



Ajloun Needs Assessment

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Introduction

Ajloun governorate is located in the north of Jordan with an estimated population of 194,700 in 2019.¹ Despite being home to various natural and historical tourist attractions, the governorate has one of the highest poverty rates across the country, with three of its sub-district classified as poverty pockets.² The unemployment rate in Ajloun reached 18.8% in the second quarter of 2019. In that same period, 55.7% of males and 19% of females were economically active.³

High unemployment rates can be attributed to several reasons, one of which is the lack of private sector establishments and investments and thereby high dependency on public sector jobs.⁴ Despite the tourism potential of the area, Ajloun's tourism infrastructure is still poorly developed, failing to take full advantage of its significant natural, historical and cultural assets. Various challenges preventing the development of the governorate's sector include, the lack of a clear definition of Ajloun tourism offerings, attractions, and services; the lack of proper infrastructure to access and experience the area; the lack of tourism-industry experience of the local communities; and the lack of adequate positioning and branding to attract tourists.

National and international civil society organizations (CSOs) and government institutions are working to address the challenges in Ajloun, particularly those relating to poverty and unemployment. Most of the initiatives in the past have focused on promoting economic growth and business development in the governorate through the utilization of available resources.

This assessment is part of a larger project implemented by the King Hussein Foundation (KHF) that aims to help Community-based Organizations (CBOs) working on women and youth empowerment in Ajloun to operate more effectively and professionally by enhancing their institutional, operational and advocacy capacities. The project will also facilitate networking between CBOs and local authorities to voice community needs to the government.

The main objective of the assessment is to **identify the social, political and economic needs of women and youth in Ajloun**. It comprises the following components:

- A literature review on the socio-economic background of Ajloun as well as women and youth related initiatives conducted;
- Findings of 400 surveys completed by workers and beneficiaries of CBOs;
- Findings of 10 focus group discussions with male and female youth;
- Findings of 7 in-depth interviews with key stakeholders.

Background

Overview, location and demographics

The governorate of Ajloun is located in the north of Jordan, 76 km north west of the Capital Amman. It is bordered by Irbid Governorate to the north and west, Jerash Governorate to the east, and Balqa Governorate to the south. Ajloun is divided into two counties, two districts, Skahra and Orjan, and five municipalities, Greater Ajloun, New Kofranjah, Junaid, Oyoon, and Al-Shifa.⁵ The governorate had a total estimated population of 194,700 in 2019.⁶

While Syrian refugees are concentrated in the northern and central region of Jordan, Ajloun has not been affected like other governorates such as Mafraq and Irbid, which were hosting over 160,000 and 130,000 Syrian registered refugees respectively. The number of Syrian refugees residing in Jerash and Ajloun governorates is considerably lower, over 9,000 and 6,500 respectively.⁷

Poverty, employment and livelihoods

According to the 2015 Human Development Report, the poverty rate in Ajloun was 25.6%, with 37,752 poor individuals and 5,232 poor households. The poverty rate in Ajloun was among the highest across the governorates. The poverty gap metric, which is an estimate of depth of poverty was also among the highest at 6.3%. Ajloun has three sub-district that were classified as poverty pockets (Orjan, Qasabet Ajloun and Skahra).⁸

The unemployment rate in Ajloun reached 18.8% in the second quarter of 2019 (39.4% for females and 12.5% for males). The economic activity rate, which includes employed persons and those seeking work, was 55.7% for males and 19% for females during that same quarter.⁹ Data shows that of those employed, 48.3% work in the public sector, 17.2% in education, 10.5% in transportation and warehousing, 1.8% in agriculture and 1.4% in tourism.¹⁰

High unemployment rates can be attributed to several reasons, including, the concentration of the private sector in the capital and not the smaller governorates, the high dependency on public sector jobs and the scarcity of new opportunities and the lack of investment. The largest proportion of Jordan's workforce is concentrated in the central region, where ministries, public service institutions, and official departments are located, as well as factories, private interests, and investments.¹¹

Tourism

Ajloun is home of various natural and historical tourist attractions. Two destinations stand out: Ajloun's Castle, a 10th century Crusader fortress and the most important heritage site in the governorate, and Ajloun Forest Reserve, one of the eight nature reserves of the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature and a destination for ecotourism. Yet, despite the potential of the area, Ajloun's tourism infrastructure is still poorly developed, failing to take full advantage of its significant natural, historical and cultural assets. Various challenges preventing the development of the governorate's tourism sector have been identified. They relate to the lack of a clear definition of Ajloun tourism offerings, attractions, and services; the lack of proper infrastructure to access and experience the area; the lack of tourism-industry experience of the local communities; and the lack of adequate positioning and branding to attract tourists.¹²

Recent studies on Jordan's tourism sector consider 'cultural and heritage tourism' and 'adventure tourism' as the most promising tourism sectors for support and development in the country.¹³ This emphasizes the potential of Ajloun's ecological and historical sites to boost the governorate's development and transform it into a tourist destination. However, as noted by His Majesty King Abdullah, there is still need for tangible progress and for a considerable development of Ajloun's infrastructure, facilities, products and services in order to attract visitors and have positive repercussions on Ajloun residents.¹⁴

Development initiatives

National and international civil society organizations (CSOs) and government institutions are working to address the challenges in Ajloun, particularly those relating to poverty and unemployment. Most of the initiatives have focused on promoting economic growth and business development in the governorate through the utilization of available resources. They include initiatives that seek to promote women and youth employment opportunities, and to support the establishment and development of businesses. A smaller number of projects aimed to improve service provision and to increase the engagement and participation of youth and women in politics.

Most of the projects reported targeted women, with fewer addressing youth's needs. This resonates with the findings of UNFPA's mapping exercise in 2015, which showed that Ajloun is one of the governorates with the least number of activities being offered to youth by CSOs, national and international NGOs, and informal youth groups.¹⁵

Economic empowerment initiatives

Different development initiatives have been designed to address the issues of poverty and unemployment in Ajloun. These included projects that sought to support the establishment of businesses, promote women and youth employment opportunities, and improve their livelihoods.

