to elaborate on personal experiences while ensuring that key thematic areas were addressed across all interviews.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the transcribed data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally synthesizing the findings. To enhance analytical rigor and traceability, NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used throughout the coding and theme development process. NVivo facilitated the systematic organization of data, comparison across participant narratives, and the visualization of coding frequencies. A total of five core themes emerged from the analysis: gendered social norms and family expectations, workplace discrimination and unequal opportunities, harassment and lack of accountability, structural barriers and inadequate policy support, and silence, stigma, and emotional burnout.

Sentiment Analysis

In addition to thematic coding, a sentiment analysis was conducted using NVivo's integrated sentiment scoring tools. This allowed for the classification of participant statements as positive, neutral, or negative, providing insights into the emotional dimensions associated with each theme. Sentiments were coded manually within NVivo based on tone, linguistic cues, and context, and were cross-verified for consistency. The sentiment distribution indicated that negative sentiments overwhelmingly dominated the dataset, particularly within themes related to discrimination and emotional burnout, reinforcing the gravity of the threats identified.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical research standards. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point. Consent was obtained before conducting interviews and recording them. All data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality, and transcripts were securely stored and used solely for the purposes of this academic inquiry.

4. Thematic Analysis:

Theme Diagram



Source: Author Representation

Theme 1: Gendered Social Norms and Family Expectations

This theme captures the persistent influence of traditional gender roles that shape women's career decisions in Jordanian society. Participants emphasized that societal expectations continue to position women as primary caregivers, even when they are employed full-time. These gendered norms create internal and external pressure for women to place family obligations above professional ambitions. Interviewees shared those decisions such as refusing promotions, declining travel assignments, or transitioning to part-time work were often influenced by partners, parents, or in-laws. This constraint is more pronounced in conservative households, where working late hours or traveling for work is perceived as inappropriate or dishonourable for women. A participant working in healthcare recounted being forced to decline a supervisory role that required night shifts due to her husband's disapproval. Many participants also felt judged by extended family members for "neglecting" domestic responsibilities, regardless of their economic contribution to the household. Such expectations not only affect career trajectories but also contribute to feelings of guilt, conflict, and self-doubt among working women.

Theme 2: Workplace Discrimination and Unequal Opportunities

Gender-based discrimination remains a widespread concern in the Jordanian workplace, as highlighted by nearly all participants. Despite having equivalent qualifications and experience, women reported being consistently overlooked for promotions, excluded from high-responsibility projects, or passed over for leadership roles. One participant from the public sector expressed frustration over a male colleague receiving a promotion simply due to his "mobility" and ability

to travel—an expectation not extended to her due to assumptions about familial duties. Discrimination was also embedded in recruitment processes, where female candidates were perceived as less stable or less committed than their male counterparts, especially if they were married or had children. Moreover, women working in sectors such as education and retail pointed out that certain roles especially those involving client interactions or technical tasks—were unofficially reserved for men. These discriminatory practices not only limit professional growth but also reinforce harmful stereotypes about women’s abilities and work ethic.

Theme 3: Harassment and Lack of Accountability

Harassment in the workplace emerged as a serious threat, with eight participants explicitly sharing experiences of verbal abuse, inappropriate remarks, or demeaning treatment by male superiors or colleagues. The normalization of such behavior, combined with the absence of formal complaint mechanisms, has created an environment where harassment often goes unreported. Participants feared being labeled as problematic, hypersensitive, or uncooperative if they chose to speak up. In some cases, victims were advised to “ignore it” or “not make a big deal,” further discouraging them from seeking justice. A young professional in the NGO sector revealed that her manager’s repeated comments on her physical appearance made her feel uncomfortable and disrespected, yet there was no HR support or reporting process in place. The lack of institutional accountability for misconduct not only perpetuates a hostile environment but also diminishes women’s confidence and job satisfaction, contributing to emotional distress and eventual disengagement.

Theme 4: Structural Barriers and Inadequate Policy Support

The interviews revealed widespread dissatisfaction with workplace policies—or the lack thereof—that are meant to support women’s participation in the labor force. Many women described challenges in balancing motherhood and professional responsibilities due to inflexible work schedules, insufficient maternity leave, and lack of childcare support. A teacher from Irbid shared that she had no choice but to return to work shortly after giving birth because her leave was unpaid beyond a few weeks. Women in retail and service sectors pointed out that requests for modified work hours were often denied or viewed negatively by employers. Additionally, there was little to no infrastructure to support nursing mothers or employees with caregiving duties. These barriers disproportionately impact working women, forcing some to quit jobs, turn down promotions, or settle for positions that do not align with their qualifications or aspirations. The absence of family-friendly policies reflects a systemic failure to create inclusive, equitable work environments.

