

February 2020

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Recommended Citation

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

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss1/21>

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The Time to Question, Rethink and Popularize the Notion of 'Women's Issues': Lessons from Jordan's Popular and Labor Movements from 2006 to now

By Sara Ababneh¹

Abstract

Jordanian women were an integral part of the Jordanian Popular Movement (*al Hirak al Sha'bi al Urduni*, *Hirak* in short) protests in 2011/2012. Yet, despite their large numbers and presence, female protestors did not call for any of the commonly known 'women's issues' (*qadaya al mar'a*) which include fighting Gender Based Violence (GBV), legal reform, increasing women's political participation, and women's economic empowerment. This paper argues that the protestors' silence concerning most of the problems usually included in the list of 'women's issues' raises the question of how prevalent these issues are (or not) in the lives of Jordanian women. Drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse, insights from intersectional feminists and critical development studies, I argue that the composition of the Jordanian women's movement on the one hand, and how these women conceptualize women's rights discursively, as a result of how global discursive shifts were adopted in Jordan on the other hand, help explain why the list of women's issues ignores the lived realities of most Jordanian women. In detail, I examine who participated in the *Hirak* and who did not. I seek to understand the absence of members of the Jordanian Women's Movement through conducting a historical reading of this movement. In contrast, I study why women members of the Day Wage Labor movement participated in the *Hirak*. This contrast helps me think through what a list of women's issues that includes national and communal issues might look like. The paper ends with recent developments in Jordanian women's rights activism and asks whether intersectional understandings of womanhood are being considered.

Keywords: Jordanian Popular movement (*Hirak*), Arab Uprisings, women's issues, Jordanian Women's Movement, intersectionality, participant observation, interviews, participatory transformative feminist research.

Introduction

Jordanian women were active participants in the Jordanian Popular Movement (*al Hirak al Sha'bi al Urduni*, *Hirak* in short) protests in 2011/2012 and the labor protests that preceded them (2006-2010). Yet, despite their large numbers and presence, female protestors did not call for any of the commonly known 'women's issues' (*qadaya al mar'a*) which include fighting Gender Based Violence (GBV), legal reform, increasing women's political participation, and women's economic empowerment.² At the time of the protests this led many Jordanian activists

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² Protestors have called for social justice and economic rights (Ababneh, 2019, 55). As I show later on in the paper however, this is very different from the notion of economic empowerment used by women's rights activists and NGOs which mostly aim to empower women *from* their communities.

to argue that the HIRAK did not address women's concerns. Some even went as far as considering the HIRAK patriarchal (Jinisiyati Coalition Meeting, 2013). I argue that the protestors' silences concerning the problems usually included in the list of 'women's issues' raises the question of how prevalent these issues are (or not) in the lives of Jordanian women. Moreover, the inability of Jordanian women's rights activists to understand the HIRAK female and male protestors' demands as being gendered, and therefore concerning women, points to a crisis in current Jordanian women's rights discourse in which national or communal concerns are not seen as concerning women. In the global North, the struggle of indigenous women's rights activists and African American feminists to be included in the category of "women" has a long history, as will be elaborated on below. However, the lessons of intersectional feminism have not been taken up by the Jordanian Women's Movement, nor the development apparatus which currently provides the discursive framework for most women's rights work in Jordan.

To understand why HIRAKIS (HIRAK activists) refrained from making demands related to women's issues, I examine who participated in the HIRAK and who did not. Firstly, I study the absence of members of the Jordanian Women's Movement (hereafter JWM) through conducting a historical reading of this movement. In contrast, I study why women members of the Day Wage Labor movement participated in the HIRAK. This contrast helps me think through what a list of women's issues that includes national and communal issues might look like.

Centrally, this paper asks the following question: how has women's rights discourse in Jordan reached a point in which national and popular concerns are viewed as being unrelated to women? Based on over a hundred interviews conducted with HIRAK groups, Day Wage Labor Movement (DWLM) activists and women's organizations during and after 2011, this paper provides a re-reading of the academic literature of the JWM. As a feminist academic who is active in many discussions around gender and women's rights in Jordan, as well as in labor protests in Jordan, much of my fieldwork with the JWM was conducted through participant observation. I also interviewed ten women's rights activists (both current and past). Believing in engaged transformative feminist research (Joseph, 2014), in which research is part of a wider cause and research participants are asked to speak back to the research (Koopman, 2008), upon completion of this paper, I have presented my research paper to Jordanian women's rights activists (CSS, 2019).

I draw on poststructural theory, specifically, Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. In addition, I use an intersectional feminist lens to examine why the issues listed as 'women's' issues exclude the experiences and problems facing so many women in Jordan. Finally, I draw on critical development studies to highlight how NGOization – to use Islah Jad's adaptation of this term (Jad, 2004) shapes women's activism in Jordan.

