

FEMINIST SERVICE PROVISION AND GENDER JUSTICE

BRIEF

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This is a brief of the KVINFO study titled *Feminist Organising, Justice, and Change from below - Review of Jordanian Women's Union's Work 2017-2022* by Afaf Jabiri (published in June 2026). For the full study, please consult [Publikationer - KVINFO](#).



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SUMMARY

Service delivery by the women's rights movement, such as support for survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), may be accepted as an inseparable part of advancing gender justice, or as having an impact at a systemic level. In supporting GBV survivors, for instance, we assume that women's rights organisations get insights that can be used for improving those services or for advocating for gender just legislation.

However, the question about how this service delivery more precisely plays into such broader agendas remains: How may feminist service provision be linked to the prevention of GBV? – to political participation and legal change, involving activities such as advocacy and awareness raising?

This brief offers an overview of the more elaborate study, initiated by KVINFO. It examines systemic transformation emerging from sustained, collective, and politically grounded work of Jordanian Women's Union (JWU), the largest women's rights organisation in Jordan, based on one core question: How does the engagement of JWU with individuals and grassroots networks at the community level contribute to broader structural change?

Jordanian Women's Union was established in Jordan in 1945. Since then, the organisation has been a prominent actor for gender justice in Jordan, however discontinued from 1957 to 1993 as a result of restrictions on civil society imposed by the state of Jordan. JWU was selected as the case for the study, since this organisation works within a broad scope of agendas and modalities, including service delivery and has partnered with KVINFO for almost two decades.

The study adopts a decolonial feminist lens, seeing change as relational, contextually grounded, and co-produced through trust, care, and shared political commitment. Transformation is understood as the reconfiguration of power, meaning, and visibility within communities.

Answering the core question thereby moves beyond conventional evaluation frameworks that tend to prioritise external metrics, hierarchical validation, or depoliticised indicators.

The study applies feminist theory as a practical tool rather than an abstract overlay. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's concepts of redistribution, recognition, and representation alongside Naila Kabeer's emphasis on agency and access to resources, and informed by intersectional thinking, the study traces how JWU's community-level work contributes to social and political shifts. These frameworks help render visible subtle, often intangible forms of change, like voice, dignity, participation, and belonging, and translate them into actionable analysis.

JWU's interventions, such as hotline services, legal and psychosocial support, leadership training, and advocacy campaigns, form part of a coherent feminist strategy aimed at disrupting entrenched structures of violence, inequality, and marginalisation. Redistribution, in this context, means creating pathways to survival and agency; recognition entails validating women's lived experiences as forms of political knowledge; and representation points at redefining who shapes public life and under what conditions.

Women engaged through JWU are treated as political actors rather than passive beneficiaries. JWU cultivates their agency through legal literacy, feminist consciousness, and opportunities for decision-making to ensure that empowerment is co-created rather than imposed. The study also

highlights the need to deepen structural commitments to intersectionality. While refugee women, women with disabilities, and those in remote areas are included, JWU programming is often generalised. To fully embody intersectional feminist principles, JWU must intentionally differentiate programming, design inclusive strategies, and enable marginalised women to shape the services intended for them.

At the same time, JWU operates within persistent tensions: between political courage and donor expectations, between grassroots activism and professionalised structures, and between historical legacies and threats such as digital violence.

These challenges reflect the realities of feminist organising under shrinking civic space and global funding models that frequently require de-politicisation. Nevertheless, JWU continues to navigate these pressures by maintaining a principled stance and prioritising local feminist knowledge over imported models.

This study is as much about listening as evaluating. Through the voices of staff, social workers, lawyers, and women, it has engaged in a political dialogue about what justice, freedom, and feminist work can look like when rooted in struggle rather than strategy alone. Moving forward, JWU's work points to the need for internal systems and resources that match its political vision, while integrating the most excluded women at the centre of programming and decision-making.

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The study concludes that systemic change is not a distant endpoint, it is somehow evident in everyday interventions of JWU, in their collective action, and in JWU's refusal to separate care from politics. The grassroots activism is the foundation for transformative feminist practice that is built incrementally, from below, in ways that ripple across communities and society at large.

MAIN FINDINGS

The below-mentioned findings emerge from conversations with those deeply involved in JWU's work, like staff, branch members, social workers, lawyers, women engaging with JWU, and leadership. The study constitutes a space for collective reflection, not a technical assessment or an external critique.