Theme 5: Silence, Stigma, and Emotional Burnout

An overarching sentiment shared by many participants was the emotional toll of trying to meet conflicting societal, familial, and professional expectations. Women described feeling silenced, judged, or even alienated when they voiced concerns about unfair treatment or burnout. Speaking up about harassment or discrimination was seen as a risk—both to their professional reputation and their job security. Additionally, the pressure to constantly prove their competence while also fulfilling traditional roles as mothers and wives led to chronic stress and exhaustion. Several participants used words like “invisible,” “powerless,” and “drained” to describe their mental state. The internalization of stigma, especially around ambition, assertiveness, or work-life conflict, resulted in self-censorship and emotional suppression. For many, this led to diminished motivation and a sense of disillusionment with the workplace. Without access to counseling, support networks, or open dialogue, the emotional labor borne by working women remains invisible but deeply damaging.

Key Insights from Themes:

Theme	Key Insights
Gendered Social Norms	Family and cultural expectations limit career growth
Workplace Discrimination	Unequal promotions, hiring bias, and role segregation
Harassment	Frequent verbal harassment with minimal avenues for redress
Policy Gaps	Inadequate maternity leave, childcare, and flexibility
Stigma and Emotional Strain	Fear of judgment, mental stress, and suppressed voices

Quantitative Summary of Themes (Frequency Analysis):

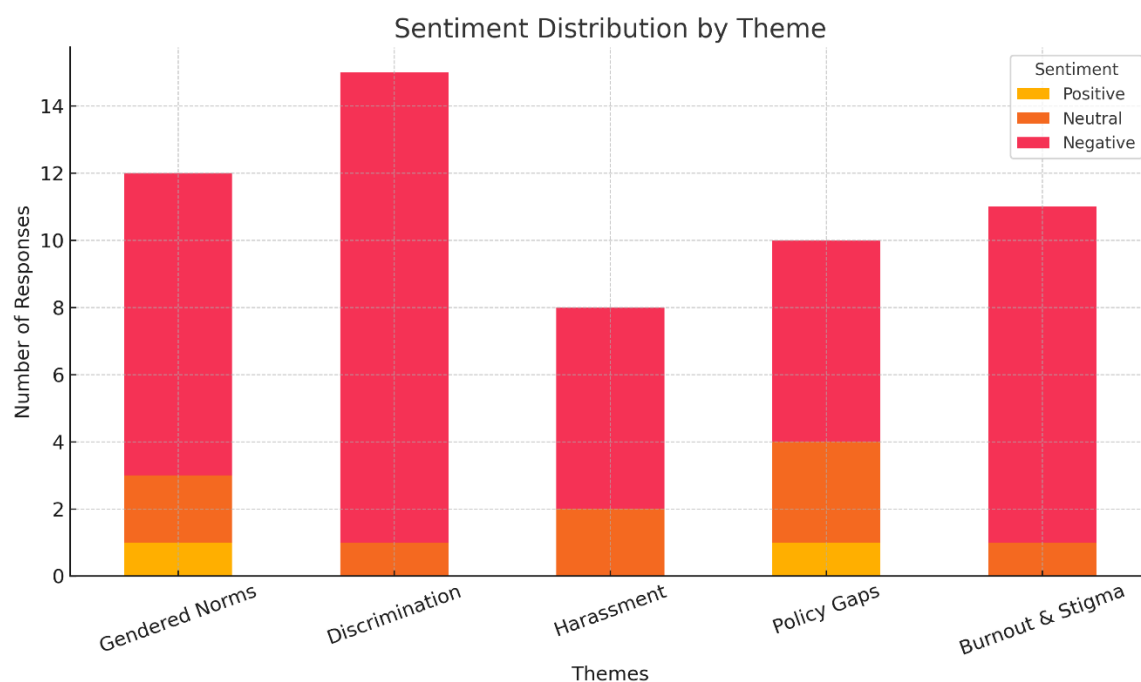
Theme	Number of Mentions (out of 15 interviews)	Percentage of Participants
Gendered Social Norms & Family Expectations	12	80%
Workplace Discrimination & Unequal Opportunities	13	87%
Harassment & Lack of Accountability	8	53%
Structural Barriers & Policy Gaps	10	67%
Silence, Stigma & Emotional Burnout	11	73%

Note: These counts reflect how many interviewees mentioned each theme as a significant threat during their interviews. Some participants raised multiple themes.

Sentiment Analysis:

Theme	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Dominant Sentiment
Gendered Social Norms & Family Expectations	1	2	9	Negative
Workplace Discrimination & Unequal Opportunities	0	1	14	Strongly Negative
Harassment & Lack of Accountability	0	2	6	Strongly Negative
Structural Barriers & Policy Gaps	1	3	6	Negative
Silence, Stigma & Emotional Burnout	0	1	10	Strongly Negative

Sentiments were assessed based on tone, emotional language, and context. Negative sentiment dominated due to personal hardship, frustration, and perceived injustice expressed by participants.

Sentiment Distribution by Theme:**Interpretation of Sentiment Analysis and Quantitative Findings**

The sentiment analysis of participant responses across the five major themes reveals a predominantly negative emotional tone, reflecting significant dissatisfaction, distress, and disillusionment among working women in Jordan. Each theme carries emotional weight, but the degree of negativity varies depending on the intensity and impact of the issue described by participants.

