



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية
Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development



Policy Paper June 2026

Allies for Change: Advancing Women's Leadership in Jordan through Engaging Men and Boys



مركز النهضة الاستراتيجي
Renaissance Strategic Center

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
Key Findings.....	2
1. Background	3
1.1 Why Women's Leadership Requires Collective Action	3
1.2 Evidence Base and Analytical Approach	4
2. Systemic Barriers to Women's Leadership	5
3. Inclusive Decision-Making as a Strategic Entry Point towards Community Resilience ...	6
4. Policy and Programmatic Priorities for Enabling Women's Leadership	7
5. Engaging Men and Boys: Opportunities and Risks	8
6. Recommendations for Strengthening Women's Leadership	9
6.1 Strengthening Women's Leadership and Civic Engagement	9
6.2 Engaging Men and Boys as Strategic Allies	10
7. Conclusion.....	11
8. References	12

Executive Summary

Women's civic engagement and leadership in Jordan remain constrained by intersecting structural, social, and institutional barriers. These barriers confine women's authority to the private sphere, while the public domain continues to be dominated by men. Addressing this imbalance does not only require directly targeting constraints, but also transforming the broader social environment, including engaging men and boys as active allies.

Engaging men and boys as allies contributes to a results pathway in which increased awareness and dialogue lead to shifts in attitudes and behaviors, fostering more enabling environments that support women's leadership and participation in community decision-making.

This policy brief provides evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and civil society to advance women's leadership through inclusive, gender-transformative approaches that actively engage men and boys. It draws on insights from local dialogues and programmatic experience to identify key barriers and opportunities for fostering more inclusive civic spaces and to propose recommendations for policymakers, civil society actors, and community leaders seeking to strengthen women's participation in community decision-making in Jordan. During 11 community dialogue sessions with 331 male participants across several governorates, stakeholders recognised inclusive decision-making as essential to social cohesion and community resilience, noting that women's leadership produces solutions more closely aligned with household and community needs.

Safe spaces for men should be complemented by joint dialogue between women and men. Religious and community leaders should be engaged to reframe gender equality as a shared value, while greater visibility of women in leadership roles and expanded economic empowerment opportunities are essential to driving lasting change. To address these challenges, programmes should be **locally grounded** and designed in consultation with community stakeholders, with strong investment in gender-transformative facilitation.

Key Findings

- Women's civic engagement and leadership in Jordan remain constrained by intersecting structural, social, and institutional barriers that limit their participation in public and decision-making spaces.
- Prevailing gender norms continue to position women within the private sphere, while leadership and decision-making roles in the public sphere remain largely male-dominated, affecting women's legitimacy and access to leadership opportunities.
- Limited access to resources, infrastructure, mobility, and institutional support systems, particularly in rural and remote areas, further restricts women's ability to engage in civic and community leadership.
- Despite these barriers, there is growing recognition at the community level that women's leadership contributes to more inclusive, effective, and socially responsive decision-making, particularly in addressing local needs and strengthening social cohesion.

- Evidence from community dialogues highlights that inclusive decision-making strengthens trust, resilience, and collective problem-solving, especially when women, men, youth, and local leaders are meaningfully engaged.
- Engaging men and boys as allies is essential to transforming social norms, reducing resistance, and creating more enabling environments for women’s leadership and civic participation.
- Effective approaches require a combination of women’s leadership empowerment, gender-transformative programming, and structured community dialogue spaces that include both separate and mixed-gender engagement modalities.

1. Background

1.1 Why Women's Leadership Requires Collective Action

Civic engagement in Jordan remains shaped by a combination of structural constraints and socio-cultural norms that limit inclusive participation in public life.¹ Policy and institutional frameworks for civic participation remain uneven, and public trust in civic and leadership initiatives is often limited.² These challenges are compounded by prevailing social and gender norms that restrict the participation of certain groups, particularly women, youth, persons with disabilities, and refugees. Limited awareness of civic engagement mechanisms further constrains opportunities for meaningful participation in community and local decision-making.