IMPACT AT THE INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY AND SOCIETY LEVELS

The findings of the study show that women understand the impact of JWU's programmes in collective rather than purely individual terms. Change was consistently described as relational and rooted in family and community, with particular emphasis on children's wellbeing, education, and long-term stability. Support provided by JWU extends beyond the individual woman to the family as a whole, which contributes to improved livelihoods and, in some cases, pathways out of deep poverty.

These outcomes were significant to all women who participated in the review, and specifically to Palestinian refugee women, given the structural constraints of life in Palestinian refugee camps, including displacement and socio-political marginalisation. Women also highlighted the generational impact of their engagement and noted how it shaped their children's values, aspirations, and involvement in community life.

Overall, empowerment was framed as a transformation of social relations rather than an individual process, which challenges dominant development narratives and points instead to a contextual, collective, and community-rooted understanding of change.

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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS

Women's experiences of political participation as communicated by women who participated in the study reveal a strong link between personal transformation and collective responsibility. Engagement with JWU often began through practical programmes such as literacy or legal awareness, but over time enabled women to take on influential roles within their communities, including mobilising others, connecting other women to services, and shaping local political debates. While many women were active in electoral campaigns and community organising most expressed deep disengagement with formal political institutions, particularly parliamentary elections, which they viewed as ineffective and unresponsive to the realities of women. This disengagement should not be read as apathy, but as a form of political critique to political processes. Instead, women described alternative forms of political action rooted in everyday life, including care work, solidarity, selective engagement with local candidates, and community leadership.

These practices reflect a grassroots feminist politics that challenges narrow definitions of participation and highlights how power is built collectively from below. In this context, JWU's role is not only to provide services, but also to build skills, and most importantly to support the conditions under which this every day, community-based political engagement can emerge and be sustained.

UNDER-AGE MARRIAGES AND AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGNS

Empowerment emerges through the expansion of knowledge, agency, and life choices.

Long-term community-based feminist work can disrupt cycles of violence and inequality.

Despite the 1999 amendment to Jordan's Personal Status Law raising the legal age of marriage to 18, the continued use of judicial discretion has allowed under-age marriages to persist, particularly in contexts shaped by poverty, displacement, and patriarchal control. Available data show stagnation rather than meaningful progress, which continue to demonstrate the limits of legal reform that does not address underlying power structures. Within this context, JWU has adopted a sustained and multi-level approach to combating under-age marriages, combining legal advocacy, awareness raising, community outreach, and psychosocial support.

JWU frames under-age marriages as a form of structural violence rather than a cultural practice, and works to shift power dynamics at individual, community, and policy levels. Focus group discussions revealed that there is an intergenerational impact of under-age marriage, as well as the transformative role of feminist awareness. Women described how access to legal knowledge and rights-based education enabled them to challenge harmful practices, resist pressure to marry off their daughters, and prioritise education and safety.

ACCESS TO RESOURCES, KNOWLEDGE, AND SUPPORT

Empowerment emerges from the combined expansion of resources, agency, and achievements that enable women to act as active agents of change despite structural constraints, not from isolated personal achievement. Women's engagement with JWU expanded their access to resources in material, informational and social forms. Legal literacy, awareness raising, education, and employment support enabled women to challenge internalised norms and to respond to structural exclusion rather than individual failure. Access to feminist knowledge was described as a key enabling resource, particularly in reframing practices such as under-age marriage as forms of gender-based violence rather than protection. This expansion of resources supported the development of agency, understood as the ability to make meaningful and strategic life choices within unequal power relations. Women described exercising this agency by resisting harmful family pressures, leaving abusive environments, prioritising their children's education, and making selective political choices. These shifts had visible outcomes in the lives of their children and communities that have created breaks in intergenerational cycles of harm.

JWU'S STAFF PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICE

Perspectives from JWU staff, lawyers, and social workers revealed that women's pathways to change are neither smooth nor linear, but are shaped by long-term, emotionally demanding processes of trust, care, and sustained support. Staff highlighted the hidden labour behind support to women, including continuous follow-up, crisis response, and navigating systems that frequently fail to deliver justice. They stressed that awareness raising and service provision are inseparable and they should form a single process through which women gradually build knowledge, confidence, and the ability to act. This work comes at a high emotional and political cost, as staff

carry the weight of women's experiences while confronting entrenched institutional barriers. Staff also noted the gap between knowing one's rights and being able to claim them, and emphasised the need to provide women with a realistic understanding of the challenges they may face.

