

# Cross-Country Research on Youth and Women Employment in Conflict-Affected Regions: Insights from Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Jordan, and Sudan

Country Case Study Jordan

## Introduction & context

Jordan, a stable yet economically fragile nation in the heart of the Middle East. It is home to a population of 11.3 million people as of 2025. The country is deeply influenced by its complex geopolitical environment and boasts a rich history of nomadic culture that continues to shape its societal norms and traditions. Hosting one of the largest refugee populations in the world—predominantly from Syria and Palestine—Jordan faces immense pressure on its labor market and public services. Regional conflicts, including the ongoing Gaza crisis and the prolonged Syrian conflict, have further exacerbated challenges such as unemployment, particularly among women and youth, while straining the country's already fragile employment ecosystem. These crises have disrupted trade routes, increased dependency on international aid, and heightened competition for limited job opportunities. Despite these significant challenges, Jordan continues to play a vital role in fostering regional stability and driving innovation.

The conducted research investigates the complex challenges faced by women and youth in conflict-affected regions. The study, conducted in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Jordan, and Sudan, explores actionable strategies to enhance economic engagement and highlights solutions that can be adapted to other fragile contexts. The research process employed a participatory approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative methods to gather data from diverse stakeholders. Key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys were conducted. All details can be found in Annex 1 and 2 of the full report.

The study is structured around two core pillars, each exploring critical aspects of employment ecosystems and development programming in fragile contexts. **Pillar A** focuses on the role of private sector SMEs in fostering job creation and building sustainable employment ecosystems for youth and women. **Pillar B** investigates how economic development and employment creation programs, including interventions of the Challenge Fund of Youth Employment (CFYE), function in conflict-affected zones and adapt to the barriers imposed by such settings.

## Key demographics Jordan

The country hosts one of the largest refugee populations globally, including **1.3 million Syrians**, placing immense pressure on public services and the employment ecosystem. Jordan's open economy, with robust trade ties to the Gulf states, the European Union, and the US, as well as notable foreign direct investment (FDI), leaves it highly susceptible to external shocks such as the Syrian conflict and the Gaza crisis<sup>1</sup>.

Unemployment remains a critical issue, with a national rate of **21.5%** in Q3 2024. Male unemployment stood at **18.3%**, while female unemployment was alarmingly higher at **33.3%**, reflecting significant gender inequality. Youth unemployment exceeded **46.1%**, particularly impacting rural areas like Ma'an (**24.3%**) and Aqaba (**16.3%**). The labor force participation rate was **34.3%**, with women contributing just **14.8%**, indicating persistent systemic barriers to accessing employment opportunities<sup>2</sup>.

Urban and rural disparities further compound the challenges. Youth in urban areas face unemployment rates of **20.6%**, while those in rural regions experience even greater difficulties, with young rural women disproportionately affected. Despite high levels of education among women—**76.2%** of employed women hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared to **26.7%** of men—female participation in the labor force remains among the lowest globally, recorded at

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Statistics, 2025

<sup>2</sup> Department of Statistics, 2024

**13.8%** in 2023. Moreover, only **3%** of young women aged 15-24 are employed, compared to **24%** of young men<sup>3</sup>. Income disparities and limited wage growth further hinder progress. Over **70% of workers earn less than 500 JOD** (\$704) monthly, while the national average income remains **546 JOD**. To address rising living costs, the minimum wage was increased to **290 JOD** (\$409) in January 2025. However, many workers continue to be engaged in the informal sector, which comprises over half of all jobs and leaves them without social safety nets or pathways to growth<sup>4</sup>.

Jordan's economy relies heavily on micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), which make up **95% of businesses**, contribute **40% to GDP**, and employ **60% of the workforce**. Despite their economic importance, MSMEs face significant challenges, such as limited access to financing and regulatory inefficiencies, which restrict their ability to create sustainable jobs<sup>5</sup>.

Structural inefficiencies also weigh heavily on Jordan's economy. GDP contributions by sector show agriculture accounting for **4.81%**, industry for **23.95%**, and services for **60.36%**, underscoring the country's reliance on service-oriented activities. Regional conflicts like the Syrian war and Gaza crisis disrupt trade routes and increase competition for low-wage jobs, particularly in the informal economy. To combat these challenges, Jordan requires targeted investments in rural regions, robust SME support, and systemic reforms to bridge gender and regional employment gaps<sup>6</sup>.

## Key findings of the research

Jordan's labor market is a dynamic yet fragile landscape shaped by deep-rooted systemic challenges, further strained by regional and global conflicts. Insights from stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions vividly illustrate the hardships faced, alongside the innovative strategies being implemented to navigate these difficulties and create opportunities.