Women and girls in Jordan increasingly aspire to play active roles in leadership and decision-making across multiple spheres, from the household to community-based organizations and local governance.³ However, gendered social norms continue to shape expectations regarding women’s and men’s roles in society. Women are often perceived primarily as caregivers whose decision-making authority is confined to the private sphere, while men are expected to assume leadership and decision-making roles in the public domain.⁴ These norms influence not only women’s opportunities to participate in civic processes but also community perceptions of women’s leadership and legitimacy in public spaces.⁵

¹ CIVICUS - “13 countries downgraded in new ratings report as civic rights deteriorate globally”:

<https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/5501-civicus-monitor-2021-report>.

² IRI - “IRI Jordan Poll Shows Dissatisfaction over Country’s Direction, Distrust in Political Institutions, Strong Desire for Democratic Development”:

<https://www.iri.org/news/iri-jordan-poll-shows-dissatisfaction-over-countrys-direction-distrust-in-political-institutions-strong-desire-for-democratic-development/>.

³ ARDD – “Raising Tomorrow’s Leaders: The Role of Family and Social Norms in Shaping Young Women Leadership in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt”:

<https://ardd-jo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SheLeads-Raising-Future-Leaders.pdf>.

⁴ ARDD - “Supporting Governance from Below: Effective local engagement of and within communities in northern municipalities in Jordan and the role for local civil society”: <https://ardd-jo.org/publication/supporting-governance-from-below-effective-local-engagement-of-and-within-communities-in-northern-municipalities-in-jordan-and-the-role-for-local-civil-society/>.

⁵ UN Women Jordan - “Jordan sets historic record for women in politics: legal reforms and leadership training drive change”:

<https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/08/jordan-sets-historic-record-for-women-in-politics-legal-reforms-and-leadership-training-drive-change>.

As a result, the public sphere remains largely dominated by men, who constitute the majority of decision-makers shaping public policies, humanitarian responses, and local development priorities. **Addressing this imbalance requires not only strengthening women’s leadership capacities but also transforming the broader social environment in which civic engagement takes place. Expanding women’s civic participation requires collective action involving multiple stakeholders, including civil society organizations, local authorities, community leaders, and families.** In this context, engaging men and boys as allies is critical to challenging restrictive gender norms and fostering more inclusive forms of community decision-making.

By recognizing these dynamics, the **Oasis Programme** provides multi-sectoral services to Syrian refugee women and vulnerable Jordanian women through 18 Oasis centers operating across host communities. Among its initiatives are civic engagement activities aimed at strengthening women’s leadership, agency, and participation in community processes while engaging men and boys in dialogue on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Within this framework, **the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD) facilitates dialogue sessions with local stakeholders to raise awareness about the importance of creating enabling environments for women’s civic engagement, encourage men and boys to play supportive roles in advancing women’s leadership,** and identify locally grounded solutions to the barriers women face in participating in community decision-making.

Building on these experiences, this policy paper examines the role of community stakeholders, particularly men and boys, in enabling women’s civic engagement and leadership. It draws on insights from local dialogues and programmatic experience to identify key barriers and opportunities for fostering more inclusive civic spaces and to propose recommendations for policymakers, civil society actors, and community leaders seeking to strengthen women’s participation in community decision-making in Jordan.

1.2 Evidence Base and Analytical Approach

The findings presented in this policy brief are based on a series of community dialogue sessions facilitated by ARDD within the Oasis Programme. A total of 11 dialogue sessions were conducted across several governorates, engaging 331 beneficiaries, including community leaders, youth representatives, civil society actors, and other local stakeholders. Sessions were designed to surface community-level barriers and opportunities for women’s civic engagement. Facilitation was led by ARDD legal and advocacy specialists, with select community members co-facilitating based on demonstrated prior engagement. These sessions also served as a platform to explore pathways for social norm change, including the role of men and boys as allies in promoting women’s leadership and inclusive decision-making.

This brief draws on 11 community dialogues engaging 331 participants across multiple governorates.