JWU's commitment to long-term, community-rooted awareness campaigns, often sustained through partnerships with grassroots organisations reflects a decolonial feminist approach that prioritises continuity, local ownership, and collective power over short-term, donor-driven results. However, declining outreach due to funding constraints, heavy caseloads, and restrictive civic space poses ongoing challenges to sustaining this work at the grassroots level.

INTERSECTIONALITY

The study identifies a gap in how JWU's programming addresses intersectionality. It suggests that integrating intersectional thinking more deliberately into programme development, evaluation, and decision-making would strengthen inclusivity, amplify the voices of all women, and ensure that services respond meaningfully to their lived realities.

While intersectionality lies at the core of JWU's political mission, it is not always fully operationalised in their programmes. JWU engages diverse groups, including refugees, women with disabilities, and other marginalised communities, but programmes are not consistently adapted to the specific circumstances and needs and rights of these women.

As a result, the distinct barriers faced by the most marginalised may not be fully considered, particularly in programme design and strategic planning.

At the organisational level, sustaining core services such as the hotline, legal aid, and psychosocial support remains a major challenge, as donor priorities often favour short-term or “innovative” projects over long-term care and continuity.

PERSISTENT CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING SERVICES AND MAINTAINING POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

JWU faces a range of evolving challenges that reflect broader shifts in structural and gender-based violence, civic space, and the political environment. Gender-based violence is increasingly being rebranded in digital spaces through depoliticised language, such as “toxic relationships,” which obscures its structural and patriarchal roots, while new forms of technology-facilitated violence, including digital surveillance, blackmail, and online coercion, expose women to additional risks.

At the organisational level, sustaining core services such as the hotline, legal aid, and psychosocial support remains a major challenge, as donor priorities often favour short-term or “innovative” projects over long-term care and continuity. This is compounded by restrictive NGO regulations that delay funding approvals and limit the ability of organisations to respond flexibly to women's needs, effectively using legal and financial mechanisms as tools of control.

JWU also navigates the tension between political engagement and organisational survival, particularly in relation to speaking out on the atrocities in Palestine, which aligns with its feminist and justice-based principles but carries institutional and funding risks. Finally, as the organisation develops, it continues to negotiate internal power dynamics between its democratic, membership-based structure and an expanding professional workforce, working to ensure that service delivery does not dilute its political mission and that decision-making remains rooted in feminist values and collective accountability.

SERVICE PROVISION AS JUSTICE-ORIENTED PRACTICE

JWU's work emerges not as service provision alone, but as a long-term, justice-oriented practice that supports survival, resistance, and the collective rebuilding of women's lives within deeply unequal structures. In applying the theoretical frameworks of Nancy Fraser and Naila Kabeer to the women's narratives empowerment is highlighted as a process shaped by recognition, representation, and real choice. JWU's role in creating spaces where women's experiences are heard and validated challenges forms of injustice rooted in invisibility and misrecognition.

In the study, women described regaining confidence, finding their voice, and becoming active within their communities, reflecting a demand for social recognition as survivors of violence and as agents of knowledge and value. At the same time, women's widespread rejection of formal political processes reflects political exclusion rather than apathy, as refugee women remain largely unrepresented within existing institutions. Instead, women engaged in politics on their own terms through community leadership, mutual support, and everyday forms of action. Drawing on Kabeer's framework, these experiences demonstrate empowerment as the expansion of real capabilities, including the ability to work, protect children, leave violent environments, and support others. However, the narratives also reveal the limits of empowerment in the face of ongoing legal, economic, and political barriers.

LOOKING AHEAD: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF FEMINIST ORGANISING

The study highlights the importance of deepening JWU's grassroots engagement, securing sustainable, long-term funding, and expanding initiatives such as youth leadership programs. It also highlights the need for continued advocacy for feminist funding approaches that prioritise long-term, systemic support rather than short-term, project-driven models.