In 2015, the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation in partnership with the Regional Development Directorate of the Ministry of Interior inaugurated the first Business Development Incubator in Ajloun. The goal of the incubator is to provide business development and mentorship services to entrepreneurs and community based organizations willing to establish and develop business initiatives in the tourism and food processing industries.¹⁶ A Women's Economic Empowerment Unit has also been established in Ajloun by the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF) with the purpose of issuing licenses for home production projects and networking to market the products.¹⁷

Some organizations have conducted training sessions in Ajloun with the aim of helping women to develop different vocational, entrepreneurial, leadership and life skills. Examples of such training projects included the 'Leadership Skills and Economic Empowerment' training conducted by the Arab Women Organization (AWO) and funded by IM Swedish Development Partner;¹⁸ and the UNESCO entrepreneurial and innovation project implemented by community based organizations (CBOs) with the support of Jordan River Foundation.¹⁹

There have also been efforts to reduce poverty and vulnerability in rural areas, with a particular focus on women. Some organizations have opted for facilitating access to credit and micro-loans to support entrepreneurial projects and create sustainable livelihoods. For example, the Jordan River Foundation implemented two initiatives during 2017-2018 under the Rural Economic Growth and Employment

Project, funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), one that seeks to develop and support saving and credit associations, and another that aims to provide business mentoring and marketing for farmer groups.²⁰ JRF also launched in 2018 a project that aims to offer women and youth access to finance through saving and loan groups.²¹ Similarly, over the last ten years, the Agricultural Credit Corporation provided low-interest loans to agricultural and production projects through the Islamic Murabaha system, and supported rural women empowerment projects at zero interest.²²

Other organizations have promoted socioeconomic development programs for women empowerment that rely on the rich natural resources of Ajloun governorate. Examples of these are the “Dar Nemeh” project in Kufranjeh, an initiative led by the Princess Taghrid Institute and funded by UNDP that engages local women to harvest, distillate, and sell native aromatic plants,²³ or the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) handicraft workshops in Ajloun Forest Reserve, which includes the Soap House, the Biscuit House and the House of Calligraphy.²⁴

Other initiatives, although scattered, aim to promote the economic development in other sectors. These include the royal initiative implemented in Kufranjeh, Anjara, and Junaid, which supports establishing productive branches for existing and new factories to provide girls with suitable job opportunities near their place of residence;²⁵ and the Sustainable Energy and Economic Development project, funded by Global Affairs Canada, which aims to promote sustainable and inclusive economic growth through renewable energy technologies and supports the employment of women in the renewable energy sector.^{26 27}

Political empowerment

Few projects focusing on political engagement have been carried out in the governorate. Examples of such projects are the Youth Project for Women’s Political Participation in Ajloun, implemented by Intermediaries Changing Center for Sustainable Development to address society’s negative perceptions towards women’s political participation by mobilizing youth to support women candidates in the 2017 municipal elections in Ajloun;²⁸ and the USAID Takamol Jordan Gender programme, which trained youth to become leaders and gender champions.²⁹

Social initiatives

Different community centers have been established in the governorate to provide social services to the community there. This includes the Family Counselling Center and the Family Protection Department branch in Ajloun, which opened in 2017 and 2018 respectively.^{30 31} The first center provides health services and psychological support to refugee and Jordanian families, whereas the second is in charge of the response to cases of violence against women and children within the governorate.

The Jordan Hashemite Fund (JOHUD) has two community development centers in Ajloun, the Wahadneh Centre and the Kofranjah Centre. Among its activities, the centers provide basic skills training to young people and support them in finding jobs. Youth and women’s committees have been established to help the fund reach out to local woman and young people and to identify community needs.³²

Conclusion

While several projects and initiatives have been carried out in the governorate of Ajloun, it is difficult to address the economic needs especially due to the weak private sector. Even with its potential for eco-tourism, unemployment continues to be a major problem for women and especially youth. Based on the available literature it is safe to say that while projects are still needed to empower and engage women in Ajloun, even more is needed for youth, especially when it comes to economic empowerment and livelihoods.

Methodology

Design

This assessment aims to identify the social, economic and political needs of women and youth in Ajloun. To do so, qualitative and quantitative research was conducted as follows:

- 327 surveys with beneficiaries of CSOs. The sample was randomly selected through visits to CBOs and CSOs in Ajloun.
- 73 surveys with employees working in 32 different organizations in Ajloun. The selection criteria for the CSOs were as follows:
 - The CSO must be located within the geographical area of the Ajloun governorate;
 - The CSO must have as their main beneficiary target women or youth or both; and,
 - The CSO must be in contact with municipal or local or decentralized authorities, or should not have any objections to such contacts in future.
- 10 focus groups discussions (FGD) with male and female youth
- 7 in-depth interviews (IDI) with key stakeholders including the Deputy Manager of the General Union Voluntary Societies in Ajloun, a representative from the Ministry of Education, a female Parliament member from Ajloun, a female municipality member from Kofranjah, the Chief of political parties in the Parliament, the Chief of Women's Department in the Parliament and a political journalist from Ajloun.