'Women's Issues'

Let me first clarify my key term. The phrase '*qadaya al mar'a*', which translates into "the issues of woman" (in the singular), is a term used in both the Jordanian media, Jordanian women's organizations, and popular culture to speak about problems facing Jordanian women. While this term rarely appears in academic literature, I use it here to refer to the invisible list of issues on which most women's rights activism focuses. I classified the main projects, activities and research conducted by three active women's rights groups in Jordan, namely, the Jordanian National Committee for Women's Affairs (JNCW), the Jordanian Women's Union (JWU) and UN Women over the last ten years. Four main challenges from which women are mainly believed to suffer

emerge, namely: Gender Based Violence (GBV), patriarchal laws, lack of political representation/empowerment, and economic *disempowerment*. When examining UN and aid literature globally, these four categories also reappear as the key problems facing women (Khafagy, 2017; UNICEF, 2011). In this paper I use the term 'women's issues' to refer to the (invisible and unofficial) *list* of problems usually addressed in various initiatives and projects carried out by development, women's rights and international organizations.

The Jordanian Women's Movement

Amal Sabbagh defines a women's movement as follows: a "vague, catch-all phrase which means different things to different people... It can include any and all activities and organizations which have the aim of improving women's status and situation" (Turtle 1986: 361, cited in Sabbagh 2006, 29). Lawyer and women's rights activist Hala Ahed argues that while there is a women's movement in Jordan there is no feminist movement per se. Parts of the women's movement, she argues, are independent women's groups such as the Jordanian Women's Union and the Arab Women's Society. There are also semi-governmental and governmental organizations, however, which can be seen as connected to the status quo, or engaged in state feminism (Dababneh, 2005, 3). In addition, independent activists who are not part of any organized structure should also be seen as part of the JWM (Ahed, 2019, interview). Amenah al Zubi - the president of the Jordanian Women's Union - emphasizes that not all organizations working on women's issues necessarily share feminist principles. She is also hesitant to call the various groups and organizations a movement (Zubi, 2019b, interview). The distinction between a feminist movement and a women's movement is important. So is the question of whether these different groups and individuals share common goals, and their connection to the status quo.

For the purposes of this paper, I follow Sabbagh and Ahed's definition to include the work, whether coordinated or not, of all actors, organized in groups or as individuals, working on women's issues (however defined) to be part of the Jordanian Women's Movement (JWM). I am not making a value judgement confirming that what is referred to in the literature as the JWM is truly a movement, feminist, resists the status quo or not, or is grassroots. In fact, given the lack of coordination it is questionable if the JMW can really be considered a movement. Nor should *women's* movement indicate that the JMW is representative of all Jordanian women, shares certain (feminist or other) principles, or is based on grassroots mobilization. I use this functional definition (Lenz, 2010, 867) to be able to speak about the various groups and individuals whom the literature on the topic has considered to make up the JWM (Al-Atiyat, 2003; Al Tal, 1985; Brand, 1998; Dababneh, 2005; Massad, 2001). This enables me to examine the discourses those who have worked on women have engaged in, countered or produced.

Theoretical Framework

I mainly draw on poststructural theory. Specifically, I use Michel Foucault's notion of discourse. For Foucault discourse is not simply talk or narrative. Rather Foucault maintains that discourse is the productive combination of power/knowledge in which "a human being turns him or herself into a 'subject'" (Foucault, 2000, p. 327). Power structures are not separate, nor can they function without or apart from discourse. By enacting certain power/knowledge beliefs, subjects construct both themselves and certain realities. I use the term discourse to show how women's activists' understanding of women's issues have impacted their identities as women's rights

activists and the actions they have taken. However, in addition to impacting how women's rights activists acted themselves, the privileged subject position which most women's rights activists occupy in relation to women of more marginalized economic classes enables them to speak for and represent these women. In speaking about Orientalism as a hegemonic discourse, Edward Said, shows how hegemonic discourses emerge due to the unequal subject positions of actors.

Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman...He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but also to speak for her and tell his readers in what ways she was 'typically Oriental' ... Flaubert's situation of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem was not an isolated instance. It fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled (Said, 1978, p. 6).

Just like Kuchuk Hanem's missing voice in the discourse about herself, the discourse on women in Jordan is made with very little input from the majority of Jordanian women themselves.