JWU's grassroots work demonstrates the transformative potential of feminist organising: creating change that is material, political, and deeply empowering. Real empowerment emerges when women are placed at the centre and when they shape their own futures and make decisions that affect their lives and communities.

The challenge moving forward is to build on this foundation in ways that keep the movement inclusive, resilient, and responsive to the demands of all women in order to ensure that no one is left behind in the pursuit of justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Feminist organisations in the region already know what they need and are not lacking vision. What is often missing is sufficient political space, consistent support, and recognition for the depth and complexity of their work.

The recommendations that follow are not intended to direct or correct JWU's practice. The organisation is already grappling with strategic questions: how to safeguard essential services like hotline and legal support, respond to evolving forms of gender-based violence, such as digital violence, maintain democratic structures while expanding, and nurture youth leadership in a challenging political climate. Rather, these suggestions are offered in solidarity, as tools to support ongoing reflection, strategy, and resistance. They affirm that feminist work is inherently political, and cannot be reduced to discrete projects, and that organisations like JWU are not merely recipients of knowledge, since they also generate it.

1. SECURE CORE FUNDING FOR ESSENTIAL SERVICES

- * Advocate for and seek long-term, flexible funding that supports JWU's core programmes, such as the hotline, legal aid, and psychosocial support services.
- * Engage donors in dialogue about the ethical responsibility to fund services that accompany awareness-raising and political education to ensure that women are not left with knowledge but no tools for action.
- * Develop a sustainability plan to reduce dependency on short-term, project-based funding, including exploring local fundraising strategies or solidarity-based models.

2. STRENGTHEN ORGANISATIONAL COHERENCE BETWEEN THE POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL ARMS

- * Facilitate regular internal dialogues between the elected leadership and management staff (institutional arm) to build mutual understanding, clarify roles, and maintain a shared political vision.
- * Develop internal political education programmes to support staff, especially those not rooted in activism, in understanding the feminist and political identity of JWU.
- * Create participatory spaces where both activists and professionals contribute to strategic planning and programmatic decisions.

3. MAINTAIN POLITICAL CLARITY WHILE MANAGING RISK

- * Continue JWU's principled stance on regional issues like Palestine, while also developing risk management strategies that safeguard the organisation's legal and operational existence.
- * Build alliances with other feminist and human rights groups to amplify collective voice and offer protection when taking political positions.
- * Document and publicly share the impact of political instability in the region and continuity of occupation and western states' intervention in the region on women's lives to make the feminist case for political engagement clear to funders and policymakers.

4. DEVELOP A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO TECHNOLOGY-FACILITATED GBV (TFGBV)

- * Expand and resource the new digital GBV (TFGBV) programme, ensuring it includes prevention, awareness, legal support, and digital literacy.
- * Engage with tech platforms, legal experts, and other feminist organisations to develop localised strategies for digital safety and advocacy.
- * Train staff and partners on recognising and responding to new forms of online violence, particularly those affecting young women and girls.

5. CHALLENGE DONOR-DRIVEN AGENDAS THROUGH FEMINIST NEGOTIATION

- * Advocate for feminist funding principles that value continuity, care work, and political organising — not just “innovation” or quantifiable outcomes.
- * Build donor awareness about the regional context, the intersection of politics and gender, and the ethical risks of depoliticised funding models.
- * Consider creating a donor engagement toolkit that clearly communicates JWU's values, priorities, and red lines.

6. DOCUMENT AND SHARE JWU'S MODEL AS A FEMINIST PRACTICE

- * JWU has rich experience in sustaining feminist work under pressure. Documenting its history, strategies, and lessons learned can offer valuable tools for others in the region and beyond.
- * Consider producing reflective materials (reports, stories, videos) that centre women's voices and share JWU's decolonial and political feminist approach.

7. CONTINUE COURSES IN FEMINIST THEORIES FOR STAFF AND MEMBERS AND CONTRIBUTE THROUGH RESEARCH TO FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE MAKING:

- * By creating spaces where staff can reflect critically on their work and link it to broader feminist thought, JWU can contribute meaningfully to feminist knowledge production from the Global South. There is still little written about the everyday practices of frontline feminist workers in the Arab world. JWU's model, which is built from experience, care, and collective struggle offers a rich source of insight. Bridging practice with theory strengthens internal political consciousness and challenges dominant, Western-centric narratives about what feminist work looks like and where it comes from.



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