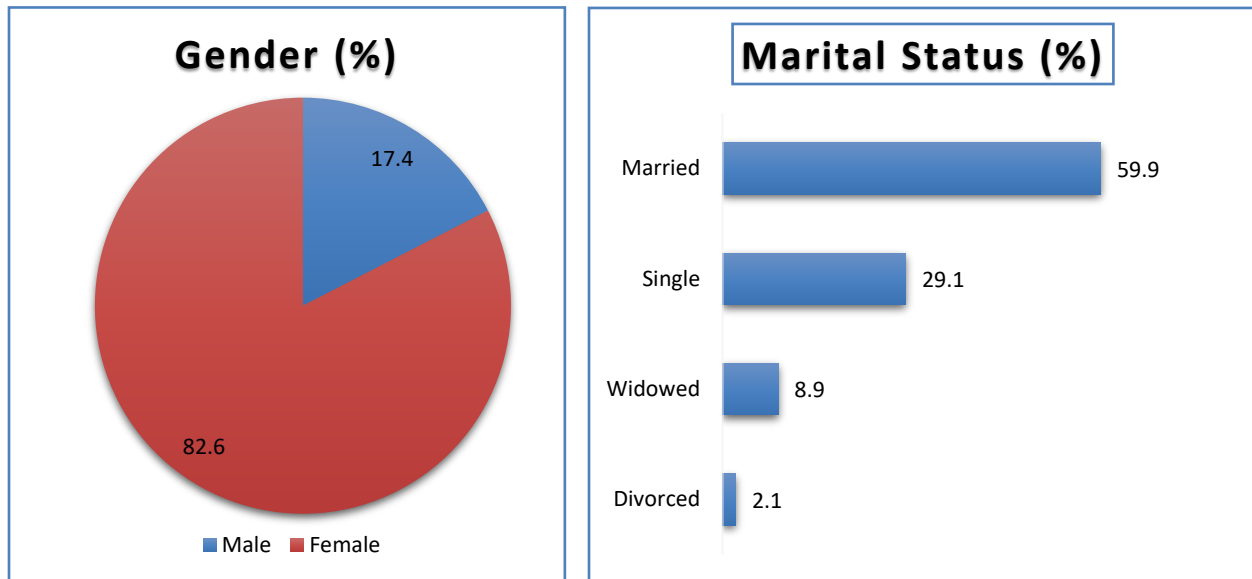
Ethical considerations

Specific ethical considerations were taken to ensure the safety of research participants and to protect their privacy and confidentiality:

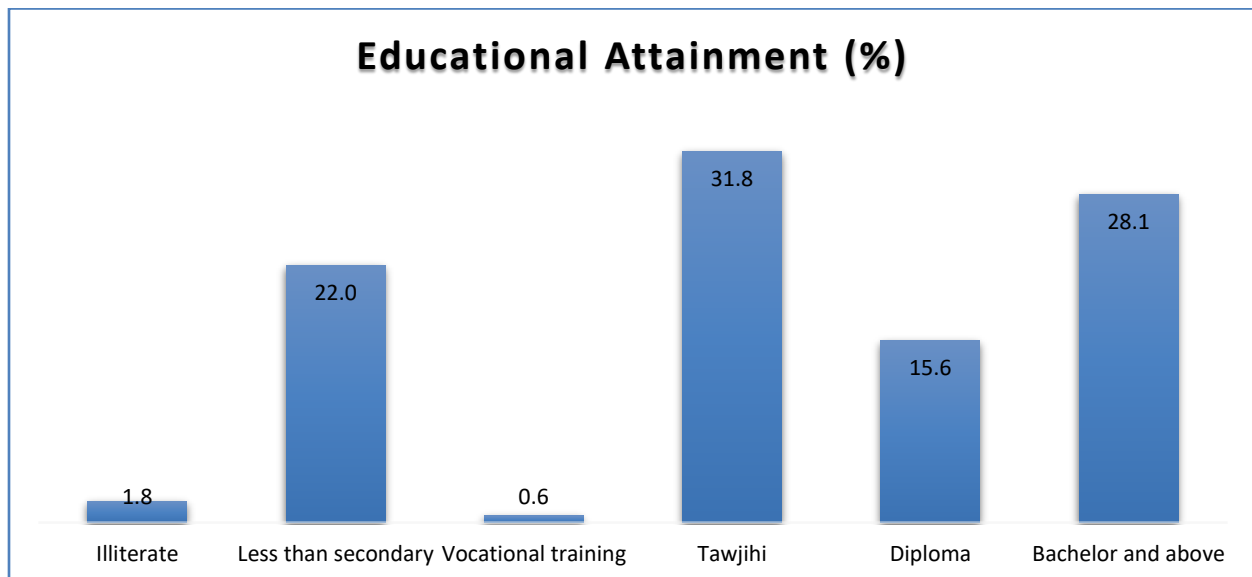
- The FGDs were conducted by an experienced male and female researcher from the same sex.
- Informed consent was sought: all participants involved in the research were provided with information sheets detailing the objectives and scope of the assessment as well as privacy and confidentiality guidelines.
- The confidentiality of participants was maintained through the proper handling of data.