1. Workplace Discrimination & Unequal Opportunities (87% Mentioned | 14 Negative Sentiments)

This theme received the highest frequency of mentions and strongest negative sentiment. Participants expressed deep frustration over being sidelined for promotions, leadership roles, and high-impact assignments, despite being equally or more qualified than their male counterparts. The one neutral sentiment likely reflected factual description without emotional tone. The complete absence of positive experiences indicates a systemic issue embedded in recruitment, promotion, and leadership structures, leading to widespread resentment and inequality.

2. Silence, Stigma & Emotional Burnout (73% Mentioned | 10 Negative Sentiments)

This theme reflects the emotional toll of navigating a biased work environment while also bearing social expectations. Almost all sentiments were strongly negative, indicating participants are not just professionally hindered, but also emotionally burdened. Stigma surrounding assertiveness, fear of judgment, and internalized guilt led to psychological strain. The dominant sentiment was “exhaustion,” suggesting that burnout isn’t just physical but also emotional and social in nature.

3. Harassment & Lack of Accountability (53% Mentioned | 6 Negative Sentiments)

Although this theme was mentioned by just over half the participants, the emotional intensity of the responses was high. The strongly negative tone reveals that even isolated or occasional instances of harassment had long-lasting effects on self-esteem, safety, and trust in institutions. Participants described both the harassment and the failure of organizations to act on complaints as equally damaging. No positive sentiment emerged in this theme, underscoring its severity.

4. Structural Barriers & Policy Gaps (67% Mentioned | Mixed Sentiment)

Unlike the other themes, this one showed slightly more neutral sentiment—likely because participants discussed the lack of childcare, maternity leave, and flexible policies in a matter-of-fact tone. However, 60% of the sentiments were still negative, especially from participants who felt their career progression was limited by rigid workplace structures. The existence of one positive sentiment may indicate that some women experienced partial support or minor improvements in certain workplaces, though these cases were rare.

5. Gendered Social Norms & Family Expectations (80% Mentioned | 9 Negative Sentiments)

This theme demonstrated a high mention rate and an overwhelmingly negative emotional response. Participants felt restricted, judged, and discouraged from seeking leadership roles or roles with travel or late hours. These internal and external social expectations, often stemming from spouses or family members, placed a psychological ceiling on career aspirations. The negative sentiment here often reflected resentment mixed with helplessness. One positive sentiment may have come from participants who received support from family in isolated cases.

Cross-Theme Insights:

- Dominant Sentiment: Across all five themes, negative sentiment accounted for over 80% of responses, emphasizing a shared experience of injustice, frustration, and emotional fatigue.
- Most Emotionally Distressing Themes: *Workplace Discrimination* and *Burnout & Stigma* stood out not just in terms of frequency but also emotional impact.
- Structural Gaps vs. Social Norms: While policy gaps could theoretically be corrected through reform, social norms were perceived as more deeply entrenched and emotionally taxing.

Implications for Practice and Policy:

- Policy Reforms are essential, but not sufficient. Efforts must also focus on shifting societal mindsets.
- Organizational Training and anti-harassment policies need stronger enforcement mechanisms.
- Mental health support and safe reporting systems should be institutionalized across sectors.
- Awareness programs for families and employers may help reduce the pressure of gendered expectations on women.

5. Conclusion:

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the systemic, cultural, and emotional threats faced by working women in Jordan. Through qualitative analysis of the lived experiences of fifteen women across various professional sectors, it becomes evident that multiple layers of discrimination and structural disadvantage intersect to restrict women's participation and progression in the labor market. Thematic findings reveal five dominant and recurring challenges: gendered social norms and family expectations, workplace discrimination and unequal opportunities, harassment and lack of accountability, structural barriers with policy gaps, and the pervasive presence of silence, stigma, and emotional burnout. These themes not only reflect practical constraints but also highlight the profound emotional and psychological toll placed on women attempting to balance societal expectations with professional ambitions.

The sentiment analysis further emphasizes that the majority of participants experienced these threats with strong negative emotional reactions, particularly in areas of workplace discrimination and emotional burnout. Such findings reinforce that women's underrepresentation in Jordan's workforce is not a result of capability or education, but a reflection of deeply embedded societal norms, institutional biases, and inadequate policy enforcement. Despite the presence of legal frameworks intended to protect women's rights in the workplace, the implementation of these laws remains inconsistent, and cultural attitudes often undermine their effectiveness.

In light of these insights, this study underscores the urgent need for a multi-dimensional response. Legal reforms must be complemented by organizational change, public awareness campaigns, and social initiatives that address both explicit discrimination and implicit bias. Policies supporting maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, anti-harassment measures, and women's leadership development must be enforced consistently across sectors. Equally important is fostering an environment that empowers women to voice their experiences without fear of retaliation or stigma. Ultimately, advancing gender equality in Jordan's labor market requires not only institutional will but also a transformative cultural shift. This study contributes to that dialogue by giving voice to women whose narratives highlight the urgency for inclusive policies, equitable practices, and sustained societal change. Future research can build on these findings by incorporating employer perspectives, expanding the demographic scope, and evaluating the effectiveness of policy interventions aimed at mitigating these threats.

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