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UNPACKING EDUCATION AS MIGRATION DRIVER AMONG YOUNG JORDANIAN WOMEN: A STUDY ON GENDER, AGENCY, AND SOCIOCULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN JORDAN

Abstract

This paper explores young Jordanian women's desire to migrate, uncovering often-unacknowledged factors influencing their decision to leave their home country. By delving into their dreams, aspirations, and expectations, this research uncovers why they firmly *aspire* and *creatively plan* to migrate, shedding light on the intricate interplay of agency and gender in shaping their migration choices. It theorizes that these women employ a *co-optation strategy*, whereby they reinterpret and leverage the inner meaning(s) of gendered expectations regarding education, to facilitate their journey abroad and enact more desired life trajectories. This paper argues that young Jordanian women's desire to migrate stems from shifting sociocultural values and norms, mirroring evolving understandings of femininity, gender roles, and social hierarchies. Within this framework, migration emerges as a consequence of the country's inability to address its young population's aspirations for change. By addressing these dynamics, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the underlying drivers behind the migration aspirations of a significant segment of Jordan's youth—a pressing issue the country is facing. Ultimately, the insights offer a valuable perspective on migration as a lens through which ongoing sociocultural transformations can be comprehended.

خلاصة

تستكشف هذه الورقة رغبة الشابات الأردنيات في الهجرة، وتكشف عن العوامل غير المعترف بها في كثير من الأحيان والتي تؤثر على قرارهن بمغادرة وطنهن. من خلال الخوض في أحلامهم وتطلعاتهم وتوقعاتهم، يكشف هذا البحث سبب تطلعاتهم القوي والتخطيط الإبداعي للهجرة، وتسلط الضوء على التفاعل المعقد بين الوكالة والجنس (الجندر) في تشكيل خيارات الهجرة الخاصة بهم. وتنظر النظرية إلى أن هؤلاء النساء يستخدمن استراتيجية الاختيار المشترك، حيث يعيدن تفسير والاستفادة من المعنى (المعاني) الداخلية للتوقعات الجندرية فيما يتعلق بالتعليم، لتسهيل رحلتهم إلى الخارج وسن مسارات حياة مرغوبة أكثر. ترى هذه الورقة أن رغبة الشابات الأردنيات في الهجرة تنبع من تغير القيم والأعراف الاجتماعية والثقافية، مما يعكس الفهم المتطور للأثوية، وأدوار الجنسين، والتسلسل الهرمي الاجتماعي. وفي هذا الإطار، تظهر الهجرة كنتيجة لعجز البلاد عن تلبية تطلعات سكانها الشباب إلى التغيير. ومن خلال معالجة هذه الديناميكيات، يساهم هذا البحث في فهم أعمق للدوافع الأساسية وراء - تطلعات الهجرة لدى شريحة كبيرة من الشباب الأردني وهي قضية ملحة تواجهها البلاد.

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وفي نهاية المطاف ، تقدم هذه الأفكار منظوراً قيماً حول الهجرة باعتبارها عدسة يمكن من خلالها فهم التحولات الاجتماعية والثقافية الجارية .



INTRODUCTION

In Jordan, a woman cannot break free from societal restrictions, and if she does, she will face disapproval from everyone. I know a woman who rented an apartment to become more independent. She was religious, wore the hijab, and followed our traditions. Her only crime was wanting to live on her own! Unfortunately, her family disapproved of her choice, and her brother stabbed her. Because of society, I want to build my life elsewhere. I want to be able to move from my parents' home, choose my own career and life partner, and make my own decisions. I know that if I don't get married, being more independent is a problem unless I leave the country, which I actually plan to do after graduation to avoid conflict with my family. For me, staying in Jordan is not an option! I don't wish for my daughter to be born and raised here!¹

The powerful words of Yasmin, a nineteen-year-old student yearning for independence, starkly illuminate the challenges faced by many Jordanian women: "If I don't get married, being more independent is a problem unless I leave the country." Her words reverberate with a profound acknowledgment of the societal constraints encircling her aspirations for autonomy as an unmarried woman. Yet, her determination harbors a vision of migration as a pathway to living a life aligned with her values, while protecting herself from potential family discord, and ensuring a future for her yet-to-be-born daughter devoid of similar challenges. Yasmin's vision embodies the perseverance of women navigating societal expectations while striving to maintain familial bonds and avoid societal estrangement. Her resolution in forging an alternative life trajectory reflects a rejection of hegemonic gender narratives among a segment of Jordanian women, which fuels their aspirations for migration.

Drawing upon the lived experiences of women like Yasmin, this paper delves into the intention of young, educated Jordanian women

to migrate, unveiling the underlying motivations propelling their desire. It specifically focuses on women who *aspire* to migrate and *actively plan* for it, while recognizing its limitation in directly engaging with those who have already migrated. By examining the complexities surrounding women's migration aspirations, it highlights the intricate interplay of gender and agency in migration decision-making and realization. Specifically, it zooms in on women's desire to "study abroad" as a pathway to permanent settlement elsewhere, presenting emigration as a means for women to shape desired identities and life trajectories. By closely scrutinizing this significant migration factor, the paper uncovers the deep-rooted motivations driving this choice, unveiling less visible factors that may prompt young women to leave their homeland. In doing so, it provides valuable insights into broader social change processes in Jordan, portraying migration not only as a personal journey but also as a reflection of societal transformations.

Migration significantly shapes the lives of millions globally, posing profound challenges across political, economic, and social realms.² As political tensions rise and disparities widen, understanding the root causes of migration becomes urgent. In Jordan, the increasing trend of youth migration, with 56 percent of educated young men and 39 percent of educated young women contemplating emigration, highlights the imperative need for comprehensive inquiry.³ Beyond mere statistics highlighting economic factors, this trend speaks to broader issues of opportunity, equity, shifting sociocultural norms, and evolving youth expectations and aspirations. Qualitative analyses can provide insights into these dynamics, empowering societies to navigate a changing world effectively.

A fragmented and diversified field of migration studies has grown rapidly in the past decades, trying to understand the multifaceted nature of migration and its complex interplay with political, economic, and social drivers. However, in analyzing the diverse reasons for migration, migrants have often been racialized, and their motivations have been forced into categories, which—while calling into question the sociopolitical complexities within their countries of origin—often fail to examine what lies beyond them. Migration literature on the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), excluding forced displacement, often emphasizes employment opportunities and political dissatisfaction as key migration drivers among Arab youth seeking better prospects abroad due to unemployment, corruption, and instability. This approach, which risks oversimplifying motivations, overlooking individual agency, and perpetuating victimization narratives, is rooted in

Orientalist epistemology, which tends to strip Arab/Muslim people, especially women, of their agency and reinforces perceptions of powerlessness. Narratives depicting Arab youth in waithood hinder a nuanced understanding of migration dynamics, while prevailing discourses on youth seeking employment reinforce stereotypes of predominantly male migrants. Consequently, the migration experiences of ordinary Arab women have been disregarded, along with the significant role of gender in shaping migration decisions. Additionally, migrant women from the Mashriq region (i.e., the Levant, Egypt, and the Gulf) have received less attention compared to those from the Maghreb region (i.e., North Africa), whereas a larger body of literature has focused on female domestic workers migrating to the Gulf states from non-Arab sending countries. Finally, while Middle East migration studies have explored various aspects of gender and agency in migration, including intersecting forms of oppression, violence, or insecurity, there has been insufficient consideration of the impact of evolving gender norms, values, and identities on women's migration choices.

This paper illuminates often-overlooked factors shaping young, educated Jordanian women's aspiration to leave their home country, challenging conventional and limited categories of analysis. To do so, it delves into the realm of young women's dreams, longings, and desires, informing us on what motivates them to aspire and plan to migrate in the future. Through an analysis of their efforts to forge more fulfilling life pathways abroad, this paper further uncovers the agentive strategies women employ to navigate gender barriers, personal vulnerabilities, and context-related challenges that shape their migration decisions.

