

Internal Migration of Women for Work in Jordan

By Fida Adely Sumayah¹, a 35-year-old engineer working in Amman, had been commuting from her village in the north for 10 years, a commute that could take as much as two hours. After 10 years of this daily journey, she finally convinced her parents to let her live in Amman, and now lives in an apartment that she shares with two other women.

“I made a revolution at home,” she says, “so they would agree.” Although she explained that the move made little difference as she often stayed with friends in Amman because of her long commute and her parents barely saw her anyway.

While doing research in 2011, I met several single women who had migrated to Amman for work and career opportunities. I became increasingly interested in their motivations to migrate and their experiences in Amman, and commenced on a research project that tries to capture their stories. While it is very difficult to know precisely how many single women move to Amman for work, it is clearly a phenomena on the rise and one that can tell us a lot about the effects of education, neoliberal economic policies, and shifting labor dynamics, as well as socio-cultural changes underway in Jordan. **Who are these women?**

Since 2011, we have interviewed 37 women who came to live and work in Amman². These women hail from all over the country: Irbid, Kerak, Mafraq, Tafleeh, Ajloun, Shobak and surrounding villages. In our interviews, we have asked them why they came to Amman, if they were met with any opposition from their families, and how they have fared since they arrived. We also discussed hopes and plans for further education, marriage, and professional growth.

There is much that these women share. They have been academically successful in a public school system, which tracks the brightest students into math and science. As a result, quite a number of them have majored in what are considered “STEM” (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields.

They have university degrees and in a few cases graduate degrees. **Field of education**

The women in our study are overwhelmingly employed in the private sector (75%)³ and many talked about their migration in terms of limited employment opportunities in the governorates, especially in the private sector. “*The types of opportunities in the governorates are really bad,*” says Ruweida, a thirty-year-old living and working in Amman in the IT sector. “*Unfortunately we call these governorates cities but in reality they don’t surpass the rural threshold, in terms of facilities, development and services. Employment is very limited there; they’re limited to the public sector. Families are reassured in regards to the public sector because of the job security, but a person that works in this sector will feel that their opportunities to grow and advance are minimal.*”

All of the women talked about their migration as driven by the need to “use my education.” As Sameera, a 24-year-old engineer put it, “*I studied engineering, so it would be a shame if I just sat at home and*

there are no opportunities [near my village]. It's very rare to impossible, where would I work? I mean you study for 5 years, and 12 years of excellent grades at school not so you could end up at home."

While some of the women reported that they would prefer to live closer to their families, all agreed that the career opportunities outside of Amman were limited. Of the women we interviewed working in the public sector in Amman, four of them worked at government ministries in higher-level positions not available in the governorates.

Rania is a 24-year civil engineer from the North who was hired by a refugee agency soon after graduating from university and offered a very competitive salary. She has two siblings studying at university (a sister and a brother) and she gives about 20 percent of her salary to her family to help pay for her siblings' education. While her salary is relatively high, she says it is difficult to save money while also helping her family but she is confident she will be able to in the future.

Rania talked about her desire for financial independence, which required that she work. While very few of the women initially went to Amman for social reasons, many talked about becoming accustomed to life in Amman and the opportunities it provided for better services, leisure spaces, as well as opportunities to meet a variety of people from diverse backgrounds.

While national female labor force participation rates are relatively low at around 15% for women ages 15 and up⁴, these macro statistics mask significant variability in the working lives of women in Jordan.⁵ For example, the labor force participation rate of unmarried university graduates is 53 percent.⁶ For university graduates "ever married" the employment rate is 43 percent. While all of the women we interviewed were single, some have subsequently married. Of the few that have married that we have stayed in touch with, only one has left the workforce thus far. Some of the women in our sample are of the age that it is not likely they will marry (four were over 35). Based on national statistics, this makes it likely that they will stay in the labor force.

Their Families Most of the parents of these young women had at least some secondary education. Quite a number of the women have at least one parent who has gone to university. This is not surprising given high educational access rates in Jordan. Nevertheless, some parents had no education or only a few years of formal schooling. Still, based on our analysis thus far, very little stands out about their family and class backgrounds that we might point to as an explanatory factor for their migration, and their families' acceptance of their re-location for work.

Clearly women could not be making this move to Amman without the agreement of their families. We met only one woman who stayed in Amman against her family's wishes (her family wanted her to come back home after she had been in Amman for a few years), and after a period of conflict in which they did not speak to each other, her family eventually accepted her decision to stay in Amman. Some women had full support and encouragement for the move to Amman from the start, while some families (or a particular family member) needed convincing. Others begrudgingly accepted their daughter's decision to live and work in Amman at first.

In a few instances, women who had been commuting to Amman for work, convinced their families to let

them live in Amman because of the strain and cost of commuting, such as Sumaya.

The economics of their migration

Many with whom I have discussed this research assume that economic need is the primary driver for their migration. The assumption is that these women are helping to support their families. In our sample, the economic story is quite varied. While most of the women help their families occasionally with anything from small gifts, to helping to pay for a home repair or covering the educational expenses of a sibling for one semester for example, fewer than 10 women in this sample sent home a regular amount on a monthly basis. On the contrary, quite a number of the women relied on help from their families or friends to cover their monthly expenses when they first moved to Amman, as the cost of living in Amman was too high.