2. Systemic Barriers to Women's Leadership

Findings from the community dialogue sessions highlight several cross-cutting insights that frame the systemic barriers outlined below. There is increasing recognition among participants that women's leadership contributes to more responsive and inclusive community solutions. However, social norms and structural barriers remain deeply interconnected, limiting women's participation despite existing capacities and aspirations. Discussions also underscored that engaging men and boys in structured dialogue can contribute to greater acceptance of women's roles in public life, particularly when linked to tangible community benefits. Overall, participants emphasized that inclusive and participatory approaches, when grounded in local realities, are more likely to foster trust, ownership, and sustainable change.

Social barriers continue to constrain women's access to leadership roles at the community level. In smaller communities, social structures and local dynamics can shape access to leadership roles, sometimes limiting the visibility and participation of women leaders. Strong local affiliations and community networks shape leadership pathways in ways that can disadvantage women. In addition, prevailing social norms in some contexts are discouraging broader interaction and collaboration, which can further limit collective support for women's leadership initiatives. Development opportunities remain disproportionately concentrated in urban centers, reducing investment in rural women's leadership. Over time, limited opportunities for meaningful participation have contributed to lower levels of civic engagement and reduced support mechanisms for women's leadership.

Structural barriers remain significant and include weak rural infrastructure, limited institutional presence, and the absence of functional local mechanisms to support participation. Inadequate transportation systems, under-resourced local councils, and the lack of committees with clearly defined problem-solving roles are major obstacles to networking among women leaders. Geographic dispersion of households in rural and remote areas, such as Allan and Al-Taybeh, makes it difficult to establish forums, associations, or shared civic spaces, further constraining participation. These challenges are compounded by limited financial resources, a scarcity of development projects, and the remoteness of some areas from governorate centers, all of which reduce women's access to leadership pathways and weaken their contribution to social cohesion.

Additionally, **behavioral barriers** include hesitation toward collective action and limited engagement with formal political structures. There is a persistent lack of confidence in political parties, as the concept of party affiliation continues to evoke fear or mistrust related to access to formal employment. As a result, participation in political life at the local level, particularly through women leaders, remains unlikely. Moreover, economic pressures and the prioritization of securing livelihoods often overshadow civic engagement, leaving little time or motivation to support leadership initiatives perceived as symbolic or ineffective. These dynamics reinforce disengagement and further limit women's leadership opportunities at the local level.

Knowledge-related challenges also play an important role and include limited access to information about laws and rights, and a lack of specialized training that builds leadership skills capable of addressing challenges in the field.

3. Inclusive Decision-Making as a Strategic Entry Point towards Community Resilience

Inclusive decision-making is a key mechanism for strengthening social cohesion, trust, and community resilience. Involving women, youth, community elders, and marginalized groups in addressing local issues enhances a shared sense of belonging and responsibility, while ensuring that decisions respond more effectively to the real needs of families and communities. In particular, the inclusion of women in community committees is seen as generating solutions that are more closely aligned with household and village priorities and as contributing to the reduction of social tensions.

Participatory dialogue and transparent decision-making processes help reduce conflict, counter misinformation, and strengthen trust between communities and institutions. When decision-making is inclusive and clearly communicated, using locally accessible language and formats, community members are more likely to perceive decisions as collective rather than imposed. This sense of ownership encourages active civic engagement, motivates individuals to support implementation, and increases the likelihood of successful and sustainable outcomes.

Intergenerational collaboration is also critical. Effective decision-making combines the experience and legitimacy of community elders with the energy and ideas of youth, resulting in more resilient and widely supported decisions. Women's leadership is not a new phenomenon in Jordanian communities; historical examples of respected women leaders ('Sheikhas') demonstrate that it can be exercised within accepted social and cultural frameworks.

However, inclusive decision-making alone is insufficient without parallel investments in enabling conditions. Cultural change is a critical entry point for expanding women's participation in public life, alongside tangible improvements in rural infrastructure. Weak transportation systems, limited public spaces, and inadequate local institutional capacity continue to constrain women's access to employment, civic engagement, and leadership opportunities, despite high levels of education and willingness to participate among women and girls.