The main argument of this paper centers on the notion that young Jordanian women's desire to study abroad reflects a deeper aspiration to permanently settle abroad, which results from a broader shift in sociocultural values and gender norms within this segment of the population. This shift can be observed in young women's reconceptualization of femininity identities, the renegotiation of gender roles, and the restructuring of social hierarchies. As per its theoretical underpinnings, the paper employs Lois McNay's conceptualization of creative agency⁴ to understand how people negotiate their aspired positions within family and society by creatively engaging with complex social norms. The paper proposes a *co-optation strategy* wherein young women reinterpret and benefit from gendered expectations surrounding education to safely overcome the complexities of migration and forge pathways to their desired lives.

Sociologists have traditionally defined co-optation as an elite strategy whereby change-seeking groups are absorbed into existing power structures through apparently cooperative practices, without receiving substantial benefits, thereby reinforcing elite dominance.⁵ However, this paper overturns the conventional scholarly understanding of co-optation by redefining it as the process by which ordinary people appropriate and reinterpret hegemonic gendered meanings to perpetuate the illusion of alignment to social norms while quietly and safely engaging in their redefinition. This new conceptualization underscores ordinary people's capacity to devise effective strategies to confront power dynamics and instigate desired change amidst diverse ideological and structural constraints.

Finally, this paper proposes that studying young Jordanian women's migration desires offers insights into youth evolving gender norms, thereby informing us about Jordan's sociocultural transformations and emphasizing the importance of migration studies in comprehending dynamics of social change.

MIGRATION TRENDS IN THE MENA REGION: INSIGHTS FROM THE ARAB BAROMETER WAVE VII

The 2022 Arab Barometer (AB) Wave VII Migration Report revealed a growing migration desire among MENA youth, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ Approximately one-fifth of the surveyed population expressed a desire to leave, with Jordan exhibiting the highest rate at 48 percent.⁷ Other countries with substantial migration desires include Sudan and Tunisia; Lebanon, Iraq, and Morocco follow closely, each with about one-third considering emigration.⁸ In contrast, Mauritania and Egypt show lower rates, with less than one-fifth contemplating leaving.⁹ Emigration patterns have shifted since 2018–19, rising in Lebanon and Tunisia due to economic challenges, and declining in Egypt and Morocco.¹⁰ The report highlights strong emigration aspirations among younger, well-educated males, eliciting concerns about a regional brain drain.¹¹ Gender differences also emerge, as the report shows more men than women wanting to emigrate in most countries.¹² Given the region's youthful population (under thirty) forming over half the total demographic, understanding their needs is vital to effectively address challenges.¹³

Regarding Jordan's migration trends, the AB indicates that nearly 63 percent of young Jordanians (18–29) desire to leave as compared to 39 percent of those thirty or older.¹⁴ Among aspiring migrants, 56 percent are college educated.¹⁵ In terms of gender, young Jordanian men are more likely to want to migrate (56 percent) than

women (39 percent).¹⁶ The United States and Canada are preferred emigration destinations, chosen by 35 and 30 percent respectively, followed by Germany and Turkey (14 percent), the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (13 percent), and Saudi Arabia (9 percent).¹⁷ Economic factors are predominant drivers for leaving (93 percent), followed by education opportunities (6 percent) and security reasons (1 percent).¹⁸

Across surveyed countries, economic reasons emerge as the primary driving force for migration, whereas security, political factors, and educational opportunities vary due to differing political climates. Economic factors are significant in Egypt, Jordan, and especially Libya, where they motivate women more than men.¹⁹ Overall, motivations vary across countries, reflecting the specific issues faced by each nation. Security concerns stand out in Iraq and Libya, educational opportunities in Morocco,²⁰ and political reasons in less stable countries like Lebanon, Palestine, Libya, and Iraq.²¹ Corruption is a notable factor in Libya but rare in Tunisia.²² Preferred destinations differ based on historical trends, language, proximity, and perceived opportunities.²³ While confirming the increasing desire of educated Arab youth, especially Jordanians, to relocate abroad, the AB migration report overlooks other catalysts for this trend, which are complex to assess via surveys, thus highlighting the need for further research.

JORDAN: INWARD AND OUTWARD MIGRATION DYNAMICS

Historically, Jordan has been a significant hub for both emigration and immigration, simultaneously responding to regional refugee crises while serving as a source of emigration for citizens seeking better opportunities abroad. As of 2020, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA) reports that 814,909 Jordanians reside abroad.²⁴ Among them, nearly 500,000 are in Gulf countries, particularly in Saudi Arabia (240,606), the UAE (168,968), Kuwait (54,688), and Qatar (32,808), while around 153,656 Jordanians reside in North America and Europe.²⁵

Additionally, Jordan is home to a number of displaced people, with an estimated one in fourteen individuals in the country being refugees.²⁶ Due to its geographical location at the crossroads of the Middle East as well as its relative stability amidst regional unrest, Jordan has experienced multiple migration waves throughout its history. The Palestinian community, Jordan's largest refugee group, comprises 2.4 million members,²⁷ many of whom began arriving in waves of displacement after their forceful expulsion from Palestine by Zionist forces upon the establishment of Israel in 1948. This event marked the onset of the Palestinian diaspora and brought significant

changes to Jordan, altering its demographic landscape and constitution.²⁸ Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, Jordan annexed central Palestine (renamed the West Bank), incorporating approximately 900,000 Palestinians—half of whom were refugees fleeing territories occupied by the Israeli forces—who joined 450,000 Transjordanians (i.e., Jordanian of East Bank origin).²⁹ These Palestinians naturalized and came to be known as Jordanian-Palestinians (i.e., of West Bank origins), contrasting with the Jordanian-Jordanians (i.e., of East Bank origin).³⁰ This division intensified after the 1970–71 events known as Black September, which was a fierce armed conflict between the Jordanian military and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).³¹ The Jordanian-Palestinian community not only shaped Jordan’s demographic landscape,³² with half of its population being of Palestinian origin,³³ but also enriched its cultural and social fabric.³⁴ Besides influxes in 1948 and after the 1967 Six Days War, which resulted in Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, additional waves of Palestinian refugees resettled in Jordan during other significant periods. During the 1990–91 Gulf War, 300,000 Jordanians, 95 percent of whom were of Palestinian origin, were expelled from Kuwait.³⁵ A more recent influx occurred during the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000, with 200,000 Palestinians fleeing to Jordan, either to settle or emigrate to Western countries.³⁶ While many Palestinians from 1948 and 1967 (especially West Bank Palestinian) hold Jordanian passports, some, particularly from Gaza, lack citizenship.³⁷

Jordan sheltered other displaced refugees from the region, including Lebanese during the 1975 civil war and Iraqis escaping the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Anglo-American military intervention.³⁸ Most of these refugees settled in Jordan while others sought asylum in North America or Europe.³⁹ Furthermore, since 2011, the Syrian civil war caused a massive refugee influx; the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered 643,199 individuals, which, combined with unregistered refugees, totaled 1.2 million.⁴⁰ After Syrians, Iraqis rank as the second largest refugee group (55,382), followed by Yemenis (12,765), Sudanese (4,963), and Somalis (479).⁴¹ With 717,864 UNHCR-registered refugees as of January 2024, Jordan ranks second in refugees per capita worldwide.⁴² The substantial increase in refugees entering Jordan has benefited the nation across several fronts, including gaining access to cost-effective labor, receiving considerable remittance inflows to mitigate protests and widespread unemployment, and securing significant financial aid from international donors, refugee organizations, and foreign nations.⁴³