Demographics and Sample Composition

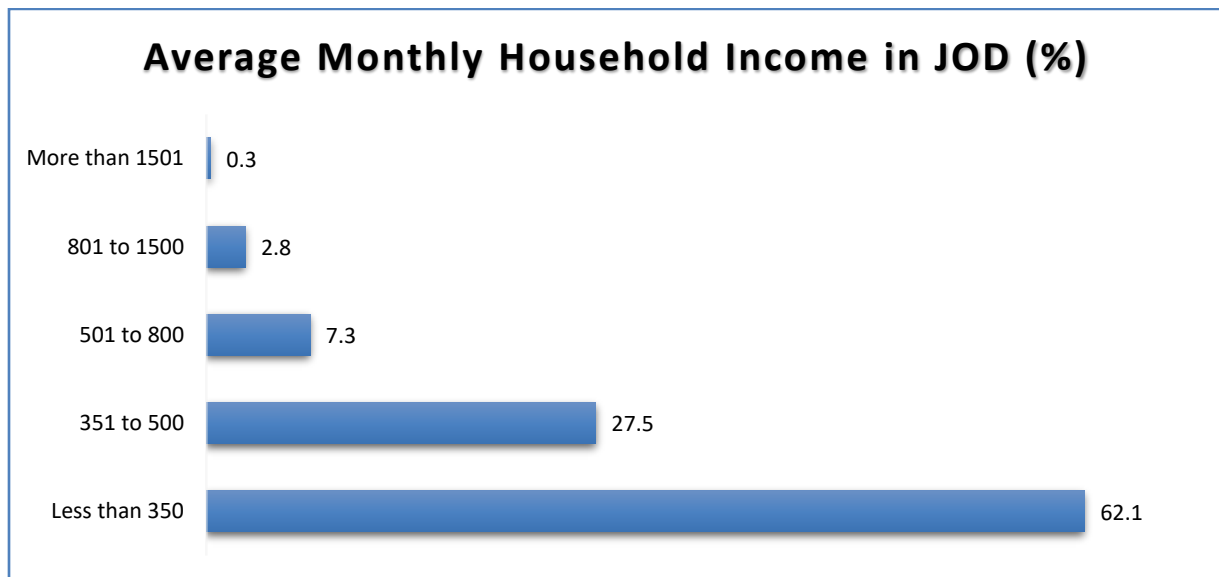
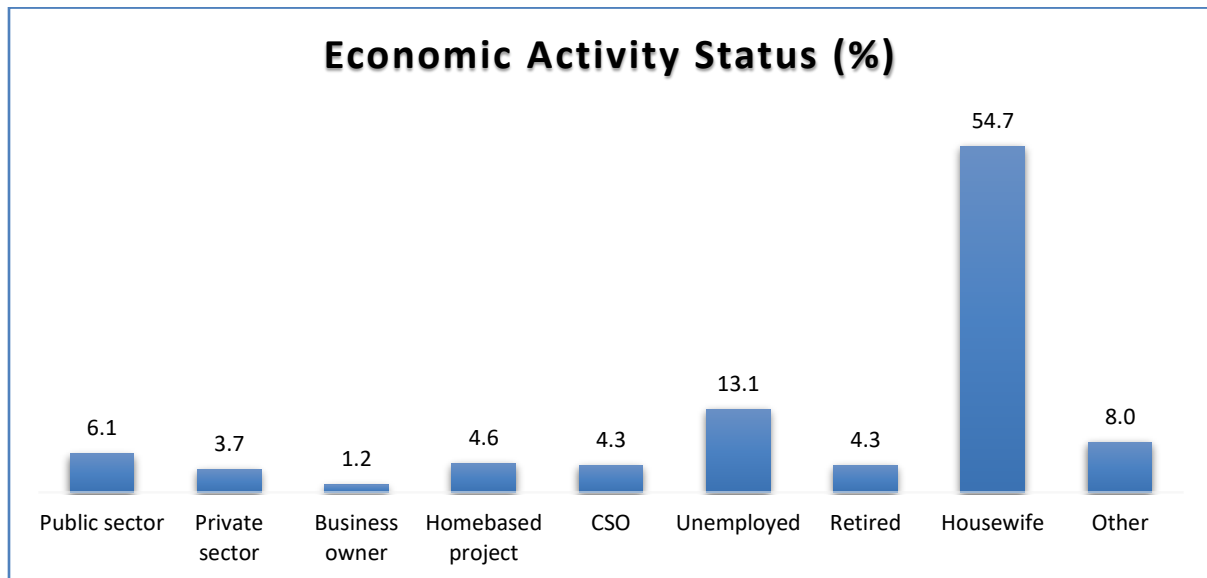
The survey was completed by 327 beneficiaries of CSOs. All participants were above the age of 18. 83% of the participants were female, and the majority of respondents were married (60%) followed by single (29%).



Over three quarters of the respondents were educated with a Secondary (Tawjihi) degree or above, with less than a third (28%) of the respondents having a university degree at the Bachelor's level or above.



55% of respondents identified as 'housewives' and only 28% were employed or economically active. Only 13% of the sample was composed of unemployed people, with just under half (49%) of them having attained university degrees. Over half of the respondents earn below 350 JD per month.



Findings

Social Challenges

When asked about the social challenges facing youth and women in Ajloun, respondents of the quantitative survey were asked to select the main problems that they believed were facing each group. The table below outlines the problems with their corresponding percentages.

Problems facing youth	%	Problems facing women	%
Wasta/ nepotism	72%	Gender stereotypes	56%
Inability to cover marriage costs	69%	Child marriage	54%
Worry about the future	68%	Gender discrimination	46%
Drug use among youth	67%	Violence against women	45%
Inability to cover university fees	65%	Preventing girls from their right to education	23%
Mismatch between education and labor market needs	56%		
Fear of not attaining self-realization	53%		
Migration	49%		
Lack of cultural and sports clubs	46%		
Weak public transportation	42%		
Weakness of vocational training	40%		
Weakness of volunteering programs	38%		

Drug use

Female and male participants in focus group discussions, spoke about the widespread prevalence of drugs among youth. They said drugs are easily accessed at cheap prices and are constituting a growing challenge at schools and universities. Some stated that some youth are not only using drugs but are selling them at universities – including females. Participants expressed that youth are turning to drugs primarily because of the high unemployment rates and the free time that they have at hand. Other reasons included the weakening of the value and religious belief system.

“Unemployment leads to drugs prevalence. Unemployment destroyed the whole Jordanian society. When you don’t have a job, you do wrong things because the state didn’t provide you with a job opportunity.” (Female participant, Sakhra)

“Drugs are widespread in the university; I do not enter the cafeteria because the guys always do drugs and drink there.” (Female participant, Qasabet Ajloun)

“My sister was at school and a girl offered her a pill to stay awake all day to study and get a full mark, my sister didn’t know about this and searched online. She tried to convince my sister but she refused to take it.” (Female participant, Sakhra)

Participants stressed on the need to intensify efforts around Ajloun to combat the problem of drug use. They explained that some tribes in Ajloun have become aware of the issue and are organizing meetings and gathering to raise awareness on this issue. Participants believed that civil society organizations need to intensify awareness raising campaigns and establish rehabilitation centers.