I draw on feminist theories of intersectionality and seek to extend the insights of thinkers such as bell hooks and Chandra Mohanty to the Jordanian case to speak about the ability of people who occupy different subject positions to impact discourses which concern them. Intersectionality as a term was coined by Kimberle Williams Crenshaw to "denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences." (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 358). bell hooks and others have provided important critiques of feminist analyses which do not take intersectionality seriously (hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 1988). hooks argued against seeing certain issues as inherently good or bad for women. hooks critiqued white feminist groups for considering working as inherently empowering for women, and marriage as inherently oppressive (hooks, 1981, p. 82). For African American women, hooks argued, family was a key source of comfort, while labor has been anything but liberating. After all, slavery was uncompensated labor that ripped apart Black families. It is important to acknowledge what subject position a given woman occupies when thinking about what the list of problems are that she and members of her community face. Centrally, intersectionality is a framework which recognizes that people's experiences of privilege and marginalization shape their world view. Finally, I draw on critical development studies theory, mainly on Islah Jad's use of the term NGOization, which I define later on in the paper, to understand how the Jordanian discourse on women's issues has been shaped.

The Hirak and the Women's Question

The Arab popular protests of 2011 and 2012 saw hundreds of thousands of men and women take to the streets. Commentators do not disagree on the high number of female protestors (Khamis, 2011; Hasso and Salime, 2016). In Jordan, too, women were present in large numbers in the 2011/12 Hirak protests. In addition to the Day Waged Labor Movement (DWLM), workers and the movement of teachers demanding a union (Al-Sholi, 2015), many of the youth protestors in Amman were women. Groups such as *La sharaf fil jareema* ("there is no honor in crime") and *Jinsiyati haqun li wa li aylati* ("my nationality is my right and that of my family") also emerged alongside Hirak protests. However, these two groups on a whole did not participate in the

nationwide Friday protests with other Hirak groups. I will provide more details about the reasons for this later in the paper.

Apart from the last two groups, the high number of women protestors did not translate into demands being made that related to women specifically. More importantly, the general demands and chants were not explicitly gendered, meaning that ‘women’s issues’ were not incorporated into national demands. There are numerous reasons for this. Most importantly, however, was the absence of women’s rights activists who make up the JWM, with the exception of members of the Jordanian Woman’s Union.

The literature on the JWM focuses mostly on the role the Jordanian state played in fighting independent women’s groups and how state actions contributed to making the JWM an elitist movement (Al-Atiyat, 2003; Al Tal, 1985; Brand, 1998; Dababneh, 2005; Massad, 2001; Pratt, forthcoming). By examining the history of the JWM I show that not only state interference, but also discursive shifts in how women’s rights activists saw themselves and their work contributed to the current state of the JWM. In addition to understanding the class composition of JWM, I argue that we need to examine how state actions and international discourse shifts *together* helped produce the women’s movement as it understands itself and practices today.

Women’s Rights Discourses: A Historical Overview

To appreciate why the JWM for the most part did not participate in the 2011/12 Hirak, it is important to understand how the JWM emerged and changed over time. In this section I show how three factors contributed to this change, firstly, the composition of the JWM, secondly, the relationship between the Jordanian state and women’s groups, and thirdly, shifts in international discourse concerning women’s activism and how this international discourse was practiced in Jordan.

Historians of the JWM usually point to the visit of leading Egyptian women’s rights activist Huda Sharawi (1879-1947) to Prince (later King) Abdallah (1882-1951) in 1945 as the main event which initiated the formation of the JWM (Al-Atiyat, 2003; Al Tal, 1985; Dababneh, 2005; Sharawi and Badran, 1986).³ Sharawi, who was invited to Jordan by Jordan’s first woman lawyer Emily Bisharat whom she had met in the Arab Women’s Conference in Cairo in 1944 (Egyptian Women’s Union, 1944, Abu Ulbeh, 2019, interview), is said to have met with Prince Abdallah. During this visit she wondered why Jordan did not have a women’s union which was able to join the Arab Women’s Federation. The prince, not knowing that a similar union in fact existed, gave his approval and the Jordanian’s Women’s Federation (JWF) [*Jami’yat Al Itahat Al Nisa’i al Urduni*] was established on the 31st of May 1945, with Princess Musbah (1884-1961), Prince Abdallah’s wife, as its honorary president (Al Tal, 1985, p. 121). The working president was Princess Zain Al Sharaf (1916-1994), the wife of the later King Talal (1909-1972).

The federation was concerned with increasing women’s education, improving children’s health and helping poor mothers (Dababneh, 2005, p. 92). Joseph Massad comments that,

This society, like the social society, was based in Amman and did not have other branches...the bourgeois composition of both groups was a reflection of the newly emergent merchant class. (2001, p. 93)

³ The Jordanian Women’s Union (JWU) refutes this narrative, claiming that it was first women’s organization founded in 1945 under the name of the Arab Women’s Federation (Zubi, 2019a).

In the beginning the JWM, like many women's movements at this time, was led by elite women who saw their work mostly in terms of charity work towards poorer women. Women were mainly conceptualized as mothers, and the society's work aimed to help poor mothers in distress. These poor mothers were not part of the women's movement (the JWF in this case) but mainly recipients of the federation's charity.