Besides providing a safe harbor for many refugees, Jordan is also a country of emigration for transit migrants and its own citizens. In the 1950s and 1960s, Jordan began supporting migration into oil-producing countries to ease political, social, and economic tensions.⁴⁴ Most Jordanian migrants to the Gulf countries were high-skilled Jordanians of Palestinian origin who contributed to establishing emerging state systems.⁴⁵ The 1973 oil crisis triggered a second phase of Jordanian labor migration to oil-producing countries.⁴⁶ Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, 42 percent of Jordan's labor force was expatriated. By the late 1980s, 350,000 Jordanians worked overseas, with half of them employed in Saudi Arabia; notably, over 30 percent of these expatriates were university graduates and predominantly male, with 40 percent occupying professional roles.⁴⁷ Skilled emigration from Jordan aided in reducing unemployment and stimulating economic growth through securing stable revenue streams until the 1990s. It also played a crucial role in easing political tensions by mitigating polarization between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and Transjordanians after the Black September events.⁴⁸ High-skilled migration resumed after the Gulf War and the 1994 Jordan-Israel treaty.⁴⁹ Yet, by the mid-1990s, many Jordanians started migrating to Western nations, particularly Canada, the United States, and Germany.⁵⁰ This shift towards Western destinations was motivated by the aspiration for family reunification and, potentially, the promise of stable residency and citizenship.⁵¹ Emigration visa requests to Canada tripled from 1995 to 2002, with approximately 50 percent of Jordanian migrants settling in North America by the late 1990s.⁵² Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, regained popularity for Jordanian emigrants post-9/11 due to tighter migration controls in Western countries.⁵³ The few studies on Jordanian migration indicate that most Jordanian expatriates held skilled or highly skilled positions.⁵⁴

In discussing the dynamics of Jordan's skilled emigration and its political ramifications, Françoise De Bel-Air argues that while Jordan's open door emigration policy addresses economic challenges, it also deals with broader sociopolitical issues such as averting political destabilization, managing opposition forces, and preserving elite continuity.⁵⁵ Skilled emigration, especially as it involved Jordanians of Palestinian origin, has significantly contributed to perpetuating the status quo by preventing the accumulation of social unrest that could threaten the stability of the Hashemite monarchy. Despite these assertions, a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical factors driving skilled emigration among Jordanians remains elusive.

SCHOLARLY INSIGHTS ON MIDDLE EAST MIGRATION LITERATURE

Migration has long been a focal point of academic inquiry, with scholars endeavoring to unravel its intricate motivations and outcomes. Despite varied analyses of economic, political, and social drivers, mainstream debates often oversimplify migration experiences, leading to a superficial understanding of this complex phenomenon. Historically, migration literature has addressed various migrant groups, including illegal and legal migrants,⁵⁶ often emphasizing distinctions between forced and voluntary migration, though these boundaries are blurred and question their analytical value.⁵⁷ Additionally, economic migration models, which primarily view migration as driven by employment opportunities, have disproportionately emphasized men's experiences while neglecting the nuanced motivations and experiences of women.⁵⁸ However, recent literature highlights the necessity of focusing on diverse migrant groups and distinguishing them based on gender, age, and nationality.⁵⁹

In the 1970s and 1980s, migration studies began to consider gender as a perspective, yet women were often portrayed as non-agentive subjects following family decisions.⁶⁰ In the 1990s, literature explored household dynamics, especially domestic and sex work,⁶¹ revealing the intricate gendered dynamics in migration and interactions between household dynamics, labor markets, and gender inequalities. Later studies expanded to analyze gender within the market, civil society, and state institutions,⁶² highlighting people's differing experiences of migration and the interplay of the above in the gendering of migration, either reinforcing or contesting gender norms.⁶³ Today, a growing number of studies acknowledge international migration as a gendered process, recognizing diverse migration patterns and outcomes for both women and men across different countries of origin and destination.⁶⁴ Despite this recognition, gender often remains a control variable rather than a central hypothesis, and suitable methods to assess gender effects are still lacking.⁶⁵

Research into global youth migration and its gendered modalities in different regions of the world reveal that young migrants' experiences are not only shaped by their age and migration status but also by gender identities, social norms, and associated expectations. Unlike migration literature primarily centered on economic factors,⁶⁶ studies on youth migration emphasize education as a primary

motivator, recognizing that youth journey in search of better opportunities often starts with education.⁶⁷ Further empirical evidence emphasizes the central role of education in empowering young migrants to overcome social constraints, particularly for female students who find freedom and anonymity in migration settings.⁶⁸

Despite the increasing integration of theories on global gender inequalities into international migration studies, Middle East migration literature has lagged in incorporating diverse perspectives, consequently constraining our comprehension of migration dynamics in the region. Middle East migration studies extensively document the experiences of male migrants moving to the Gulf or Western countries, yet the existing literature often overlooks the agency of Arab women migrants, frequently depicting them as dependents accompanying their families or focusing on the experiences of women left behind when their husbands migrate abroad. Additional narratives examine Arab women's migration experiences in host countries, particularly in France, while others concentrate on women's experiences in the diaspora.⁶⁹ An intriguing body of ethnographic literature delves into the migration of non-Arab women to Gulf countries and examines the intersecting forms of violence and insecurity impacting women's migration decisions.⁷⁰ This literature portrays migration as a tool for women to escape various forms of violence within families and communities as well as dominant gender regimes while seeking autonomy.⁷¹ However, a similarly nuanced exploration of Arab women's migration decisions remains limited.

Studies on Arab women's migration motivations categorize them into political, educational, or employment factors,⁷² while others associate desires for freedom, independence, and autonomy with their migration aspirations.⁷³ One study reveals that Palestinian, Tunisian, Algerian, and Moroccan women, initially seeking higher education abroad, eventually utilized education as a strategy for settling abroad for other reasons, including evading family control or escaping escalating violence and conflict in their home countries.⁷⁴

While these analyses may reflect Orientalist narratives, further research is needed to fully explore the underlying migration motivations of women seeking autonomy through settling abroad. This paper challenges narratives that portray women migrating for autonomy solely as victims fleeing family control and seeking freedom,⁷⁵ advocating for a deeper examination of the root causes beyond surface claims and thereby reaffirming women as agents rather than mere victims.

To do so, this paper adopts an intersectional approach that assists in recognizing the complexity of gender and agency in its unique entwinement with women's aspirations, sense of self and family relations, and diverse material conditions, all of which are highly diverse and shape one's decision to migrate. Contextualizing individual migration aspirations within individual living contexts – which can encompass vulnerabilities, forms of oppression, privileges, and individuals' and families' diverse interpretations of norms and morals – helps us comprehend the complex factors shaping migration decisions. This approach offers a more holistic view of women's migration drivers, providing further insights into how gender inequalities shape their aspirations and strategies for navigating migration feasibility.

Regarding MENA youth migration motivations, economic factors are frequently emphasized, primarily due to alarming statistics regarding youth unemployment and political instability, especially post-Arab Uprisings. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) states that Arab countries have the highest and fastest-growing youth unemployment rates globally (25 percent in 2022), with women facing double the rate of men (43 percent compared to 21 percent) and three times the global average of 15 percent.⁷⁶ In Jordan, where 63 percent of the population is under thirty years old, the prevalence of youth unemployment is particularly high, reaching 45 percent overall and soaring to 79 percent among Jordanian women.⁷⁷ Jordan's Department of Statistics (DoS) reports that female graduates encounter an unemployment rate of 82 percent, in contrast to 30 percent for male graduates holding bachelor's degrees or higher.⁷⁸ The nation's stagnant economy, prominent unemployment rates among educated youth, high cost of living, low wages, rampant corruption, and lack of trust in institutions are indeed significant challenges that contribute to motivating young people to seek better opportunities abroad. However, my interviews with young Jordanians confirmed a strong desire to migrate from a country deemed unable to fulfil their expectations beyond purely economic factors.