“We don’t have drugs rehab centers in Ajloun; drug users go to the centers in Irbid and Amman.” (Female participant, Orjan)

“I wish there were organizations to spread awareness and warn against drugs. Those who are not aware of the dangers of drugs will use it without thinking.” (Female participant, Sakhra)

Conservative social norms

Female participants spoke about conservative social norms that limit their freedom and participation in the community. Different participants spoke about how some females have limited agency and decision making when it comes to studying, working and marriage.

“Parents do not teach their daughters to study, develop their personalities, or how to choose well, they choose their daughters’ future husbands so they don’t have relationships with other guys or even consider having one, they make them marry their cousins.” (Female participant, Sakhra)

As for the respondents within the quantitative survey, the issue of conservative social norms typically comes in the form of stereotyping women into a specific role. More than half (51%) of respondents noted that families object to women participating in the activities and initiatives that CSO provide, however, the greater pressure is on women’s responsibilities at home and with the family (58%), which families use to deny women access to services. Furthermore, 38% of respondents noted that families object to women accessing services regardless of their responsibilities at home.

Early marriage

Participants in focus group discussions also spoke about the prevalence of early marriage especially with the influx of Syrian refugee families into neighboring governorates. They spoke about the negative consequences of early marriage including depriving girls from their right to education as well as social, psychological and mental development, in addition to health complications that girls face during pregnancy and child birth.

Some large families marry off their daughters because of their poor economic status and low income. (Female participant, Orjan)

Reasons behind early marriage included the need for some families to reduce the economic burden on themselves. It was noted that early marriage is more common in rural villages than bigger urban centers

Early marriage is more common in villages than Ajloun, where awareness levels are lower. (Female participant, Kofranjah)

Economic Challenges

When asked about the economic challenges facing youth and women in Ajloun, respondents of the quantitative survey were asked to select the main problems that they believed were facing each group. The table below outlines the problems with their corresponding percentages.

Challenges facing youth	Percent	Challenges facing women	Percent
Lack of job opportunities	96.3%	Long working hours in private sector	71.8%
High prices of basic commodities	79.3%	Lack of gender-sensitive support services, such as nurseries	68.3%
Reliance on military jobs	71.5%	Social norms and culture of shame	68.0%
Lack of funds for youth projects	64.8%	Lack of policies to stop harassment against women in work and public spaces	54.0%
Unsustainability of small and medium projects	62.3%	Weak public transportation	51.3%

Unemployment of youth

Unemployment and the lack of job opportunities appear to be the main economic challenges for youth in Ajloun. The mismatch between the university's field specialization and the needs of the labor market seems to be one of the underlying reasons. Furthermore, the lack of working experience also hinders youth's integration into the labor market. Many are faced with the requirement to have working experience as a precondition when they try to find their first job, thus creating a vicious cycle.

"Not all graduates are able to start and manage projects due to the lack of sufficient experience and the inadequate higher education, which differs from the labor market." (Female participant, Sakhra)

"Having experience is very important. If you don't have experience you won't find a job." (Female participant, Qasabet Ajloun)

"I graduated from university three years ago, in 2017 and I didn't find a job. Even if I did, they ask for experience. How may I gain experience if I haven't worked before?" (Male participant from Qasabet Ajloun)

"I have a Bachelor of Accounting. The first employment opportunity I was offered was at the Ministry of Agriculture. I looked for a company to have training, and they only gave me transportation reimbursement. Then I contacted another company in Amman for training and stayed there for a year and a half as they only gave me transportation reimbursement.." Male participant from Qasabet Ajloun.

The lack of job prospects and the consequent frustration and disappointment leads the youth to seek alternative opportunities outside Ajloun. They migrate to cities in other governorates, such as Amman or Irbid, or even outside Jordan.

*“Most of the youth migrate for employment, good income, and improving their livelihoods”
(Male participant from Ajloun)*

“If we could, we would migrate to Mars. All the youth in Jordan aspire to migrate. I would give half of my life to migrate. We all want to migrate because we have nothing here.” (Male participant from Ajloun)

However, this option is not always accessible for female graduates. Custom and traditions related to gender norms prevent them from moving away from their families or condition them to do so with acquaintances.

“Migration is not available for females as it is for males. Unlike for males, families fear for their daughters... If she migrates with some of her acquaintances, they’ll let her go, otherwise, they won’t. That is a result of our customs and traditions, and the community’s perception.” (Female participant from Orjan)

“Customs and traditions prevent females’ migration. One of the female participants said that she was offered to travel to Germany to study and stay with her aunt who lives there, but the traditions prevented that. Her father agreed to let her travel but other community members (her fathers’ female family members) convinced her father not to, which made him change his mind and refuse to let her travel, and she was deprived of this opportunity.” (Female participant from Qasabet Ajloun)

“Some families allow their daughters to move to another governorate for education or work. They are not allowed to live alone and need to stay with a group of girls whom they know well.” (Female participant from Orjan)

During focus groups, women and youth stressed the importance of supporting business incubators and entrepreneurial ideas by providing funding, linking them with investment opportunities, and offering guidance to improve product marketing and financial management. It was also emphasized the need for training programmes on how to use employment platforms in order to boost youth employability in local projects.

“I have an idea to build a farm (Chalet) and rent it out to generate income. The only obstacle is the undercapitalization.” (Female participant, Sakhra)

“Most university graduates in Sakhra are unemployed. None of the organizations support them and the graduates don’t have a clear idea of the donors. They don’t start projects, nor do they know how to manage projects financially.” (Male participant, Sakhra)

“I wanted to start a home-based pickle-making business and market it. I looked for an entity to help me market my business but I couldn’t find any.” (Male participant, Qasabet Ajloun)

Barriers to women's economic participation

According to focus group participants, difficult economic conditions facing many families have pushed some to join the labor market in order to help their husband's cover the household expenses. Of those who work, most tend to work in the public sector and the military because of shorter working hours and job security – including social security coverage.