The recent regional conflicts have significantly impacted Jordan's economy, particularly the tourism sector, which has faced sharp declines due to regional instability. Additionally, the boycott movement of not consuming or buying products made by Israel or on occupied Palestinian territory, while creating challenges for some companies, has opened new opportunities for local factories. Many factories reported increased demand and even introduced new production lines to cater to the growing preference for locally produced goods. However, the boycott also led to layoffs in companies directly affected by it, with many youth losing their jobs as a result. This dual impact underscores both the resilience of Jordanian industries and the vulnerabilities faced by its workforce during times of economic turbulence.

## Long-standing structural challenges

The challenges confronting Jordan's employment ecosystem have deep roots in its economic structure and societal norms, predating recent conflicts. **Skills mismatch** is a persistent issue; while Jordan has one of the highest literacy rates in the region and invests significantly in higher education, employers often highlight a lack of practical and technical skills in the workforce. Many young people find themselves struggling to secure jobs in oversaturated fields like

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<sup>3</sup> Haqqi; Open Knowledge Repository; World Bank

<sup>4</sup> WageIndicator; Zawya; EconData Insights

<sup>5</sup> BTI 2024 Jordan Country Report; MDPI

<sup>6</sup> Statista; BTI 2024 Jordan Country Report; Arab Development Portal

engineering and business, while demand for vocational and technical roles in fields like agriculture, IT, and renewable energy remains unmet.

**Gender barriers** further complicate the labour market, negatively affecting women's access to employment opportunities. Deeply entrenched cultural norms, limited childcare, and unsafe transportation disproportionately affect women, especially in rural areas. Even highly educated women face significant hurdles, as societal expectations and systemic constraints limit their ability to enter or remain in the workforce.

**Regional disparities** exacerbate these challenges, with urban areas like Amman concentrating most of the economic opportunities, while rural governorates such as Karak, Ma'raq, and Ma'an are left with inadequate infrastructure and fewer employment options. This inequity has a disproportionate impact on rural youth and women, who face higher unemployment rates and reduced access to training programs.

Meanwhile, **dependence on the informal sector**—where over half of the country's workforce operates—leaves workers vulnerable, without protections or pathways to long-term growth. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which make up 95% of Jordan's businesses and employ 60% of the workforce, have long been the backbone of the economy. However, SMEs grapple with high operational costs, limited access to financing, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, all of which stifle growth and job creation.

### **Exacerbation by regional and global conflicts**

While these systemic challenges persist, regional and global conflicts have intensified economic pressures. Hosting over 1.3 million Syrian and 2.3 million Palestinian refugees has increased competition for low-wage jobs in sectors like agriculture and services, further straining public resources. The **Gaza conflict** has disrupted trade routes and added uncertainty in critical sectors, including tourism. The impact of the fall of the Syrian regime on the Jordanian economic ecosystem remains to be seen.

The **Ukraine-Russia war** has driven up the cost of raw materials destabilising Jordan's manufacturing sector. Many businesses have been forced to reduce production or pass these rising costs onto consumers, leading to layoffs and hiring freezes. Compounding these challenges, the instability around the **Bab al-Mandab Strait**—a vital shipping route—has caused delays and increased transportation costs, further disrupting supply chains. Recent attacks in the **Red Sea**, particularly near Yemen, have severely impacted global trade, increasing insurance premiums, delaying shipments, and raising transportation costs. These disruptions have made it more expensive and difficult for Jordan to import essential goods and export locally produced products, exacerbating **inflationary pressures** and limiting economic growth. As businesses struggle to absorb these costs, the uncertainty in regional trade routes continues to pose significant risks to Jordan's economic stability.

These external pressures have pushed many Jordanian businesses into "survival mode," where they focus on maintaining operations rather than growth. Stakeholders described a cautious "wait-and-watch" approach among both local businesses and international investors, particularly from Gulf countries and Europe, due to the country's vulnerability to regional instability.

### **Positive impact of the boycott movement**

Amid these challenges, the **boycott movement** has emerged as an unexpected driver of resilience. The movement, spurred by regional tensions and public sentiment, encouraged

consumers to prioritize locally made products over imports. This shift in purchasing behaviour has provided a much-needed boost to Jordanian factories and SMEs, particularly in manufacturing and food processing. Stakeholders reported increased sales, capacity expansion, and renewed innovation among local businesses striving to meet the growing demand. **This movement has not only supported business survival but has also created job opportunities, particularly in rural areas where local production plays a significant role in the economy.** It has fostered a sense of economic nationalism, as consumers rally around Jordanian-made goods to reduce dependency on external markets and stabilize the local economy.