Despite having one of the highest proportions of people aspiring to leave, Jordan has not received adequate attention in investigating this issue beyond surveys that primarily involve male participants and offer limited quantifiable variables to elucidate migration motivations. Consequently, there is an urgent need for qualitative research into the underexplored migration drivers of young, educated Jordanians. Additionally, contrary to survey data, my sample of educated Jordanian women displayed a more pronounced

desire to migrate than men,⁷⁹ emphasizing the importance of delving into their reasons. With about 70 percent of Jordan's youth pursuing higher education, and women (37.4 percent) outnumbering men (31.5 percent) in university attendance, exploring young, educated women's migration aspirations is vital due to its substantial societal, political, and economic implications.⁸⁰

Jordanian families highly value education, with many middle and upper-class households sending both daughters and sons to prestigious universities abroad.⁸¹ As per the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), in 2021, there were 30,317 Jordanian tertiary students studying abroad, with approximately 10,623 in other Arab States, 9,073 in Central and Eastern Europe, and 7,734 in North America and Western Europe.⁸² Despite this trend, the topic of Jordanian youth studying abroad has received limited attention. However, the significant expansion of higher education in Jordan and the increased enrollment of Jordanian women in universities have prompted scholars to explore the gendered politics surrounding education. Studies have highlighted various perspectives, such as how women's education perpetuates traditional gender roles rather than serving as an agent of emancipation,⁸³ or how the advancement of girls' education relates to the commercialization of education, the re-Islamization of society, and narratives surrounding prestige.⁸⁴ The scholar Fida Adely has analyzed the shifting meanings of women's education in Jordan, inscribing it, as a potentially highly valuable resource for women's empowerment, into narratives of marriageability, class, and respectability.⁸⁵ Yet, the significance of education for these young women and its role in enabling them to bypass multiple gendered boundaries, including those related to international mobility, has not been thoroughly examined.

This article unravels new meaning(s) of education for young Jordanian women, particularly in relation to migration, emphasizing its collective benefits over conventional gender narratives (e.g., education and motherhood, marriageability, prestige). Indeed, these narratives played a role in "normalising" girls' access to education—as evidenced by Jordan's high literacy rate⁸⁶—enabling women to co-opt normative education meanings to their advantage. Adely's forthcoming work explores the internal migration of educated Jordanian women and examines how neoliberal economic policies in Jordan, particularly expanded educational opportunities, have reshaped gendered expectations affecting the lives of women migrating from rural areas to the capital city of Amman for work.⁸⁷ Adely highlights the interplay of familial, personal, and economic

motivations in shaping these migration decisions, with young women emphasizing “making use of their education” as a key driver for migration.⁸⁸

As per the international migration of educated Jordanian women, research has explored the experiences of women who relocated to the Arab Gulf for work, whether independently or with their families.⁸⁹ Similarly, studies have examined the lived experiences of Jordanian immigrant women in the United States, exploring the emotional challenges of resettlement such as social isolation and loneliness.⁹⁰ Furthermore, there has been inquiry into how religious and cultural values may hinder Jordanian women’s employment opportunities abroad.⁹¹ Overall, this strand of literature remains relatively understudied, especially concerning how women’s evolving gender norms and social values in their home country may influence their migration choices. This paper addresses these gaps by uncovering the intricate migration decisions of young Jordanian women (often overlooked by quantitative surveys) and thereby enhancing our comprehension of Jordan’s evolving social landscape.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SAMPLE

This study builds on my PhD findings, which highlighted the shifting values and departure from dominant gender norms among young, university-educated Jordanians. The research also revealed a strong inclination towards migration among the women in the sample, leading to a secondary data analysis to investigate the root causes. The initial study included sixty-seven urban, middle-class, young women and men,⁹² who were either pursuing higher education or already employed in Jordan. Data collection involved four qualitative methods: structured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and family observations. The analysis was thematic, using an intersectional approach, and relied on data triangulation for reliability. The research employed a multidisciplinary theoretical framework, drawing from post-structuralist and critical feminist theories, particularly Lois McNay’s theory of agency,⁹³ which views agency as a dynamic and historically contextualized phenomenon influenced by individuals’ lived experiences and surrounding circumstances. McNay’s theory highlights the creative dimension of agency and underscores the transformative power of human subjectivity in driving individual and collective change, thereby helping a reconceptualization of passive and subjugated selves into active agents capable of self-empowerment and collective transformation.

The present study involved a reanalysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with women expressing a desire to migrate. Out of twenty-four women interviewed, sixteen exhibited a firm intention to leave Jordan and were planning to do so. These participants comprised single females, including financially dependent students aged 18–24 and economically independent professionals aged 25–36, all of whom resided in their parents' homes in Amman. The sample included both Transjordanian and Jordanian-Palestinian women, mostly born in Amman, with families exhibiting diverse settlement patterns (i.e., urban, rural, and Bedouin). In this examination, further insights were gained from over forty interviews with women who, despite not planning to migrate, shared similar expectations and aspirations with those who did. Additionally, my two-year experience working in two public universities in Jordan, where I interacted closely with female students striving for international mobility, offered further perspectives.

It is worth highlighting that migration aspirations surfaced spontaneously during the research process. The primary research did not explicitly focus on migration but provided a platform for participants to share their dreams and yearnings more broadly. The secondary analysis allowed for a dedicated exploration of the migration aspect, leveraging the richness of the existing data to gain fresh insights into the specific dimension of women's expectations. The qualitative approach delving into young women's dreams, longings, and desires helped reveal the often-invisible factors guiding their migration intentions, while also illuminating both individual longings and broader sociocultural shifts in the country.

"I WANT TO STUDY ABROAD!": EDUCATION AS A SHARED MOTIVE FOR MIGRATION AMONG YOUNG JORDANIAN WOMEN

Upon exploring the aspirations of young Jordanian women, a prominent yearning emerges: their steadfast desire to pursue higher education abroad. The prospect of attaining a master's or doctoral degree in a foreign country, often situated in the global North, serves as a motivation for these women to depart from their homeland. This urge grips not only undergraduate students reliant on familial support but also resonates with financially independent young adults who have completed their bachelor's degrees and embarked on careers in Jordan. While the pursuit of education abroad may seem to be the main impetus for migration, a more nuanced examination reveals the profound significance of this ambition. Understanding why many

young women aspire to study abroad, and actively plan for it, requires a preliminary exploration of the importance of education within the context of their lives and families.

Parents emphasized higher education for their daughters, making it a principal expectation along with career and marriage. Likewise, young women recognized the significance of education, with remarkably high agreement levels. As previously discussed, existing literature on meanings of education in Jordan suggests that parents' educational expectations for their daughters are motivated by narratives on prestige and wealth, often intersecting with narratives on marriage.⁹⁴ Adely has demonstrated the importance of education in enhancing women's "marriageability" prospects, which are strictly related to a family's social mobility and the economic power ensured by a daughter's marriage to a better-off partner.⁹⁵ However, parents' inclination to prioritize first their daughters' education or marriage may depend on family status longings, understandings of social values, and gender norms. For example, Amal—a twenty-two-year-old language student and the only woman in my sample subjected to strict movement rules by her father—revealed that her father emphasizes education over marriage. He views it as a means of attaining social respectability: "He wants me to become a professor to make him proud."⁹⁶ Her father's preference is for her to obtain a degree from the US since, as Amal explained, "Job opportunities in Jordan are better for those with a degree from the States."

The pursuit of education abroad has evolved into a crucial parental expectation for Jordanian daughters, serving as a potent catalyst for elevating families' ambitions for social advancement. Parents commonly endorsed the idea of their daughters acquiring degrees from universities in the United States or Europe, recognizing them as symbols of greater prestige compared to local institutions in Jordan. In addition to prestige, this expectation is driven by the shared belief among daughters and their families that studying abroad can lead to a prosperous future upon their return, offering a competitive edge over Jordanian degree holders to overcome the country's high unemployment rates.