Overall, inclusive decision-making, when meaningfully implemented and supported by cultural transformation and infrastructural development, strengthens trust, improves collective problem-solving, and produces outcomes that reflect the interests and aspirations of the entire community, including the vulnerable groups.

Different dialogue modalities play complementary roles in advancing inclusive decision-making. Women-only spaces provide safe environments for confidence building and leadership development, while men-only spaces enable critical reflection on social norms and masculinity. Mixed-gender platforms, in turn, are essential for fostering mutual understanding, building trust, and translating attitudinal change into collective action.

4. Policy and Programmatic Priorities for Enabling Women's Leadership

A set of complementary actions is needed to strengthen civic participation and women's leadership. Central to these proposals is the need to **support community initiatives led by local women** that address concrete service and development challenges. Such initiatives are critical for building practical confidence in women's leadership and demonstrating tangible community benefits.

Institutional mechanisms such as Women Leadership Committees can play a critical role in sustaining these efforts by providing structured platforms for coordination, representation, and continuity beyond project-based interventions.

Sustained capacity building through leadership training, mentorship, and guidance systems is essential. These efforts should be accompanied by awareness campaigns that challenge negative stereotypes, combat the culture of shame, and promote acceptance of women's roles in public life. Strengthening education is also essential, including the integration of civic participation, gender equality, and political awareness into university and community college curricula, given their limited presence in earlier stages of education.

Financial and institutional support is another major priority. Genuine funding mechanisms for women's initiatives, expanded employment and vocational training opportunities, and stronger support for civil society organizations through training, networking, and direct engagement with decision-makers is needed. In addition, there is a need for creating local forums, youth clubs, and community centers, particularly in remote or geographically dispersed areas, as inclusive spaces that enable dialogue and support women leaders beyond tribal or regional divisions.

At the governance level, improving **the enabling political environment** is a priority. Key measures include strengthening awareness of laws and policies that facilitate women's participation, ensuring the presence of effective political party representatives in governorates, correcting misconceptions about political parties, and appointing local council officials based on merit rather than patronage. Encouraging women's participation in elections and leadership positions was also identified as a critical step.

Finally, **addressing practical barriers** that limit women's engagement is equally critical. This includes improving transportation, childcare, and local infrastructure, as well as expanding digital participation and local media platforms to highlight successful female role models and promote community support for women's leadership through visible, practical outcomes.

Overall, meaningful progress requires a **combined approach**: economic empowerment, institutional and legislative reform, cultural change, and sustained investment in local leadership development. Together, these measures can create an enabling environment in which women's civic and political participation becomes both possible and socially supported.

5. Engaging Men and Boys: Opportunities and Risks

When effectively designed, engaging men and boys contributes to a gradual shift from awareness to allyship, helping to create enabling social and institutional environments that support women's leadership.

Levels of awareness of and support for gender equality vary considerably, reflecting the uneven reach of existing programmes. Nonetheless, evidence gathered through this process points to a growing recognition among participants that women's civic engagement and leadership can serve as a meaningful driver of social cohesion and social justice, particularly when framed around the concrete challenges of local contexts.

Awareness of programmes that actively engage men and boys in promoting gender equality remains limited. Knowledge in this area is largely confined to initiatives in which men play a supporting or implementation role in activities directed at women and girls. Yet a broader landscape of male-engagement programming does exist. Family-based initiatives such as positive fatherhood programmes encourage men's active participation in childcare and household responsibilities, challenging the entrenched stereotype of women as primary caregivers and drawing attention to the unequal distribution of unpaid care work. Discussion and dialogue circles for men provide structured spaces to examine social pressures, toxic masculinity, and mental health, contributing to reduced stigma and stronger family and community relationships. Legally oriented programmes raise awareness of rights and responsibilities among both men and women, while advocacy initiatives seek institutional reform of laws that constrain the social, economic, and political participation of both sexes. Awareness campaigns and educational initiatives further engage men and boys in challenging harmful gender norms, preventing gender-based violence, and promoting more equitable behaviours.