Despite this, the economic participation of women in Ajloun remains weak and this can be attributed to many factors including difficulty in balancing work and household responsibilities, conservative social norms, low wages and gender gap in wages, the unavailability of quality and affordable child care, weak transportation system, and exploitation by employers.

"Most of the females only find jobs in factories, which are already difficult to work in. They ask girls to take training and then tell them that they'll be hired in case of a vacancy. I registered there almost two months ago and they haven't offered me a job yet... Also working hours in factories are very long." (Female participant, Qasabaet Ajloun)

"There is wage discrimination against females and they refuse to give us bonuses compared to our male colleagues. When I asked them for the reason, they said that males have more responsibilities than I." (Female participant, Sakhra)

Women pointed out that the need for nurseries (day care centers), at affordable prices, pushed some women to open and register nurseries at home. This way, instead of leaving their children at neighbors, women resort to these nurseries, knowing that they can be held accountable if anything goes wrong, as one woman from Qasabet Ajloun said: *"nurseries contribute to women's participation in the labor market. Women feel that their children are safe there because they are in an official and legal place that protects them and may be held accountable in case of poor treatment, which cannot be done when the children are left at the house of a neighbor."*

Women also spoke about the different challenges that they face in starting their own business, particularly regarding funding requirements, such as high interest rates, high installment payments, and having a surety.

"I wanted to open a ladies' hair salon, so I went to the Development and Employment Fund to obtain funds. The requirements were impossible, such as having 4-5 sureties: a military person, a civilian, and a family member, and the salary of each must be 250 JODs or more." (Female participant from Qasabet Ajloun)

"If one wants to obtain fund from an entity, especially Microfund for Women and Tamweelcom, they all require high installment payments and high interest rates." (Female participant from Qasabet Ajloun)

Transportation was found to be one of the barriers to women's economic participation. This included the high cost of private transportation, the irregularity of the public transportation and its limited operating hours that does not extend to the night shift.

"Buses only operate till 5 p.m. Transportation within Ajloun is more expensive than transportation to other governorates." (Female participant from Kofranjah)

Finally, participants in focus groups spoke extensively about the potential of the tourism sector in providing job opportunities for women. This however, is not exploited, due the conservative norms around women's work in the tourism sector including hotels and restaurant and tour guide companies.

"Tourism in Ajloun is very strong, but not exploited. Why is all the focus on sewing factories? ... build a hotel instead of a factory." (Female participant, Sakhra)

Political challenges

The respondents of the quantitative survey were asked about their political participation. The table below shows that majority of male and female respondents voted during the election, however, rarely any respondents are affiliated to political parties and very few females participate in political meetings.

Statements	Always		Sometime		Rarely	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Voting in election	76.6	69.8	11.7	16.7	11.7	13.5
Express an opinion on a nation level issue	24.4	24.4	34.6	40.9	23.1	34.7
Attention to general political issues	18.2	9.3	32.5	24.8	49.4	65.9
Participation in social movements	24.3	10.9	23.0	28.0	52.7	61.2
Participation in observing the election process	34.7	23.2	20.0	20.9	45.3	56.0
Participation in political meetings	16.4	4.1	27.4	21.7	56.2	74.2
Affiliation to one of the Jordanian parties	2.9	2.1	2.9	7.3	94.3	90.6
Participation in the promotion of an election in the candidate	19.7	12.7	33.8	19.4	46.5	68.0
Participation in student election	25.0	23.4	17.6	16.8	57.4	59.8

During focus group discussions with youth, it was clear than many are not interested or are discouraged from participating in political parties. Many believed that there are repercussions to participating and may affect their education and job prospects later on, especially those who want to join the public sector or military. They said that in general, youth are afraid of participation and therefore are accepting the status quo and are not engaging in politics to change it.

"We have parties in Ajloun. I once attended a meeting and was convinced to join a party, but when I went to the university, they threatened me that if I join a party, they'll withdraw my military scholarship." (Male participant from Sakhara)

"The citizens fear to participate in political parties because they fear to lose their government jobs." (Male participant from Sakhara)

Other reasons behind the lack of participation is the inability of parties to mobilize and advocate for the involvement of youth, as well as the family upbringing which discourages youth from being actively involved in politics.

“The reason why we do not participate is that our families taught us to fear being members of political parties.” (Male participant from Arjan)

“We do not participate because of the large number of parties and the lack of political parties for the youth. Our parties became like a supermarket; I start a party and make all my relatives members of this party. His Majesty asked us to have parties especially for the youth, but we do not have parties for the youth or parties we believe in.” (Male participant from Sakhara)

However, youth and women strongly engage in CSOs, as these organizations are significantly involved in community and social issues such as employment, education, health, and culture.

Regarding the youth and women participation in the voting process in parliamentary elections, it was noticed that the parties have not been able to communicate with the youth and women, nor convince them of their performance and work. Therefore, the youth and women feel influenced by their tribes and families during the voting process.

“Most of us vote for their family members, we vote for the ones our families tell us to vote for.” (Male participant from Arjan)

“Women always vote for whom their tribes agree to vote for, not for the qualified, they vote for their tribe member and hope they would help solve their problems in the future.” (Female participant from Arjan)

For the same reasons mentioned above, women and youth expressed their lack of interest in participating in social movements or interacting with the urgent national issues in any way, including through social media. A small percentage of the male and female youth interacted with some issues through social media, such as the teachers’ strike. However, some experiences, including the arrests of activists, have largely affected their interaction with these issues.

“A while ago, my cousin shared his opinion of a member of the parliament on Facebook and got arrested.” Female participant from Ajloun.

Civil Society Organizations in Ajloun

General Information on the CSOs

As part of the assessment, surveys were conducted with 73 employees, working in 32 different organizations in Ajloun. The interviews explored several issues including the domains that these organizations work in, and the beneficiaries that they target.