Contrary to prevailing narratives, the women I encountered did not link education to social mobility, let alone marriageability. Rather, they underscored its significance as a tool for empowerment utilized to surpass gendered life trajectories. In a context where education could reinforce gender hierarchies, these women have redefined its purpose to craft new pathways for themselves. Overall, women have co-opted

societal and familial meanings of education, particularly as families' signifiers of prestige and wealth, to gain agency and autonomy.

While these women recognized knowledge as empowering, they indeed realized that in some families and communities, education might function merely as a path to social advancement, without guaranteeing personal fulfillment. As Yasmin elucidated, "If a woman holds a degree, she stands a better chance of securing a favorable marriage. It's like buying something with more features." She further observed, "For some girls, a university degree doesn't necessarily translate to a career, as families ultimately dictate the most suitable life path for their daughters." Moreover, although numerous young women equated employment with financial independence and the capacity to make autonomous choices, it is crucial to acknowledge that factors beyond financial aspects can significantly impact a woman's agency in life. The women I encountered were keenly aware of this reality. The case of older, financially independent women in my sample serves as an example of financial autonomy not ensuring individual agency.⁹⁷ Despite their financial independence, these women expressed a shared understanding that marriage to a suitable partner or relocation abroad may be the only ways for some women to achieve full autonomy in adulthood. This suggests that economic self-sufficiency alone does not guarantee a woman's independence and additional strategies may be required to ensure that. For instance, Yasmin admitted, "If I don't get married, being more independent is a problem unless I leave the country," and Amal stated, "I want to be independent, but that cannot happen until I leave my parents' house, and I am not leaving it unless I do my MA abroad, or I marry. Those are my only options."

These women defined their aspirations for independent adulthood as involving the freedom to make life decisions divergent from their families or societal expectations, or contradictory to their families' morals and values, without causing rifts or estrangement. These choices encompassed unmarried women leaving their parental homes, relocating abroad, adopting lifestyles that challenged conventional norms, and overall, making autonomous decisions without the burden of conforming to norms and expectations that do not resonate with them.

The women I met struggled to find fulfillment in Jordan, prompting them to consider emigration as a means to pursue their desired lives and avoid family conflicts. Emigration would enable them to live according to their shifting values while remaining within the system. This phenomenon helps us understand why women not only

voiced desires but also actively planned to pursue education abroad, highlighting their academic pursuits as a strategy to gain familial endorsement for their migration choice.

Moreover, pursuing education abroad further underscored the viability of the emigration process. In fact, participants acknowledged that relocating abroad would hinge on securing employment in the host country after finishing their studies, ensuring settlement once their student visa expired. This clarifies why even women with established careers chose to further their education to facilitate their move abroad. Only two women in the sample mentioned the possibility of moving abroad for work, as they acknowledged the difficulties of obtaining employment with visa sponsorship, particularly in their preferred destinations of Europe or North America.⁹⁸

Ultimately, these findings suggest that parents' and daughters' expectations regarding pursuing education abroad reflect two underlying meanings: parents' ambitions for upward social mobility and young women's desire for independence. Hence, seeking education abroad enables daughters to depart from a country perceived as unable to fulfill their deepest hopes and thus emancipate themselves from societal constraints and conventions that do not align with their life goals.

GENDERING MIGRATION STRATEGIES: YOUNG WOMEN NAVIGATING THE GENDERED BOUNDARIES OF MOVING ABROAD

Understanding education as a strategy for emigration entails acknowledging the gender-based constraints on movement faced by some women, which can hinder their aspirations to leave the country, particularly if unaccompanied. Many interviewed women, whether financially independent professionals or dependent students, experienced family-imposed restrictions on movement, including curfews, travel limitations, and relocation barriers. Recognizing these challenges is crucial in comprehending the gendered migration strategies young women adopt when contemplating moving abroad. Primary factors driving these restrictions include concerns over safety and doubts about women's ability to handle responsibilities autonomously. Yet gendered restrictions are highly subjective; they are influenced by coalescing factors that impact a woman's mobility, such as each family's morals, values, and unique interpretation of social norms. Family-specific circumstances and individualized reasons can also contribute to refusal.

However, concerns about reputation—frequently linked to potential negative judgment within the immediate community and broader Jordanian society, thus threatening both the daughter’s reputation and the family’s respectability—do not always prevent daughters from moving abroad. Such movement may occur, for instance, when parents support their daughters’ ambitions, when they hold educational expectations for their daughters, or when these values align with the family’s desire for social mobility. Furthermore, this limited extension of concerns abroad may be attributed to the diminished visibility of women to their immediate community while residing overseas.

For example, Farah, a thoughtful female student, points to her sister’s thwarted aspirations of embarking on a doctoral scholarship in the United States as a poignant illustration of such gendered restrictions. “My sister was very disappointed,” Farah recounted, “when my mother forbade her to travel to pursue her education dream.”⁹⁹ Farah’s mother based her decision on the assumption that, as a woman, her daughter could not handle the responsibility of living independently. Farah further revealed, with a heavy heart:

After two months, my mother let my brother travel to the US for work. When I asked her why, she said: “Because he is a man and can handle responsibilities. Maybe your sister can go when she marries.”

This scenario reflects Farah’s mother’s adherence to ingrained gender stereotypes: men are viewed as assertive and rational, whereas women are seen as nurturing, passive, and emotionally sensitive. Such associations perpetuate the societal expectation that males are the sole providers while females are relegated to caregiving roles; moreover, this labeling engenders systemic impediments to women’s educational and occupational advancement, thereby constraining their empowerment. In stark contrast, the narrative of Amal, the language student mentioned earlier, unveils a divergent trajectory. Despite her father’s imposition of a stringent five p.m. curfew in Jordan, Amal could freely move abroad for education because of her father’s aspirations for social mobility and specific expectations for his daughter.

These young women’s experiences emphasize how family priorities and societal expectations wield significant influence over women’s opportunities. In Amal’s case, education was paramount, as

her father envisioned her as a future professor and thus anticipated an enhancement in the family's social standing. Conversely, Farah's mother prioritized her daughter's security through marriage over social mobility. These contrasting parental expectations significantly shaped the future life trajectories of Amal and Farah's sister.

Overall, when considering migration for educational purposes, a multitude of elements influence the gender dynamics that shape women's opportunities to pursue education abroad. This often leads women to employ gendered strategies to navigate family-imposed restrictions, typically involving the presentation of compelling arguments to persuade parents of the benefits of their educational pursuits. For instance, Farah, who shared her sister's desire to study abroad despite her mother's ban on her sister's movement, did not give up on her dream of leaving. She said:

I also want to continue my studies abroad. Although my mom disagrees, I won't give up. I will convince her by telling her that I want to improve myself, get new opportunities, and meet new people.

Farah's narrative further showcases the significance of women obtaining parental consent for significant life decisions, such as studying abroad, even during their transition to adulthood, albeit with varying degrees of importance. In such situations, women, whether students or professionals, employ persuasive strategies to maximize their agency. For instance, the young women in my sample often employed highly contextualized arguments encompassing moral values, respectability, social mobility, religious ethics, and practical considerations associated with employability discourses, while concealing their true intention to permanently settle abroad after completing their studies. In fact, while many parents may have expected their daughters to obtain an education abroad, they did not always desire for their daughters to permanently relocate overseas. This further underscores a convergence of youth-parents' education expectations but a divergence of the meaning(s) assigned to education by both parties. Therefore, women's convincing strategy often centered around securing consent for studying rather than settling abroad. For instance, Lama discreetly concealed her true intentions of migrating, using practical arguments to persuade her father.¹⁰⁰ She marketed her decision to study abroad as a good career investment, emphasizing its

potential to overcome Jordan's high unemployment rate among graduates:

I don't want to spend my time here. I want to do an MA in Oxford, I want this so much, but my father disagrees. My sister spent six months in Spain. Initially, my father didn't want her to go, but she convinced him. It took her a couple of years though. I also want to convince him by telling him how important it is for me to study in the UK to be economically competitive. Also, I don't want to live in Jordan, and after my MA, I would like to live in Japan or Canada.