Despite these efforts, significant implementation gaps persist. Where facilitators lack adequate grounding in gender-transformative approaches, programmes risk reinforcing rather than dismantling existing gender norms. Several broader structural and social barriers also constrain men's meaningful engagement and, by extension, limit the enabling environment for women's civic leadership.

Customs, traditions, and community social norms represent a prominent and cross-cutting challenge. Applying generic or standardised approaches to gender equality across Jordan's diverse contexts risks producing adverse outcomes or entrenching the very stereotypes programmes seek to address. Field evidence illustrates this risk: gender-equality training for women has, in some instances, generated household conflict when newly asserted rights were not accompanied by corresponding shifts in community understanding. This underscores a critical design principle, namely that approaches must be rooted in local realities and adapted to culturally specific contexts if they are to produce sustainable change.

Gender-segregated programming presents both opportunities and limitations that merit careful consideration. Separate spaces for men can serve a useful function, allowing reflection on the personal and social costs of rigid masculinity norms. However, exclusively segregated approaches are insufficient to drive meaningful attitudinal change. Evidence from existing programmes indicates that lasting shifts in

attitudes require structured opportunities for joint dialogue between women and men. Segregated and mixed programming should therefore be treated as complementary rather than alternative modalities.

Social stigma constitutes one of the most significant barriers to men's engagement with gender-equality initiatives. Participation in programmes organised by women's associations may be perceived as socially inappropriate, and men who visibly support women's leadership risk being viewed by peers as weak, subordinate, or undermined by women. This social exposure creates a disincentive for engagement. Compounding this dynamic, men who are seen to oppose gender-equality efforts may face criticism from other quarters, producing a complex and competing social pressure in which the cost of engagement and the cost of non-engagement are both perceived as threats to social standing.

Economic conditions also shape the landscape for gender equality. While evidence from prior research and programming has documented growing male support for girls' education and leadership opportunities, prevailing economic pressures in some communities continue to sustain a preference for investment in sons. This preference is linked to the persistent perception of men as primary breadwinners; high unemployment and economic insecurity reinforce the belief that women's increased labour market participation comes at men's expense. In communities outside Amman in particular, the economic calculus of investing in a daughter's education or leadership development is not yet widely seen as prudent or beneficial.

Finally, the limited visibility of women in leadership positions within communities constrains men's exposure to and recognition of women's leadership potential. Where local organisations remain male-led and women occupy largely symbolic roles, prevailing assumptions about men's superior decision-making capacity go unchallenged. Increasing the substantive representation of women in organisational leadership is therefore not only an equity objective, but a prerequisite for shifting the normative environment in which male engagement programmes operate.

6. Recommendations for Strengthening Women's Leadership

The following recommendations are designed to translate evidence into actionable steps, supporting both immediate programmatic improvements and longer-term institutionalization of inclusive practices. Additionally, they draw on community-level evidence and stakeholder perspectives to strengthen enabling environments for women's leadership and foster broader stakeholder engagement, including men and boys.

6.1 Strengthening Women's Leadership and Civic Engagement

For Government and Policymakers

- **Institutionalize inclusive governance** by ensuring women's meaningful representation and participation in local decision-making structures
- **Strengthen the enabling environment** through improved access to transportation, childcare, and safe public spaces to facilitate women's participation

- **Enhance implementation of gender-responsive policies** and raise awareness of legal frameworks that support women’s civic and political engagement
- **Promote equitable and merit-based governance systems** to expand women’s access to leadership positions

For Donors and International Partners

- **Invest in locally led, gender-transformative programmes** that strengthen women’s leadership, economic empowerment, and civic participation, particularly in underserved areas
- **Support long-term, flexible funding** for women-led and community-based organizations to ensure sustainability and impact
- **Prioritize intersectional approaches** that address the needs of marginalized women, including those in rural areas, refugee communities, and vulnerable groups
- **Advance localization** by resourcing local actors and strengthening community-based leadership structures