Dormitory rooms can be quite expensive relative to entry level salaries, ranging from about 150 JD per month to as much as 280 JD for a private room in a nicer dormitory.⁷ Indeed, the high costs of these dormitories have pushed some women to move into their own apartments, usually with other women. In many instances, women's financial difficulties were the result of challenges they faced in managing their own money when they first came to Amman, particularly given all the new leisure and consumption possibilities in Amman, as well as transportation costs. According to those we interviewed, some young women eventually gave up and went home due to these financial challenges. Others borrowed from friends and even employers, concealing their financial difficulties from their families, less they be pressured to come home.

For women who had been in Amman for several years, their financial situation might change significantly over time. So while they might be dependent on family for meeting their expenses at first, they may become more financially independent with time and, in some cases, begin helping to support their families. While there has been [some media coverage](#) in Jordan of young women whose families have been taking their salaries and preventing them from marrying, among the 38 women we interviewed, only one conveyed that she felt coerced to give up her salary to her family (she eventually married nonetheless).

A few, from significantly less well off families, talked about their obligation to help their families (e.g., younger siblings or widowed mother) but did not frame this as forced upon them but rather as their responsibility. For example, Jihan, a 30-year-old nurse, helped put one of her younger brothers through university, and continues to support this brother financially. Tharwa, a 33-year-old engineer from a town in the south, makes a good salary now and sends money home to her family every 3 months. She also helped her older brother repair his home. However, as I stated above, the majority of women only help their parents occasionally. The differences may be class-based in that young women whose families are struggling financially may feel a greater responsibility to help their families, and may not give sufficient consideration to their own long-term security. For some women who are getting older (mid-late 30s), and have not married, short-term financial independence is no longer a concern as they are self-sufficient. Some have even been able to purchase cars or pay for a master's degree. However, since

most still have salaries relatively low to the cost-of-living in Amman, longer-term financial security is a concern. For example, a number of women in their 30s mentioned that they have begun thinking about buying their own home. Some talk about their desire to go to the Gulf States where the salaries are better, so that they can save for the future.⁸**Final thoughts**This article only touches on the experiences and concerns on young and educated Jordanian women who have migrated to Amman to live and work. While each has their own personal tale of why and how they have made this progression, clearly part of this story is about broad socio-economic shifts in Jordan, namely increased education for women and evidence that females are outperforming males educationally. In addition, the growth in the number and type of employment opportunities in the private sector, almost exclusively concentrated in Amman, has also created employment opportunities that are appealing to educated young women and their families, at least while they are single. Finally, shifting attitudes about women and work, and female mobility, are clearly part of the context that enables families to send their daughters from Irbid, Kerak, Ajloun, , Mafrq, Tafileh, and so on to Amman.**Portraits of Some of the Women Interviewed**

Maryam is 27 and currently works as an IT specialist for an international organization in Amman, where she has lived in a dormitory since 2010. Originally from Irbid, she has been continuously employed in the private sector since coming to Amman, but she says it is a struggle to save any money, and sometimes she must ask for the assistance of her family to pay her bills. Nevertheless, she has found her experiences in Amman to be overwhelmingly positive and finds it hard to imagine living elsewhere now.

This article represents just some preliminary reflection on a large project on gender, education and labor in Jordan. The author is currently working on a book related to this topic.

1. All names used are pseudonyms in order to maintain the privacy of individuals who have been interviewed.
2. Twenty-nine (29) of the initial interviews were undertaken by a research assistant, herself a young professional who had migrated to Amman for work and lived in a dormitory. Of these twenty-eight, I personally conducted follow up interviews with eight women. In addition, I conducted additional interviews with eight women.
3. Sixty-one percent of single university graduates work in the private sector, while their married counterparts tend to be concentrated in the public sector. Assaad, Ragui. (2014). *The Jordanian Labour Market in the New Millennium*. Oxford University Press.
4. Measures of labor force participation are relatively standardized. It is worth noting, however, that 90% of females between 15-17 were in school in 2011, and 50% of 18-22 year olds were in post-secondary education of some kind (UNESCO).
5. See the earlier work of Mary Kawar on single working women living at home. Kawar emphasizes the importance of understanding labor patterns in relation to life course. Kawar, Mary (1997) *Gender, employment and the life course: The case of working daughters in Amman, Jordan*. PhD thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom).
6. Assaad (2014).
7. All of these dormitories are officially student dormitories. In 2013, the General Amman Municipality reported 22 licensed female dormitories in Amman, 12 of which were licensed after 2000. While the number of female student dormitories has increased, it is not possible to attribute all of this growth to female labor migration, as there may be other reasons for this growth.
8. While I have not pursued this line of research yet, I know a few young women who have gone to the Gulf to teach, and recently met three Jordanian women working in the IT sector in the Gulf. This external migration, and its possibility, is I suspect a product of similar socio-economic forces.
9. Quite a number of the women interviewed came to Amman as trainees first, either because this was required for their degree (as is the

case for engineering students) or because “trainee” was the only job they could obtain. They are paid very little as trainees and, as such, must depend on family to cover expenses while in training.