Lama's story—in the contradiction it evokes—highlights how important it is for a young woman like her to devise a convincing strategy that makes perfect sense to her family and maintain it while dreaming of something else. In fact, she strategically presents the opportunity to study abroad as a means to enhance her employability in Jordan while secretly harboring no desire to spend her life there. I remember her eyes bursting with joy when confiding in me her dream of having a successful career and living a life as an independent woman, far away from a society which, she confessed, “kills you, seriously. Here, you feel you are left out when you don't follow the rules, and no one cares about you.” Furthermore, Yasmin, a young female student whose family's dismissal of her choice of moving abroad relates to her family's opinion about herself “not being responsible enough,” describes how she is working on convincing her parents that she is making the right decision, just as her sister—who successfully faced the same problem before her—did:

I'm working on convincing my parents about my decision, just like my sister did when she left the country. At university, she was totally forbidden from leaving the country without a brother or spouse, but she proved religiously that she was very responsible. She made a job interview online, got the job, and proved to my parents how right she was. Now, my sister lives her life alone in Germany. I want to go and live with her, but before that, I must prove that I am a bit more responsible. You must prove this if you are a woman, by having your own career and showing that you can handle responsibility. They think it is a man's job to get a job and pay the bills. A man can do that,

but a woman . . . she might get a job and give it up later because she is fragile and cannot handle pressure.

Yasmin's and Farah's sister's stories expose misconceptions about women's capabilities in facing adulthood challenges. However, Yasmin's story also sheds light on how women can subvert gendered stereotypes in the family context "by working hard to prove them wrong" and by being persistent in pursuing their goals. Yasmin's determination, shaped by religious virtues, fosters her success, and her sister's accomplishments propels her to resist gender biases. Yasmin's story, however, brings another issue to the fore: her family's approval of her sister's settlement abroad does not automatically grant her the same right. The fight against gender stereotypes affects every woman who must prove herself worth a right.

Further strategies to convince parents to study abroad entails young women securing a scholarship by maintaining an outstanding academic record at university and successfully competing for study offers at world-class universities. Interestingly, this approach was adopted by female students from lower social classes and rural backgrounds, many of whom, as the first educated women in their families, were eager to prove their potential to their parents. I recall the story of Haya, a young female student from Al al-Bayt University in Mafraq, northern Jordan, where I was working, approaching me to write recommendation letters for her applications to study in Rome, Italy, where she dreamed of living. She said:

My father doesn't allow me to go abroad, but I want to convince him by getting high grades and securing a scholarship. I know he will change his mind when I win this scholarship. Then he will see my potential, and it would be a shame to not let me go.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Reem aimed to secure a PhD scholarship to move to Italy, assuring her parents it would secure a good job, with which she promised to support her family by funding her siblings' studies.¹⁰² Furthermore, Noor, a student at the University of Jordan, secured a scholarship to pursue her MA in the UK.¹⁰³ Determined to find employment and settle there, she successfully achieved her goal. Upon reconnecting with her years later, I learned she was struggling to bring her divorced mother and younger sister to live with her in the UK. Consequently, she started contemplating relocating to Canada, where

family reunification procedures are less challenging. While Noor, from an upper-middle class background, saw securing a scholarship as a way to demonstrate her diligence to her family, for the other two students obtaining a scholarship functioned as a persuasive tactic and the only opportunity for studying abroad due to their low-income backgrounds. Sometimes, women's strategies for convincing parents to study abroad failed, and consequently, they were likely to abandon their decision, either temporarily or permanently.

However, it is important to highlight that not all the women in my sample needed to employ strategies to facilitate their move abroad, as their parents supported their daughters' freedom to make desired life choices. In other cases, parents' objections to their daughters moving abroad stemmed from differing personal expectations unrelated to gendered constraints. For instance, Maryam's parents supported her decision to pursue her MA abroad but not permanent settlement for other reasons:

I decided to move abroad next summer, and I had just told my parents. We are still discussing my choice, not because they don't let me travel because I am a woman; my parents don't want any of their children to be away. I plan to do my PhD in Germany, then secure a job, and settle there.¹⁰⁴

Young women's contextual tactics to persuade their parents to study abroad reflect the varied motivations behind their restrictions. While it is crucial to avoid generalizations and acknowledge the individualized nature of these experiences as well as the varied meanings of education to parents and daughters, these findings highlight that women who leverage education for emigration often encountered familial conflicts regarding their expected gendered life paths. These conflicts showcase young women's defiance of prevailing restrictive gender norms, emphasizing an ongoing intergenerational value misalignment within a segment of the country's younger population.

EDUCATION IN WOMEN'S MIGRATION CHOICES: STUDYING ABROAD AS A CO-OPTATION STRATEGY FOR ENACTING DESIRED LIFE TRAJECTORIES

The longing of women to study abroad reflects a profound yearning to realize their envisioned life in a country that aligns with their evolving values. Their departure from hegemonic gender ideologies dictating a woman's role within society fueled their desire to seek alternative

paths overseas. These women sought to surpass gendered constraints by refusing to compromise their personal aspirations and expectations for those imposed by familial and societal standards. Abeer, a twenty-one-year-old student who planned to leave Jordan, articulated this feeling as follows:

Society pressures you to conform to a certain model. This pressure comes from the media, your colleagues, or your tutor. They all say things like, "If you are a woman, you can't do this." Some women say in public, "Close your legs, don't sit like that," or they fix your clothes for you. You feel watched all the time. When you walk down the street, you know that someone is ready to tell you how you should behave as a woman, what you should do, and what you should not do.¹⁰⁵

Abeer, being bisexual, found it challenging to conform to normative femininity and sought an environment where she could express her fluid sexuality safely; hence, she saw education as a pathway to settling permanently abroad and achieving her goal:

I want to be in an environment where I feel safe. I want to leave Jordan for this reason. Ideally, I want to get an MA in the US or Europe and then settle there. My parents don't agree, but they know it, and they have accepted the fact that it is going to happen.

Similarly, Lama, the young student mentioned earlier who used the employability card to persuade her father to study abroad, when asked why she wishes to leave Jordan, firmly responded:

I want to live abroad for many reasons; Jordanian society blames women for everything, and I hate it. You can't live the way you want; you must follow others and I don't like being like others. They tell you they respect your opinion, but whenever you express it, they judge you and tell you to shut up.

As Lama continued speaking, she emphasized her desire to live in an egalitarian society where "men and women are equally valued." She

elaborated that in Jordan “a woman is always judged, even if she follows the rules, is respectful, and good.” At the time of the interview, Lama was endeavoring to persuade her father about the suitability of her choice to study abroad in the coming years. Additionally, she was navigating another gender expectation that could impede her move abroad in the future: convincing her father that she did not intend to get married before the age of twenty-five, as he expected from all his daughters. She remarked, “I have too many other priorities than getting married.” Furthermore, Yasmin, the young woman for whom “staying in Jordan is not an option,” identified her reasons for leaving her country in the way her family and society viewed women, which she described as “depressing.” She was a devout woman who did not conform to the gender norms her family expected her to follow, including not engaging in relationships with men. She expressed her aspiration to transform gender relations within her society as follows:

I would like women-men relationships to be more casual within the limits of our religion. Being extreme is not the right way. It's too much to say that women can't talk to men, shake their hands, or say hello. Having male friends should be okay. Women should be able to voice their opinions more; they should be able to choose their husbands, their education, and all other aspects of their lives. Women should just be able to live as normally as men.