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Networks

- **Strengthen community-based leadership structures**, including Women Leadership Committees, with clear mandates, accountability mechanisms, and inclusive representation
- **Facilitate safe, inclusive, and participatory dialogue spaces**, including mixed-gender platforms, to promote trust, collective problem-solving, and social cohesion
- **Invest in leadership development, mentorship, and peer learning** through women-led networks and alliances
- **Promote positive social norms** by engaging families, youth, and community leaders and highlighting the social and economic value of women’s leadership
- **Support women’s meaningful participation in local governance and community initiatives**, ensuring their roles extend beyond symbolic representation

6.2 Engaging Men and Boys as Strategic Allies

For Government and Policymakers

- **Integrate the engagement of men and boys** into national gender equality and civic participation strategies as a core component of social norm transformation
- **Engage religious and community leaders** to promote gender justice as a shared societal value grounded in local cultural and social contexts
- **Support national awareness efforts** that normalize and legitimize men’s roles as allies in advancing women’s leadership

For Donors and International Partners

- **Invest in evidence-based, gender-transformative programming** that engages men and boys in challenging harmful gender norms and promoting equitable practices
- **Strengthen institutional and community capacities** by supporting training for facilitators in gender-transformative and conflict-sensitive approaches

- **Fund locally grounded initiatives** that address stigma, reduce backlash, and promote positive models of male allyship

For Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Community Actors

- **Design culturally responsive and locally grounded interventions** that reflect community realities and are developed through participatory approaches
- **Adopt complementary programming models** that combine safe spaces for men with structured joint dialogue with women
- **Address stigma and resistance** by promoting positive male role models and recognizing men who support women's leadership
- **Highlight the shared economic and social benefits** of women's participation to counter perceptions of competition
- **Increase the visibility of women leaders** across community platforms to shift perceptions and normalize women's leadership
- **Expand community-based initiatives for men and boys**, including positive fatherhood programmes and dialogue circles, as entry points for sustained engagement

For Women and Men

- **Promote shared responsibility in leadership and decision-making** within households and communities
- **Engage in inclusive dialogue platforms** that foster mutual understanding and trust
- **Support positive social norms** that enable women's participation and leadership
- **Collaborate across generations and social groups** to strengthen community cohesion and resilience

7. Conclusion

Strengthening women's leadership in Jordan's local communities requires coordinated efforts that address structural barriers, social norms, and institutional limitations. Dialogue with community stakeholders demonstrates that inclusive approaches through engaging women, men, youth, and local leaders can create pathways for more participatory and equitable decision-making. In the context of increasing economic pressures, evolving civic space, and growing demands for social cohesion in Jordan, advancing women's leadership is not only a matter of equity but a strategic necessity for sustainable development and stability. Sustained investment in locally grounded initiatives, combined with stronger partnerships between civil society, communities, and policymakers, will be essential to ensuring that women's leadership becomes an integral component of community resilience and development.

8. References

ARDD. "Raising Tomorrow's Leaders: The Role of Family and Social Norms in Shaping Young Women Leadership in Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://ardd-jo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/SheLeads-Raising-Future-Leaders.pdf>.

ARDD. "Supporting Governance from Below: Effective Local Engagement of and within Communities in Northern Municipalities in Jordan and the Role for Local Civil Society." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://ardd-jo.org/publication/supporting-governance-from-below-effective-local-engagement-of-and-within-communities-in-northern-municipalities-in-jordan-and-the-role-for-local-civil-society/>.

CIVICUS. "13 Countries Downgraded in New Ratings Report as Civic Rights Deteriorate Globally." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.civicus.org/index.php/media-resources/media-releases/5501-civicus-monitor-2021-report>.

International Republican Institute (IRI). "IRI Jordan Poll Shows Dissatisfaction over Country's Direction, Distrust in Political Institutions, Strong Desire for Democratic Development." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-jordan-poll-shows-dissatisfaction-over-countrys-direction-distrust-in-political-institutions-strong-desire-for-democratic-development/>.

UN Women Jordan. "Jordan Sets Historic Record for Women in Politics: Legal Reforms and Leadership Training Drive Change." Accessed March 19, 2026. <https://jordan.unwomen.org/en/stories/feature-story/2025/08/jordan-sets-historic-record-for-women-in-politics-legal-reforms-and-leadership-training-drive-change>.