The discourse on women used by women's rights organizations became more radical in the 1950s. In a context of rising pan-Arab and anti-colonial sentiments new women's groups emerged. The Women's Awakening League (*Rabitat al Yaqada Al Nisa'iyah*) was established as the women's group of the communist party in 1952 (Al-Atiyat, 2003, p. 59). Like the communist party, the Women's Awakening League opposed continued British presence in Jordan, called for women's suffrage and the end of British colonial politics in the region. This led John Bagot Glubb, the British commander of the Jordanian Army (the Arab Legion) to order the immediate closure of the group (Massad, 2001, p. 96). The league continued to work underground until it began working openly again in 1967 as *Jam'iyat al Nis'a al Arabiyyat* (the Arab Women's Society) (Dababneh, 2005, p. 101).

The second group which emerged in the fifties was the Arab Women's Union (AWU), *Itihad al Mar'ah al Arabiyya*. The story goes that in 1954, about 100 politically active women met in Amman to establish the AWU under the leadership of the first female lawyer in Jordan, Emily Bisharat (Dababneh, 2005, p. 96; Al Tal, 1985, p. 125; Pratt, 2015). The AWU asked to join the National Guard, focused on the rights of women in a much more explicit way, and started demanding the right of women to vote and be elected to parliament (Al Tal, 1985, p. 127). On the same day women with a primary education were given the right to vote in parliamentary elections in 1955, the federation went back to protest on the streets, calling for universal women's suffrage. On the international level, the federation promoted the Palestinian and Algerian case (Sayegh, 2018), boycotted any meeting led by Zionist women and supported women's struggles for independence all over the world (Al Tal, 1985, pp. 128-129). The AWU's slogan was "equal rights under one Arab nation" (Zubi, 2019b, interview).

The 1950s and 1960s thus saw further radicalization of the JWM. Many members of women's groups were simultaneously active in leftist and pan-Arab national liberation circles and political parties, as well as being women's rights activists. A big part of their activism was to end colonial and imperial interference in the newly independent Arab states. Many women worked on problems they were facing themselves and saw national liberation and anti-imperialism as part of their work as women's rights activists (Abu Ulbeh, 2019, interview). During this period, being a women's rights activist was not free of danger; women were targeted by secret service harassment, dismissed from work, threatened with imprisonment and sometimes even killed (Massad, 2001, p. 96). An example of an early women's rights martyr is Raja Abu Amashah, who was shot in Jerusalem while she was demonstrating against the Baghdad Pact (Sayegh, 1975, p. 31). During this period both the JWM and the state regarded women's work as political. Women activists engaged both in national as well as in women's struggles, albeit often prioritizing the national. As a result, the radical years of the JWM came to an abrupt end, when King Hussein declared martial law in 1957. The entanglement of women's groups with political parties and political work led the state to shut down the AWU alongside all political factions.

Starting in 1974 a third shift in the discourse in how women's organizations understood their mandate and determined their action occurred, from national liberation and women's suffrage to women's rights as a universal concept. This shift was triggered by preparations for the UN's women's decade. This was facilitated by changes in the international arena, most importantly the

1972 UN resolution 3010 which declared the year 1975 the Women's International Year.' King Hussein (1935-1999) wrote a letter regarding the enfranchisement of women. The letter included a royal decree changing the Electoral Law and finally giving all women the right to vote and run for parliamentary elections (a right, it must be noted, which could not be taken advantage of by men or women since the parliament was inactive, as the country was still under martial law) (Brand, 1998, pp. 124-125).⁴ Furthermore, in a gesture of good will, the Jordanian state wed the Arab Women's Union to resume its activities, which changed its name to the Society of Women's Federation (Union) in Jordan' (SWFJ) [*Jam'iyat al Itihad Al Nisai fil Urdun*] (Al Tal, 1985, p. 130).⁵ Secondly, the first female Minister, In'am al Mufti, was appointed as the minister of Social Affairs (Al Tal, 1985, p. 161). The new minister worked on establishing an umbrella organization for women's rights: The General Federation of Jordanian Women (GFJW). Initially the SWFJ welcomed this move. However, none of the members of the SWFJ were consulted or invited to join.⁶ Furthermore, in 1981 the Ministry of Interior wrote a letter to the SWFJ ordering it to shut down (Al Tal, 1985, p. 154). After Jordan 'democratized'⁷ in 1989, the SWFJ was allowed to operate again, albeit under a new name the Jordanian Woman's Union (hereafter JWU, *Itihad al Mar'a al Urduniyya*). By then most women's rights activism was managed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. Pressure on the JWU increased to also shift registration to the Ministry of Social Affairs. The JWU resisted until 2016 when the JWU received a letter informing them that henceforth they would no longer be registered under the Ministry of Interior as it had been before but under the Ministry of Social Development as it was renamed by then (Zubi, 2019b, interview).