The majority of employees worked in CSOs and charitable organizations followed by non-profit companies. However, some of those interviewed also worked with donor and international organizations.

Female representation among the organizations was very strong with a majority of organizations having more than 50% females on their boards, and over two-thirds of these organization having a workforce that is over 50% female. In fact, 6 of the organizations are fully run by females, with both their board members and their employees wholly consisting of females. On the other hand, only 2 of the organizations had no female representation whatsoever, either on their boards or among their employees.

There was a good spread of domains in which organizations work, providing a variety of activities and services. The top two domains were “Economic Empowerment” and “Youth” and were provided by 26 of the organizations interviewed, whereas “Democracy and Governance” and “Media” where the least worked in domains, with 10 or fewer organizations working in them.

Domain	No. of Organizations	Domain	No. of Organizations
Economic empowerment	26	Social cohesion	20
Youth	26	Environment, water and energy	19
Orphans	25	Religious	18
People with disabilities	25	Archeological tourism	17
Women's rights and freedoms	24	Refugees	17
Humanitarian relief	24	Education	16
Public private partnerships	23	Rights and freedoms	16
Health	23	Other	14
Culture, arts and sports	23	Associations	12
Agriculture	22	Democracy and governance	10
Funding CSOs	21	Media	7

Beneficiaries and Activities of the CSOs

A majority of the organizations worked with the broadest spectrum of society, attempting to reach as many beneficiaries in their local communities as possible. However, when looking at specific beneficiaries, children come out as the group in which the organizations declared as their primary target, with 14 organizations working with children. Male youth were the least targeted group among the organizations with 11 having activities and services specifically catered to them. Still, the differences are not great, and the results show that these organizations are trying to be as inclusive as possible in their service provision to all sectors of local communities.

Almost all of the organizations claim to provide awareness sessions and some form of training for their beneficiaries, with less than half conducting advocacy activities for the domains they are involved in. However, when comparing their claims against projects or initiatives they have initiated in the last 5 years that target youth and/or women, a plurality of them chose to provide services that help women manufacture and sell goods (i.e. homebased micro projects) over the awareness sessions and meetings that most claim are their main activity, with less than a third having conducted awareness sessions.

This can be seen as responding to the needs of the local communities, especially as youth unemployment is prevalent. Considering that some of the CSO in the study were focused on some form of agricultural activity, 6 of the projects focused on providing services to the agricultural sector, especially in terms of helping farmers market and sell their products. This can also be counted under the economic empowerment that the micro projects aim to achieve.

However, one glaring area that seems to have been missed is combatting the prevalence of drug use in Ajloun. Not a single initiative was created to combat the prevalent drug use by youth mentioned in the section examining the social challenges that youth face. This is obviously an area that has many of the beneficiaries anxious (67% of them mentioned it) and was mentioned even by the CSO employees themselves as a problem that has serious social consequences for youth.

In terms of the beneficiaries these projects targeted, the CSOs mainly tried to maintain the broad spectrum of local communities, however, women and youth (40.6% and 31.3%, respectively) received more attention than the declared beneficiaries. Children, received significantly less attention in recent initiatives, with only 15% of organizations catering their initiatives to them specifically.

Including Women in the Design and Implementation of Projects/Initiatives

Encouragingly, a majority of the initiatives (79.5%) in the past 5 years had the active participation of the direct beneficiaries in the design and implementation of the initiatives. Almost all of the initiatives (96%) were designed to facilitate women's ability to access them and this was mainly achieved either through ensuring that the certain activities were for women only, or there were quotas for women's participation in the initiatives.

The survey asked the CSO to list what methods were used to allow the beneficiaries to participate in the design and implementation of the initiatives, with the majority of CSO choosing to conduct either individual or group interviews to better understand the beneficiaries' needs. Many of these organizations also conducted conferences to town hall-style meetings to ensure that a wide group of people could attend and have their voices heard, while understanding the viewpoints of others. Lastly, less than half instituted a suggestions and complaints box, that allowed for anonymous feedback to the organizations by members of the local communities they served.

Improving the Activities and Services Provided

"Securing funding" and "Connecting with decision makers" are the two most pressing issues when CSOs were asked to consider how they could improve the activities and initiatives they provide. However, considering the success of including women and youth in the design and implementation of initiatives (as noted above), it is less encouraging that some organizations did not mention this in their efforts to

improve their services. Still, a majority of them did in fact mention these two points, and it may be that the ongoing inclusion of women and youth precludes their being mentioned as a possible solution. However, the point about access to decision makers is well made, as will be shown below.

Solution	Count
Securing funding	31
Connecting with decision makers	27
Securing equipment	26
Skills development and training	25
Including women in initiative design	25
Including youth in initiative design	24
Connecting with the private sector	22
Improving policies	18

Access to Decision Makers

When considering how many of the CSO have been able to access decision makers in the past, only 2 of the organizations have not or could not access decision makers in their communities. However, when looking at it from the perspective of the employees of these organizations, less than half have ever had access to decision makers. Therefore, this section will focus on the respondents' rather than the organizations, as it connects well with the point made in the previous section, where connecting with decision makers is the second most important method of improving activities and services.

Slightly over half of the respondents helped organize meetings with decision makers in the past, and in an overwhelming number of these meetings did women help organize and implement the meetings. A positive aspect of these meetings brought up by the employees is that women's roles were not minimized to the point of mundane tasks but were actively involved in preparing the agendas for these meetings and moderating the discussions. Although many women did take up some of the more mundane administrative tasks to set up these meetings, these encouraging statistics show that there is indeed a commitment to the inclusivity of women in an active participatory role in community development.

As noted above, fewer than half of respondents were able to access decision makers, and of those who could, decision makers were overwhelmingly supportive the causes that the organizations are involved in. It is encouraging to note that not a single respondent found decision makers to be opposed to the causes brought to them, however, only a few would actively advocate for the cause. Some of the decision makers were either undecided or indifferent. This is definitely an area that the CSOs can commit more advocacy resources to in ensuring that a greater number of decision makers become advocates of the causes themselves, by first encouraging those who are supportive, then working the indifferent and undecided to convince of their causes.