Yasmin dreamed of living an independent life free from multiple constraints, yet according to her shifting understandings of morals and values; however, she acknowledged the challenge of doing so within the confines of Jordan and identified migration as a solution to avoid an act of rebellion that would jeopardize her relationship with her family:

I want to have my own place, but in this country, I must live with my family. Moving out would be an act of rebellion, which I want to avoid. So, I would rather leave Jordan.

The desire for independent living was another significant migration driver, particularly among the older unmarried women in my sample. The difficulty of convincing parents to let them leave the family home, often prompted them to consider migrating as a means to fulfill their

desires without straining family ties. Lana, a financially independent woman in her thirties, succinctly captures this sentiment:

Leaving the country is easier, as my family would not say no, because, in that case, society will not judge them. But if you live in Jordan and you decide to move out and live maybe in a flat next to your family's, that is a big thing, it's crazy.¹⁰⁶

Lana had been in ongoing arguments with her family about moving out, but she eventually gave up on her dream to live alone after realizing it could jeopardize her relationship with her parents. Hence, she acknowledged, "I have to find another solution," and for an adult, single woman like her, that "solution" was "leaving Jordan." Like many others, Lana started planning to leave Jordan because her positive relationship with her parents, made her reluctant to "upset them by moving out of the family home." However, unlike her counterparts, Lana was not inclined towards furthering her education and aimed to secure a job abroad to maintain her current standard of living. During the interview, she expressed her determination to relocate to Europe once she finds a suitable job, stating, "As soon as I find something decent, I will move abroad immediately."

Furthermore, other women mentioned gender discrimination in the workplace as a key factor driving their decision to migrate. Maryam, a twenty-three-year-old MA student, shared how her desire to live abroad was ignited by Jordan's harsh reality of hiring discrimination, as shortly after receiving her BA degree in geology, she discovered that—as a woman—she was ineligible to apply for jobs in her field. According to Maryam, "When it comes to geologists, in the job position they only require men, and the reason is only about tradition and culture, as there is no law that says that." Maryam continued by expressing her profound rejection of the gender roles and stereotypes associated with women in Jordan:

The gender roles associated with you are the burden you carry, along with the societal norms that see women only as a body. Your main goal is to get married, have children, raise them, and take care of your husband. I disagree with this, and I want to be something else.

Maryam's encounter with job discrimination catalyzed her growing interest in women's studies, prompting her to enroll in the MA program at the University of Jordan and sparking her plans to pursue a PhD in gender studies in Germany. Through her resilience and determination to challenge societal expectations, she has discovered a way to redefine an unwanted gender identity and pave her own path to empowerment. Yet, she recognized that this journey of self-discovery and fulfillment can only be achieved through migration.

These stories illustrate the challenges faced by the women I encountered in their pursuit of independence, as their desires collided societal norms and gendered parental expectations. Consequently, their preferred option was to move abroad for study, and occasionally work, as they believed their aspirations could not be fully realized in their home country. Hence, migration emerges as a crucial tool in women's quest for autonomy, offering a route to live in accordance with their evolving gender subjectivities and escape constraining gender roles, all without jeopardizing their safety or losing their support networks.

This paper argues that Jordanian women's decision to pursue education abroad, with the intent of settling permanently abroad, constitutes a co-optation strategy employed by women to shape a life aligned with their shifting values and beliefs. In situations where migration presents challenges, education facilitates their journey and settlement abroad. By adopting this strategy, young women co-opt inner meanings of gendered expectations to be able to chart their own unique life journeys abroad. This co-optation strategy allows them to leverage gendered expectations to their advantage and (re)interpret them to create pathways towards their goals while remaining within the system. Consequently, this co-optation strategy relies on the alignment between familial expectations and individual desires to cultivate personal aspirations.

The co-optation strategy further signifies women's creative agency to subvert the system quietly and safely from within, showcasing women's extraordinary capacity to deal with power beyond resistance or compliance. Through the co-optation strategy, individuals reappropriate inner purposes based on their desires, strategically positioning themselves within family expectations to enhance their ability to achieve aspirations without severing family ties.

The co-optation strategy establishes women as agents rather than victims, as they actively defy restrictive gender norms by employing creative strategies to enact desired change, despite facing

personal and public constraints. This affirms their power to shift undesired (by them) gender roles, identities, and relations. As McNay contends, the development of agency emerges from the intricate interplay between individuals' lived experiences and pervasive social structures of power and inequality.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, agency cannot be reduced to simplistic binaries, as numerous nuanced outcomes exist between resistance or compliance with power. Indeed, given the multitude of desires and the diverse factors shaping individuals' agentic capacities, the pathways available to people are boundless.

Finally, education emerges as a favored co-optation strategy among women for several reasons. Firstly, it holds significance for both families and daughters, as it fosters families' dreams of social mobility and daughter's dream of empowerment. Secondly, it maintains the family's social respectability by shielding women's potentially controversial lifestyle from community scrutiny. Thirdly, it allows women to maintain their support system, creating the illusion of conformity to the family's expectation of education. Fourthly, it enables women to stay within the system while safely disrupting gender norms. Additionally, education helps navigate legal migration policies and visa restrictions for employment abroad. Overall, education is a co-optation strategy widely employed due to its effectiveness in achieving women's desired outcome. By leveraging this strategy, young women gain greater capacity to navigate life decisions, as their families perceive their daughters to have met their expectations. This convergence of factors positions education as a powerful tool that allows women to meet family expectations, achieve empowerment, preserve respectability, navigate immigration restrictions, and challenge social norms while operating within the existing system.

MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS AND SOCIOCULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN JORDAN

Young Jordanian women's desire to migrate signifies a shift in values among the younger generations who are challenging the country's dominant gender narrative. To transcend these norms and achieve their aspirations, these women have co-opted the gendered expectations of education and redefined its meaning to achieve fulfillment. These findings indicate that women view migration as the only feasible opportunity for the practical enactment of the new value system they identify with. Ultimately, their decision to migrate illustrates their agency in successfully navigating vulnerabilities to transform their personal and social lives and enact desired realities while safely co-opting social norms.

Specifically, these aspiring migrant women have shifted their understandings of gender norms to embrace a femininity identity characterized by strength, independence, and the agency to make life choices that challenge traditional expectations. They seek to replace hierarchical, asymmetrical, and restrictive gender dynamics with equality, advocating for gender justice and asserting their right to choose their own paths and identities.

Therefore, the primary reason underlying their decision to migrate lies in their inability to pursue non-gendered life trajectories in their own country. These young women feel that their country, society, and, at times, their families all fail to support their new expectations. Consequently, they seek environments that better resonate with their newfound perspectives. This mismatch between their aspirations and the limitations within their home country serves as a compelling force driving them towards migration.

Additionally, women's decision to relocate abroad is influenced by their consideration of their family's desires, strategically negotiated to preserve connections rather than sever them. Indeed, in their pursuit of envisioned lives, women frequently hesitated to openly cross gendered boundaries, not merely due to their inability to do so or fear of potential repercussions but out of a wish to avoid disappointing loved ones. This dynamic not only highlights the complexity of crafting new norms successfully amidst vulnerabilities but also underscores women as relational selves. The concept of relationality, which frames the individual as capable of autonomous actions within a larger web of intimate relationships,¹⁰⁸ further distances narratives portraying Arab/Muslim women seeking migration for independence merely as victims trying to escape family control.