As a result, the JWU is now governed by the Cooperatives Law nr.52 (2008). One of the clauses of the law prohibits any registered cooperative to replicate work that falls under the work of political parties (Jordanian Law of Cooperatives, 2008, article 3). If a cooperation is found in violation of this law, it risks being shut down. This means that now, the JWU is not allowed to participate in protests. Members can only go in their individual capacity.

The shift from being registered as part of the Ministry of Interior to being registered under the Ministry of Social Development points to another shift in discourse around women's rights. Namely, this shift is indicative of a (re)conceptualization of women's activism from being *political* (similarly to political parties) to becoming *social*. It is ironic that this increased interest in women nationally and internationally, depoliticized women's activism; that as international and national interest in 'women's issues' increased, women's rights were depoliticized. This depoliticization is also connected to women's work being seen as development work, and women's rights organizations becoming women's NGOs.

The fourth shift in discourse in women's activism was to conceptualize women's issues as problems of *development*. The UN started organizing for the UN World Conference on Women in

⁴ The King's decision to give women the right to vote is usually understood within the Monarchy's care to ensure outside (in this case US) support and satisfaction by engaging in what is perceived as modern reform.

⁵ It is important to note here that the change in names to 'in Jordan' rather than Arab points to the politicization of Jordanian identity post the events of Black September in 1970/71. This politicization meant that many women in Jordan no longer identified as Jordanian. This changing in name show that the JWM too was deeply affected by the politicization of identity in Jordan. To date no study has explored the impact of the politicization of 'Palestinian' vs. 'Jordanian' identity on the JWM.

⁶ The legal reason given for this exclusion was that the SWFJ was registered under the Ministry of Interior and therefore was not part of the Ministry of Social Development (Sabbagh, 2019, interview).

⁷ After nation-wide riots over austerity measures and subsidy lifting in 1989, king Hussein lifted martial law in 1989. This was accompanied resuming parliamentary life, namely the election of the lower house. In addition to critiques of how free and fair these elections have been since 1989, the other reason many do not consider these events to truly constitute democratization is because of the limited role the lower house plays in Jordanian politics.

Beijing in 1995.⁸ Those states wishing to participate in the Beijing conference were asked to form national councils for women's affairs. Jordan, wanting to participate, hurried to form the Jordanian National Council for Women's Affairs (JNCW). The mandate of these councils was to "integrate women more fully into *development*" (Brand, 1998, p. 158 [*emphasis added*], Sabbagh, 2006, 1). While hitherto 'women's issues' had been conceptualized as women's *rights*, now the main goal was to liberate women from the underdevelopment, or backwardness, of their (own) communities. Thus, it was no longer the states, the structures it had put in place, or the lack of rights that needed to be addressed or were considered as the root of the problem. Rather, it was the communities from which these women came. More precisely, the men of these communities became the main culprits in the new story of *women in development*.⁹ This development discourse is further solidified with the emergence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),¹⁰ especially article 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, as a guiding framework for UN and women's work (Al-Nims, 2019, interview).

NGOization followed as a mode of organizing women's rights activism. Islah Jad adapts the term coined in Latin America to speak about occupied Palestine. Jad defines NGOization as,

...the process through which issues of collective concern are transformed into 'projects' in isolation from the general context in which they are implemented and without taking into consideration economic, social and political factors affecting these projects....It also denotes a shift in women's activism from voluntarism to dependence on foreign funding; a shift in the personnel dealing with women's empowerment from grassroots rural and refugee cadres to middle class urban elites of professionals (2004, p. 12).

NGOization is a useful term to understand changes in the JWM. As a result of NGOization, rather than addressing issues of collective concern and thinking about the structural causes, many women's rights groups instead focused on isolated projects with no apparent connection to the regime and wider power structures (see Escobar 1995 for a more detailed critique of development politics). After structural readjustment programs were implemented in Jordan, there was an increase of 67% in NGOs from 1989-1994 alone (Harmsen, 2008). It was therefore no coincidence that demonstrators were unable to find a language which gendered wider national issues since the development discourse separated women's problems from wider communal and national struggles.

In Jordan modernization discourse, and the subsequent blaming of backward cultural norms for oppressing women, intersected with development discourse and NGOization. Many Jordanian women's rights activists are firm believers in modernization. They see modernity as the only way out, often blaming 'traditional' local communities for all ills (Amawi, 2000, p. 166) or

⁸ Active state interest in women's rights also led to increased royal interest in heading women's rights organizations. Princess Basma (b. 1951), the sister of the late King Hussein, emerged as the main patron of women's rights efforts in Jordan during this era (Al-Atiyat, 2003, p. 64).

⁹ It is important to point out the difference between the 'Women *in* Development' Approach and the Women and Development Approach. Proponents of the former believe that the problem women face is that they are excluded from development. The solution is thus to integrate women into development. This approach is taken on by international organizations such as the World Bank, the IMF and many international agencies (Peet and Hartwick, 2009, p.254-9).