A plurality of the discussions was aimed at informing the decision makers about the priorities of the citizens in Ajloun, followed by listing the problems that they face, then in discussing suggestions by the citizens, and lastly followed by discussions of other topics. Interestingly, none of the discussions had, as a main objective, the evaluation of or criticism leveled at governmental or municipal services.

CSO Conclusions

There are many encouraging statistics to point to in the analysis of the CSOs in Ajloun, from the inclusion of women in board memberships and the workforce, to inclusion of beneficiaries in the design and implementation of the initiatives and activities that CSOs provide. When not including all members of local communities, there does seem to be a shifting focus away from targeting children as the main beneficiaries towards women and youth, when taking into consideration the initiatives over the last five years.

Securing funding seems to be the most important method of improving the services that CSO provide, as well as having greater access to decision makers, though this may be a function of the individual employee's role in their organization rather than the organization's ability to access decision makers. Still, this is an area that can always be improved as it facilitates the work of social development.

If one criticism can be leveled at the CSOs themselves, it is the fact that no initiatives were created specifically to combat the prevalence of drugs among youth. This is notwithstanding the fact that a significant portion of the beneficiaries stated that drug abuse among the youth was a major social challenge.

Though it may be argued that this is the domain of law enforcement and not within the scope of CSOs, much of their declared work is in raising awareness, and initiatives that brings together the local and national authorities with the local communities should be considered in this instance.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Ajloun governorate has one of the highest poverty rates across the country. Despite its natural, historical and cultural assets, the governorate lacks private sector investment as well as developed infrastructure. These are underlying reasons for the high unemployment rates and lack of opportunities that particularly affect young people and women. Civil society organizations and governmental institutions are working to address the socioeconomic challenges in Ajloun. Nonetheless, there is still need for tangible progress and for considerable development.

Regarding social challenges in Ajloun, the widespread use of drugs among youth was identified to be a pressing but overlooked issue. The high rates of unemployment and excessive free time seem to be the principal reasons behind it, together with drug's cheap prices and easiness to access them. The urgent need to address the problem was emphasized by the participants, who pointed to the need to take measures to tackle the problem, such as awareness raising campaigns and the establishment of rehabilitation centers. Social issues that affect women specifically relate to conservative social norms that limit their freedom and participation in the community. In particular, early marriage was recognized as a social challenge faced by girls and women that is still present in the governorate.

Youth unemployment and lack of opportunities are the main economic challenges faced by young people in Ajloun. The mismatch between university degrees and the labor market as well as the lack of working experience seem to be the main barriers that prevent young people from finding a job. The lack of future prospects leads to frustration and disappointment and in some cases to migration to other governorates or even abroad. Migration is however restricted in the case of young females due to protective and traditional customs that stop their families from allowing them to move away alone. The need for supporting business and entrepreneurial ideas was stressed during focus group discussions, including the need for funding, networking with investors and guidance on marketing and financial aspects.

Women's participation in the labor market in Ajloun remains significantly low. Various obstacles to women's economic participation were identified, including the difficulty to balance work and household responsibilities; the conservative norms that prevent them from engaging in certain sectors, such as in tourism and hospitality; and the weak transport system, with high cost of private transport and irregular and limited public transport. Structural issues such as low wages and wage gender gap as well as exploitation by employers were also mentioned.

The assessment also shows a low involvement of young people and women in the political sphere of the governorate. Political participation among youth and women is mainly restricted to voting in elections, and their vote is mostly influenced by their tribes and families rather than the political agenda of the parties. Lack of interest and discouragement were noted to be the reasons for young people not to become involved with political parties. In general, youth are concerned that engaging in politics will compromise their education and job prospects. Furthermore, experiences of retaliations such as the arrest of activists discourage young people from taking part in social and political movements.

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Recommendations

To address social challenges

- Raise the awareness of the communities in Ajloun about the employment opportunities available for women and youth in the tourism sector and reduce the culture of shame associated with such jobs to enhance the economic participation of these two groups.
- Intensify civil society and governmental efforts in raising awareness on the prevalence of drugs and its negative consequences on youth and the community as a whole. More specifically, develop drug awareness and prevention programs for youth to be included in the educational curriculum and complemented by a campaign by CSOs.
- Establish rehabilitation centers for youth involved in drugs and raise awareness on their availability.

To address economic challenges

- Increase accountability and law enforcement mechanisms in the private sector to ensure that the labor law is implemented and that employers do not exploit men and women working in such institutions. This would remove some of the barriers that prevent women and men from joining the private sector.
- Encourage investment and funding in the tourism sector to fully utilize natural, historical and cultural assets, create job opportunities for youth, men and women and revive the economic sector in Ajloun.
- Provide life and soft skills training for youth in Ajloun to equip them with some of the skills they need to join the labor market (especially the private sector).
- Provide non-conventional vocational training programs for youth, with special emphasis on vocations related to the tourism sector, to increase their employability prospects in the private sector.

To address political challenges

- Build the capacity of officials in Parliament, municipal, and decentralized councils to have an effective role in laying out gender sensitive development policies.
- Develop opportunities for political engagement of youth and women outside of elections, such as safe platforms for dialogue with politicians and local representatives.

To strengthen civil society

- Activate means of networking between CSOs and elected councils to reflect women need in local communities in the development policies.

- Inclusion of key stakeholders, whether they are beneficiaries or decision makers, in the design and implementation of development projects and initiatives.
- Intensify CSO advocacy efforts with decision makers to turn them from being supportive of the causes to advocates of these causes.
- Direct CSO activities towards the outskirts and villages of Ajloun because funding is concentrated in the governorate's center.

End Notes

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