



JORDAN NOW: NEW WORK OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

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Introduction: Improving women's access to economic opportunities remains an important development challenge for the Middle East and North Africa Region. Although impressive strides have been made region-wide in improving women's educational and health outcomes, the region's low female labor force participation rates are not commensurate with these achievements. The youth, especially young women, are very vulnerable, facing significantly higher rates of unemployment. Productive use of this increasingly well educated portion of the labor force promises faster and more sustained economic growth for the region as a whole. In this context, MENA countries are looking at various policies and programs to change this situation. This Quick Note looks at a pilot program in Jordan which is attempting to tackle this challenge.

The Jordanian Context: Jordan is a relatively small country with a population of 5.9 million and a per-capita GNI of US\$3,300. Life expectancy at birth is 73 years on average. There are significant gender gaps, however, in measures of economic participation. While male unemployment hovers around 10%, female unemployment is around 24%. Labor force participation rates are only 23% for females compared to 70% for men. Furthermore, female youth unemployment stands at 38% and young women account for only 9% of the economically active population.



In light of these challenges, discussions were held between the World Bank President, Mr. Robert Zoellick and H.E. Former Prime Minister of Jordan, Nader Dahabi. The Jordanian government requested assistance from the World Bank to design and implement a pilot initiative focusing on: 1) female senior year community college students; and 2) private sector firms.

Pilot Overview: Jordan NOW is a pilot program that aims to increase female labor force participation. Part of the Adolescent Girls Initiative, the pilot involves two main interventions:

(i) *Job vouchers:* 600 young women have been offered a job voucher, which is a short-term incentive for firms to take a chance on hiring new graduates, provide them valuable on-the-

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job training and the opportunity to accrue work experience. Moreover, it also provides firms with an opportunity to overcome stereotypes by directly observing young women working for them; and

(ii) *Employability skills training* providing 600 new graduates with interpersonal and other basic job skills that employers identify as constraints which make them reluctant to hire young women. This training will be provided by the Jordan-based Business Development Center (BDC).



Funding: Jordan NOW is supported by a \$1 million grant from the World Bank's Adolescent Girls Initiative. In-country project Co-ordination is co-financed by the Development Impact Evaluation Initiative. The current funding gap is \$1.8 million.

Implementation and Timeline: Since securing initial funding of \$1 million from the AGI in March 2010, implementation of the Jordan NOW pilot has moved at a rapid pace. The July 2010 cohort of female graduates from 8 community colleges across Jordan were surveyed to identify the target population and benchmark outcomes. In August, a lottery was conducted and selected graduates were informed through outreach activities led by Community colleges, the World Bank and counterparts. College information sessions for graduates concluded on September 21, 2010. Multiple sessions of employability skills training are currently underway targeting smaller groups of selected graduates which will conclude on 2 November, 2010. Dissemination and outreach activities are a continuous part of the initial phase of implementation to ensure maximum participation in the pilot. These activities are undertaken with the support of the Jordan Chambers of Commerce and

Industry, the World Bank team, counterparts and the Business Development Center.

Initial feedback from the information sessions indicates very enthusiastic interest from the young graduates. Information about this program is spreading through friends; even students who have not been selected to receive the free training are calling in or showing up at the training sessions. Even more telling is the fact that many are willing to pay for these training sessions- an indication that the training we are providing may fill a critical gap! Similarly, firms are calling in asking for more information on the job voucher scheme and expressing their interest in hiring these young women. It is heartening to note that this initial feedback precedes major information outreach efforts to employers. Whether these indications translate into sustained employment remains an open question: this is precisely why Jordan NOW is underpinned by a rigorous impact evaluation.

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Impact Evaluation: This pilot has an experimental design to allow learning for future policy. The randomized lottery design allows the program to compare young women who participated in the intervention to similar young women who did not. This is an innovative pilot not only because the evaluation design allows us to compare job vouchers and training to determine which is more effective; it also measures joint effectiveness of both training and the job vouchers.