¹⁰ For a fuller understanding on SDGs please see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

attacking Islamists (Ababneh, 2014). This acceptance of modernity is often coupled with an uncritical understanding of Western (imperial) involvement and development aid politics.

For example, many Jordanian women's rights activists adopt a discourse blaming all ills on 'tribalism' (see the National Strategy for Women's Empowerment in Jordan 2013-2017 prepared by the JNCW as an example). The Jordanian HIRAK was most active in economically marginalized governorates, places which many women's rights activists believed epitomized 'tribalism.' The suggestion to work with these 'tribal' groups was met with great outrage by most activists who saw these tribal women and men as the antithesis to the very modern state they wished to build (Massad, 2001, p. 52). In a Jinsiyati coalition meeting in which different coalition members had come together to think through how to get more support for the coalition, I suggested approaching different HIRAK factions. This suggestion was vehemently opposed by most of the women present who argued that it was because of these Jordanian *tribal* men that women were second class citizens (Jinsiyati Coalition Meeting 2013). These women's rights activists saw popular anti-imperial activists as being in opposing camps to themselves. Here the modernization discourse intersects with the quest for saving women *from* members of their communities (Abu-Lughod, 2002, Hammami, 2016; Joseph, 2018, Shalhoub Kevorkian, 2006, 2008, 2015; UN Women, 2016), rather than addressing communal issues facing both women and men, has been a main element of development discourses and initiatives.

Active state involvement, whether in terms of promoting certain types of women's activism or shutting down other types, in addition to shifts in international discourse on women's activism, affected how Jordanian female activists understood and practiced their struggle. Over the past seventy years members of the so called JWM reconceptualized themselves from givers of charity, to radical fighters for women's rights and national liberation, to development and NGO personnel. The shift in global discourse, coupled with the Jordanian regimes actively fighting independent and more radical women's groups, whom they often saw as connected to oppositional political parties, has led many of these groups to move from being voluntary revolutionary groups, to being a well-paid part of the status quo. While, some groups like the JWU still hold on to their voluntary structure, the laws under which they are forced to operate push them to an NGO framework. Finally, for most of its history the JWM was made up of middle to upper middle-class women from Amman. The movement did not include working class and poor urban and rural women, who represent the majority of Jordanian women. As a result, there has also not been a discursive push back to understand women's issues more intersectionally.

This is in stark contrast to the women and men active in labor movements since 2006. Most participants in labor protests were fighting for economic survival. Their activism was out of economic necessity. The next section examines why women joined the Day Wage Labor Movement (2006-2014). Through the example of the DWLM the paper will examine for what issues women involved in the HIRAK were fighting.

Learning from Workers: The Example of the Jordanian Day Wage Labor Movement

The Jordanian Day Wage Labor Movement (DWLM) first organized a protest in May 2006. This group was composed of employees in the public sector, mainly the Ministry of Agriculture (Abu Khalil, 2007; Awad, 2008; Jarrar, 2013; Ababneh, 2016). Unlike all other public sector civil servants, day wage laborers are hired on a daily basis (Ababneh, 2016, p. 92). This means that they do not receive any of the benefits of public sector employees. They are also not eligible to any of the rights given to workers in Jordan under Jordanian labor law. What is

interesting about the DWLM for the purposes of this paper is the high number of women who participated in the movement and who took on leadership roles. Apart from the leader Mohammad Snayd,¹¹ all the other spokespeople of the movement were women. After 2012 the number of women surpassed that of men (Ababneh, 2016). More importantly, at the request of its female membership, this movement staged a sleep-in in front of the royal court. During this sleep-in, women from governorates all over Jordan spent the night alongside their male colleagues. I have argued elsewhere that this constitutes one of the most radical forms of social and cultural protest in Jordanian history (Ababneh 2016, p. 101).

Yet, significantly, the movement did not make demands for *women workers per se*. Instead, the DWLM demanded that *day wage workers* be hired permanently, that they get benefits like other workers, that labor laws be applied to them and to increase the minimum wage to a living wage. When Mohammad Snayd went to a workshop organized and attended by many in the JWM and asked the attendees why they had not supported the women during their sleep over, he simply received blank looks. None of the main women's rights activists thought it was part of the mandate of their group to work with these women and men (Ababneh, 2016, p. 87). The issue was dismissed as being unrelated to women since it was a 'worker's issue.'