**Challenges and adaptations of employment programs**  
Employment programs play a vital role in addressing systemic barriers and providing opportunities in fragile contexts. However, implementing such programs in Jordan comes with its own set of challenges:

- **Complex application processes:** Stakeholders emphasized that the application process for CFYE funding is often too complicated, discouraging smaller organizations and less conventional sectors from applying.
- **Lengthy training periods:** Beneficiaries noted that extended training timelines can be burdensome, particularly for economically disadvantaged individuals who need immediate income.
- **Mandatory formalization:** Entrepreneurial program participants, especially women in vocational training, expressed frustration over the requirement to register businesses post-training. Many cited financial and regulatory barriers as deterrents.
- **Scalability issues:** Rural and underserved areas face additional challenges, such as inadequate infrastructure and cultural resistance to women's employment, making program delivery more complex.

Despite these issues, a strong sense of resilience and aspiration among Jordan's women, youth, and SMEs allows for adaptive and innovative strategies to overcome them. Vocational training programs aligned with labor market demands are highly sought after, particularly in sectors like renewable energy, technology, and food production. Women consistently expressed a desire for flexible training models, childcare solutions, and transportation subsidies to overcome societal barriers.

## Recommendations

The findings from this research highlight the pressing need for a **holistic approach** to address Jordan's labour market challenges. Below are recommendations for key stakeholders to create a more inclusive and resilient employment ecosystem.

### Bridging the gap between education and jobs

Jordan's youth are eager to work, but many face difficulties finding opportunities due to skills mismatches. This persistent issue arises from a disconnect between what universities teach and what the job market demands. Mamoun Abu Shawar from the Jordan Enterprise Development Corporation highlighted this concern, drawing from his personal experience with his daughter, who studied artificial intelligence (AI). He noted that much of her university education focused on theoretical concepts, leaving her unprepared for real-world applications in the field.

*"The system needs to change completely so that graduates are job-ready when they leave university, with real-world skills that align with market demands".*

To address this, universities must move away from theoretical-heavy curricula and integrate hands-on, practical training into their programs. Mamoun suggested replacing less applicable coursework with industry-specific projects and internships to ensure graduates have the skills and experience employers require. For high-demand fields like AI, renewable energy, and digital technology, fostering collaborations between educational institutions and the private sector will be essential. Programs should also introduce more targeted, market-oriented courses to prepare students for the realities of their chosen industries.

### **Empowering women in the workforce**

Women face tremendous cultural and systemic barriers, particularly in rural areas. Offering flexible work arrangements like freelancing or remote jobs can give them the opportunity to balance family responsibilities with employment, providing them self-reliance and allowing them to contribute to the economy. Additionally, providing affordable childcare and reliable transportation options is essential to unlocking their potential. Community awareness campaigns can play a powerful role in challenging societal norms that limit women's opportunities.

### **Supporting SMEs, the backbone of Jordan's economy**

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the engines of job creation in Jordan, but they often face high costs, limited access to financing, and excessive red tape. Simplifying regulations, streamlining financing options, and offering incentives like grants or tax breaks can help SMEs grow. Building on the momentum of the boycott movement, which shifted demand toward local products, the government and other stakeholders should provide further support to these businesses as they expand production lines and improve their competitiveness.

### **Addressing the impact of conflicts on the economy**

Targeted financial relief for affected businesses, diversification of supply chains, and policies promoting local sourcing can help the sectors hit by insecurity in the region recover. Additionally, fostering economic resilience through campaigns encouraging the consumption of local products is a smart way forward.

### **Rethinking employment programs**

Programs like the Challenge Fund for Youth Employment have a strong potential to drive significant change through their investment into the employment sector, but the impact could be amplified. Implementing Partners advise to simplify application processes to make programs more accessible to smaller organizations. Shorter, modular training programs would allow participants to quickly transition to work, especially for those in financial need. Supporting informal businesses, which many rely on in rural areas, with flexible options instead of rigid requirements like immediate registration, can help bring more people into the fold. Digital skills training and access to global freelancing platforms should also be prioritized to empower youth and women, especially in underserved areas.

### **Focus on rural and underserved areas**

Economic growth in Jordan is concentrated in urban centers, leaving rural areas behind. To address this, there must be a concerted effort to invest in infrastructure like transportation, internet access, and industrial hubs in these underserved regions. Incentivizing SMEs to establish operations in rural areas can bring much-needed jobs closer to communities, while subsidies and training programs tailored to rural industries, such as agriculture and food processing, can stimulate local economies.

### **Building for the long-term**

To ensure long-term success, employment initiatives need to focus on sustainable approaches. Reducing dependency on donor funding through partnerships with private-sector companies is a critical step. Regular monitoring and evaluation of programs can ensure interventions remain effective and adaptable. Collaboration is also key—bringing together government, NGOs, and private businesses on shared platforms can drive more cohesive, holistic and impactful strategies.