This paper does not aim to standardize the desires, dreams, or expectations of young Jordanian women. Instead, it acknowledges their diversity, complexity, and evolution, which encompass various and sometimes conflicting expectations regarding education, migration, marriage, career, or singlehood. Thus, it is essential to recognize that women's inclination to settle abroad may change as their individual priorities and life experiences evolve.

Nevertheless, these findings revealed a collective yearning for gender justice among these aspiring migrants, who demanded to be respected and recognized as valued members of their communities, asserting their individual worth as women. This suggests that young Jordanian women's growing inclination to migrate reflects a shift in their understandings of gender norms, underscoring a value misalignment between generations that becomes further apparent as

women navigate diverse facets of life, including education, career, intimate relationships, and societal interactions.

This intergenerational discrepancy in values exposes ongoing sociocultural transformations in Jordan. Thus, revealing these frequently disregarded migration motivators allows us to elucidate women's longing for social change, providing countries of origin with insight into the specific issues they need to address.

In Jordan, addressing gender inequalities is key to supporting young women's journey towards a more equitable and fulfilling future, allowing them to live the lives they desire in their homeland. Failure to do so may lead to continued emigration and result in various adverse political, economic, and social consequences that impact individuals, families, and society. To mitigate these risks, the country must tackle this root cause of emigration by fostering an environment that enables all individuals, regardless of gender, to thrive and realize their full potential.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the aspirations of young Jordanian women to pursue higher education abroad, motivated by a desire to permanently relocate in another country, where they feel they can follow unconventional life paths consistent with their new values. This underscored education as a co-optation strategy employed by women to attain their goal of living abroad – revealing the gendered dynamics of migration – where vulnerabilities and boundaries shape not only women's migration decisions but also enactment strategies. This paper argued that this yearning to migrate stems from a shift in sociocultural norms and values ongoing in Jordan, signaling a redefinition of gender roles and hierarchies among a segment of Jordanian youth. Accordingly, the primary driving force behind migration for these young women is their determination to embody identities that defy conventional gender norms – a pursuit they deem unattainable or undesirable in Jordan, as (in the case of these women, but not necessarily others) it would require severing family ties, a prospect they are unwilling to contemplate. Ultimately, the country's inability to meet its young women's evolving expectations serves as the primary catalyst for their decision to migrate, highlighting migration aspirations as a major consequence of gender inequalities impacting multiple domains of women's private and public life in Jordan. Education, as a pathway to settlement abroad, is not merely a strategy for women to evade societal and family's constraints but it stands as a testament to women's agency in shaping desired lives and surpassing

gender barriers. The women in the study are not devoid of agency; instead, they proactively mold their destinies amidst diverse constraints, navigating with determination through complex social norms and transcending multiple structures of oppression to negotiate new roles. Overall, these findings underscore that migration is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a response to various inequalities that go beyond economic factors, impacting women's expectations and aspirations, as well as sense of fulfilment and safety in life. In the case of the young women of Jordan, these concerns mostly relate to their ability to feel safe while in the process of redefining conventional notions of femininity, gender roles, and relations. Acknowledging these unmet needs empowers practitioners and policymakers to respond to the youth's call for change, thereby nurturing broader societal benefits. Encouraging dialogue and collaboration among researchers, state agencies, NGOs, and policymakers is essential for charting new paths in Jordan's social development, enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, and communities. Ultimately, recognizing the inherent potential of migration aspirations can serve as a catalyst for change by aiding in the resolution of pressing societal issues and yielding significant positive effects for individuals in both sending and receiving societies.

NOTES

¹ Yasmin, interview by the author, 24 March 2019.

² International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022* (Geneva: IOM, 2022), <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>. According to this source, in 2020, there were 281 million international migrants, corresponding to approximately 3.6 percent of the world's population. These figures tell us that, contrary to widespread migration narratives, only a small percentage of the population are on the move.

³ Mohamed Abufalgha, *Public Views of Migration in MENA, Wave VII Migration Report* (Arab Barometer, July 2022), 6, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Migration_Report-EN.pdf.

⁴ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁵ Markus Holdo, "Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest," *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 4 (2019): 444, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133>.

⁶ Abufalgha, *Public Views*, 2. The Arab Barometer is a social research network that investigate social change over time within the Arab region, by periodically producing opinion polls, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/>.

⁷ Abufalgha, *Public Views*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

¹³ For a review, see OECD, *Youth at the Centre of Government Action: A Review of the Middle East and North Africa*, OECD Public Governance Reviews (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1787/bcc2dd08-en>.

¹⁴ Abufalgha, *Public Views*, 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8–10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁴ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA), Population Division, *International Migrant Stock 2020: Destination and Origin, 2020*, https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/undesapd_2020_ims_stock_by_sex_destination_and_origin.xlsx.

²⁵ In 2020, 91,208 Jordanians resided in the United States and 14,310 in Canada. Additionally, 48,138 Jordanians lived in Europe, with a significant portion, 14,047, located in Germany. Data regarding age and gender breakdowns are not available. See, UN/DESA, “International Migrant.”

²⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Jordan Humanitarian Fund 2021 Annual Report*, 30 June 2022, <https://www.unocha.org/attachments/d8ddd3f-c312-48f9-96dc-625ac854b077/IHF%202021%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

²⁷ Michael Pérez, “‘Min Al-Mukhayyam’ (‘From the Camp’): Discourses of Difference and the Boundaries of Exile amongst Palestinian Refugees in Jordan,” *Anthropology of the Middle East* 16, no. 1 (June 2021): 13, <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2021.160102>.

²⁸ Joseph Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 12.

²⁹ Beverley Milton-Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Jordan: A Hashemite Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2001).

³⁰ Nicola Christine Pratt, *Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), 28.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Massad, *Colonial Effects*, 12.

³³ Pratt, *Embodying Geopolitics*, 28.

³⁴ Milton-Edwards and Hinchcliffe, *Jordan*, 15.

³⁵ Yann Le Troquer and Rozenn Hommery al-Oudat, "From Kuwait to Jordan: The Palestinians' Third Exodus," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (Spring 1999): 37–51, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.1999.28.3.00p0029p>.

³⁶ Geraldine Chatelard, "Jordan: A Refugee Haven," *Migration Policy Institute Online Journal* (2010): 9, <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00514403/document>.

³⁷ Ibid., 4.

³⁸ Ibid., 2.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Jordan: Operational Update*, January 2024, 1, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/jordan-operational-update-7188>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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- ⁹² The study defined "youth" as a "period of transition," a liminal phase of people who are no longer children and not yet adults. See Tom Hall, *Better Times than This: Youth Homelessness in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 117.
- ⁹³ Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency*.
- ⁹⁴ The linkage between girls' education and prestige has been widely discussed in the literature on Jordan. For a comprehensive review, see Mary Kawar, *Gender, Employment and the Life Course: The Case of Working Daughters in Amman, Jordan* (Amman: Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, 2000); Willy Jansen, "Gender," 473–90.
- ⁹⁵ Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes*, 35.
- ⁹⁶ Amal, interview by the author, 26 March 2019.
- ⁹⁷ It is important to note that employment does not always equate to financial independence, as other factors (beyond the scope of this paper) may affect an individual's ability to make an independent use of their salary.
- ⁹⁸ I am aware of the impact of class on the actual opportunities for young people to move and settle abroad. However, most of my participants from lower and middle classes relied on receiving a scholarship to be financially able to study abroad.
- ⁹⁹ Farah, interview by author, 31 March 2019.
- ¹⁰⁰ Lama, interview by author, 21 March 2019.
- ¹⁰¹ Haya, personal communication with the author, Al-al-Beit University, Mafraq, Jordan, September 2015–May 2016.
- ¹⁰² Reem, personal communication with the author, Al-al-Beit University, Mafraq, Jordan, September 2015–May 2016.

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¹⁰⁴ Maryam, interview by author, 3 April 2019.

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¹⁰⁶ Lana, interview by author, 30 March 2019.

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