Amani,¹² a mother of four who was hired in the directorates of the Ministry of Agriculture in Ajloun, a city in the north of Jordan, told me that she joined the movement because of the sense of the injustice and oppression she felt after she was hired and then let go only three months later. "How can they tell me to come and work and fire me three months later" (Amani, 2012, interview). She did not feel that she was discriminated against as a woman, but as a worker. Hanan, who was hired as an engineer on a day wage basis in the directorate of agriculture in the city of Irbid, said that her colleagues who were hired in the civil service all received numerous bonuses and as a result, much higher salaries than herself (Hanan, 2012, interview). She was mostly concerned with being paid a salary akin to others in her field. She clarified to me that she received the same salary as male day-waged engineers. She was not paid less because she was a woman, but because she was a day wage worker. Ruwaida joined the movement after she was let go only three months after she had started working as a day wage worker. She had recently divorced her husband and her income was crucial for her to be able to plan a future. She argued that her salary "was security" (Ruwaida, 2012, interview). She maintained that it was her right as a public sector employee to have job security. While Amani, Hanan and Ruwaida all experienced their struggle as women, the reason they gave for joining the DWLM did not include any of the (listed/assumed) women's issues. Surely, Ruwaida and Hanan's insistence that they were entitled to wages and job security can be read as their struggle towards economic 'empowerment,' one of the problems on the list of women's issues. However, this empowerment was not a liberal one in which they wanted to be empowered as individual women who are disempowered *by* their communities. As Mohammad Snayd (2012, interview) explained,

These women often support their entire families. There is real suffering in their homes. When these [women] were dismissed [from their job] it was a huge hit for them and every household in which they lived; to every child in this house. It was not [just a hit] for the [female] worker individually, as much as it was a hit for every

¹¹ Mohammad Snayd (b. 1975) was the founder and official spokesperson of the DWLM.

¹² All names were changed at the request of the study participants. From January 2012 to the end of 2014, I conducted interviews with women and men active in the DWLM. I mostly traveled to the respective directorates of Agriculture in which the participants worked and interviewed them there.

child and everyone who depended on this salary. There was one [woman] whose salary paid for the rent ...another for her brother's university fees.

So yes, the women in question were motivated by economic empowerment, or rather economic survival. But this economic struggle was not theirs alone, and while it certainly had gendered dimensions, the women struggled for economic survival for themselves and their *communities*. The female DWLM activists' struggle was not one against the men of their community, but one for themselves *within* their communities *and* for themselves and their communities. As Amal (2012, focus group) put it during a focus group discussion in Jerash:

Through my job I can help my family. I help my mother. I help my father. I am different from them now. My father is unemployed and in hospital. He has leukemia. The situation of my family is bad. No one in in my family is active/productive [*muntij*], except for me.

Sukaina distinguished between herself and between women who can use their salaries to buy things for themselves (Sukaina, 2012, interview). She noted that for her it was simply about getting through the month: buying food, paying for transportation and paying all those, back, who had loaned her money the previous month. She distinguishes between her own experience and what she imagines are the experiences of other working [middle class] woman who Sukaina believes can use their salaries on themselves. All the women examined certainly experienced their economic marginalization as women. But they also experienced it as members of economic marginalized communities.

When asked what the main problems they faced were, the female DWLM members listed problems they shared with members of their communities, mainly economic problems such as poverty, not having job security, not receiving living wages, and lack of access to adequate health services, and education. Surely, they experience these problems from a gendered perspective, but on a whole these problems are not included on the 'women's issues' list. Rather than arguing that these problems are not gendered, I argue that women's rights activists in Jordan fail to construct a gendered analysis of these problems because they are dismissed from the outset as communal (i.e. male problems).

When Jordanians were asked what the most pressing problems they faced were, women and men both responded by pointing to economic problems such as unemployment, poverty and high living expenses (See table below, by Center for Strategic Studies, 2017).

Jordanian Women's Responses to the Most Important Problem Facing Jordan Today	
Unemployment	23.8
Poverty	20.0
High Prices and Expensive Living	24.5
General Economic Situation	17.3
General Corruption (Nepotism)	3.7
Internal and External Security and Political Challenges	1.8
Social Service Problems	4.3
Refugee Crisis and Foreign Workers	3.6
No Problems	.7
Other	.3
Total	100%
Source: 'Government Performance Evaluation Report' (Center for Strategic Studies, 2017)	

The aim of this paper has not been to claim that the problems on the list of women's issues are not pressing. Rather, it is to challenge the theoretical assumptions underpinning the concept of women's issues. The problem with the list of 'women's issues' is that only the problems which women do *not* share with their communities are on the list

The problems which make it to the list are those problems which are left when women do not face any type of marginalization other than that due to gender. What is left unnoted here is privilege. This conceptualization of 'women's issues' assumes that privilege does not affect gender. No effort is made to understand gender intersectionally—that we experience our gender based on all the multiple subject positions that we occupy. Poor Jordanian women experience their womanhood differently to rich Jordanian women because of their poverty, while they experience their poverty differently to poor men because of their gender. A financially privileged woman has a very different experience of her womanhood than a struggling working-class single mother. The privileged woman has no greater claim to womanhood. Just as marginalization affects the experience of gender so, too, does privilege. The list of women's issues is a list which results when one intersects privilege with gender.

A New Phase?

In the summer of 2018 thousands of Jordanian women and men took to the streets to protest the newly proposed tax law by the Jordanian government. Women's rights organizations were among workers' unions and professional syndicates as well as youth organizations. At the time various women's groups organized talks to show the unfair tax burden of working women and single mothers (Ababneh, 2018). The JNCW took an active part in these discussions, as did the JWU and other women's organizations. Despite this active involvement of JWM activists this did not translate into shifting the discourse on women's issues or on shifting the national protest discourse on taxation to include gendered concerns.

Similarly, when the teacher's union called for a general strike in September 2019¹³ women's rights activists and organizations organized in support for female and male teachers. Individual women's rights activists led civil society group solidarity efforts and wrote and gathered signatures for a statement in support of the strike and the teacher's union. However, despite their acts in solidarity, the language used to express solidarity was not gendered. Unlike other social movements like *Talaat* in occupied Palestine, a movement that emerged in protest of the violent murder of Isra Ghreib by her relatives, Jordanian women's rights activists were unable to connect issues of the nation to women's issues. The gendered way in which low teacher's salaries affect female teachers differently to male teachers was not highlighted by women's rights activists. Nor was the teachers' strike seen as a women's issue. Nonetheless, women's rights activists, perhaps for the first time since the 1950s, saw it as part of their mandate to join a national struggle which cannot be seen as neatly fitting the list of women's issues.

Conclusion

In this paper I asked how women's rights discourse in Jordan was able to reach a point in which the concerns raised by female and male HIRAK protestors in 2011/2012 were viewed as being unrelated to women. Through a historical reading of the JWM, I have shown that this crisis is not only the result of state interference in the movement, but also an outcome of shifts of how international discourses on women's rights were practiced by JWM groups and activists. Women's rights discourse has shifted from charity at the beginning of the 20th century, to radical anti-colonial and women's rights struggles in the 1950s and 60s, to seeing 'women's issues' through a development lens from the 1990s onwards. As a result, women who were active in the JWM were unable to see the struggle of those women who partook in the HIRAK protests as gendered. Doing so, the main problems women in Jordan face have remained off the radar of the JWM and women's rights discourse.

Three challenges emerge from this discursive blind spot. Firstly, women's rights activists fail to stand in solidarity with women in popular movements, and by extension fail to address the most pressing issues these women face. Secondly, this depoliticizes women's issues by failing to address the wider power structures which marginalize women. Thirdly, by dismissing communal issues as being unrelated to women, communal and national concerns remain understood as men's issues and are conceptualized based solely on male experiences.

While the literature on intersectionality has provided rich insights into how women's issues intersect with wider communal issues (Carbado et al., 2013, p. 303; Crenshaw, 1991) the lessons from this body of literature have not entered development discourse in Jordan. It is necessary to recognize that as a result of neo-liberal politics entire communities in Jordan are forced to struggle for economic survival. This is, without question, the biggest *issue* facing Jordanian women. By excluding this problem, women's rights activists are not forced to confront and dismantle, or even just critique, the main power structures that be. Focusing on the issues women do not share with their communities, Jordanian women's rights activists are able to stay clear of a more radical critique and struggle such as neo-liberal economic structures and the ruling system.

While there has been a recent shift in individual women's rights activists joining wider communal struggles such as the tax law protests in 2018, demanding the release of political prisoners in 2019, and supporting teacher's strike in 2019, the JWM has not been able to change

¹³ The teacher's union called for a strike to increase the basic salary they receive.

the discourse around these issues to shed the light on how these issues are in fact gendered. Neither have these events triggered a wider discussion on the list of women's issues or have resulted in including economic survival and the struggle for social justice to the list. The task for women's activists and organizations now is to understand how popular communal concerns and battles are gendered, and to join the struggle against the very power structures which produce these problems.

Author's Note

I would like to thank Amal Sabbagh for her continued insight, guidance, and mentorship; Hala Ghosheh for first asking me to present and research the Jordanian women's movement; Suad Joseph for caring so deeply and introducing me to transformative participatory gendered research; Lila Abu Lughod for problematizing the politics of 'saving Arab women' from their communities; Marwa Sharafaldin for pointing to the messiness of activism; Tanya Lawrence for not tiring to listen to even the smallest development in my arguments; SIT and my IHP students for their great questions and insights; all my CSS interns for their help in researching, transcribing and caring about the topic; and Shadaab Rahemtulla for having read, edited and thought about this paper more than anyone else. I want to also express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer, whose feedback and reflections greatly strengthened the article. Finally, I would like to thank all the women and men who struggled and still struggle to make Jordan a more just place. I dedicate this paper to the late Rula Qawwas who led the struggle with love and compassion.

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