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HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER EQUALITY IN JORDAN: FEMINIST- POSTSTRUCTURALIST EXPLORATION

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Abstract. This study aims to identify Jordanian youth's perceptions of gender equality. It is a quantitative survey-based study that targets higher education students in Jordan. Valid data are obtained from 848 university students having an average age of 20. A survey, based on one scale, is designed to measure students' perceptions of gender equality. Different statistical methods are used to address differences in perceptions, the relationship between independent and dependent variables and their statistical significance (set at $p \leq 0.05$). The study considers the tenets of feminist poststructuralism to interpret its findings. The results reveal that the perceptions of female students are more gender-balanced in comparison to their male counterparts, as they draw on resistant discourses. Furthermore, the study shows that students' perceptions prone to be less stereotypical among fourth-year students, who study in humanitarian schools, live in western Amman, belong to high social-economic status and whose mothers completed their postgraduate studies.

Keywords: discourses, feminism, gender, Middle-East, quantitative data, university

1. Introduction

Gender is a "system of social practices [that] organizes relations of inequality" (Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin in Wharton, 2013, pp. 7). Gender equality, which is one of the most important human rights issues in the Middle East, refers to "equal participation of women and men in different life domains" (Abendroth, 2014). Jordan, a developing country with relatively small economy, ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1992, emphasizing strong attention to advance women's rights and improve their status in different socio-economic and political spheres. Though there have been considerable efforts by the government to bridge the gender gap in Jordan, the results of the Global Gender Gap report indicated the low rank of Jordan (135 out of 144 countries) in terms of progress towards achieving gender equality (The Global Gender Gap Report, 2017). Jordanian women remain vulnerable and overwhelmingly disempowered due to bearing hardships resulted from patriarchal discourses and social norms that have restricted their roles in the society. For instance, Jordanian women's

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workforce participation is one of the lowest worldwide at only 14 percent (WorldBank, 2017).

Despite increasing national consideration to gender equality. Limited research has examined youth's perceptions of gender equality in the Jordanian society which is considered one of the youngest in the world. It is vital to investigate Jordanian youth's perceptions of gender equality within different social institutions due to their roles in reproducing these perceptions across generations. This study focuses on Jordanian youth who are enrolled in higher education institutions, as represented by the University of Jordan in the capital Amman. The aim of this study lies at identifying youth's perceptions of gender equality and recognizing if these perceptions are traditional, nontraditional, or gender-balanced¹. This helps in understanding the various discourses that influence aspects of everyday life in the Jordanian society and further shape the perceptions of youth.

Furthermore, this study sheds light on the influence of different factors such as gender, age, monthly income, place of residence, type of faculty and the education level of the mother on youth's perceptions of gender equality. Different previous studies underlined that perceptions of gender equality vary between male and female youth and adolescents. The study of Boxley et al. (1995), Hoover and Fishbein (1999), Ampofo (2001), Evertsson (2006), Crouter et al. (2007), Levant et al. (2008), Skelton et al. (2010) and Lundgren et al. (2013) confirmed that females are more likely than males to endorse views that perpetuate gender equality. As for the monthly income variable, previous studies such as Foshee and Bauman (1992), Evertsson (2006) and Hess et al. (2014) highlighted that adolescents from higher social and economic status expressed more equitable gender perceptions. Likewise, Valenzuela (1993) and Evertsson (2006) showed that higher maternal education was associated with less traditional perceptions of gender equality. On another note, results of Galambos et al. (1990), Mchale et al. (2001) and Crouter et al. (2007) emphasized that gender perceptions of adolescents were less stereotypical with increasing age, this was inconsistent with LaFont (2010), Tinklin et al. (2005), and Obare et al. (2013) who confirmed the tendency of older youth and adolescents to reveal more traditional views concerning gender equality compared to their younger counterparts. Finally, studies of LaFont (2010), Japaridze et al. (2013) and Shteivi (2015) promoted the idea that youth who live in urban areas hold more liberal views toward gender equality in comparison to youth who live in rural areas.

2. Feminist Poststructuralism

This study is underpinned by the tenets of feminist poststructuralism drawing on the work of Weedon (1997) and Gavey (1989). Feminist poststructuralism is “a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories...to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (Weedon, 1997, p.40). Feminist poststructuralism studies discourses which are defined as “systems of statements which

¹ Traditional perceptions of gender equality are shaped by social and cultural stereotyping processes. In contrast, followers of nontraditional perceptions refuse to depend upon stereotyping to determine their views of gender equality. A gender-balanced perception is a trend whose followers adopt impartiality in viewing aspects of gender equality.

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cohere around common meanings and values ... [that] are a product of social factors, of powers and practices, rather than an individual's set of ideas" (Hollway in Gavey, 1989, p.463-464). Discourses are the important ingredient of any society, they shape and are constructed and reconstructed in social institutions such as universities. According to Weedon (1997) and Gavey (1989), discourses are different in terms of power they provide to individuals. The dominant discourses have a strong institutional base, they are privileged and authoritative as they endorse the common sense premise which enjoys a great level of social approval. On the other hand, the resistant or counter discourses appear on the scene to reject their marginalized status quo and challenge the existing practices that are accepted as the norm. In light with the study's objectives, feminist poststructuralism helps to comprehend the discourses that Jordanian youth draw on, through their responses on the study's scale to determine their perceptions of gender equality. This study believes that youth have agency in how they relate themselves with respect to various discourses and that they are able to challenge dominant discourses that enhance the traditional perceptions of gender equality.

3. Methodology

This study is quantitative in nature. Based on a stratified random sampling of students enrolled at the University of Jordan during the academic year 2017-2018, 848 students (284 males, 564 females) were part of the study. As per reviewing the previous literature, the survey was developed in two sections taking into account the Jordanian context. The first part concentrates on the demographic, social and economic characteristics of the students and the second part encompasses of the study's scale which contains 21 statements that help to identify students' perceptions of gender equality. For each separate statement, scores between 1 and 3 are given for the participants' responses, where 1 is given for a traditional perception, 2 for a nontraditional perception, and 3 for a gender-balanced perception (see Appendix 1).

A pilot study was conducted before initiating the execution phase of the study. 40 surveys were distributed to test the validity of the tool. The pilot study was repeated two weeks after the first one targeted at the same participants. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the responses of the two pilot experiments, and the results were 90%, indicating a high level of stability in the developed survey.

Different statistical methods such as arithmetical means, standard deviations, t-tests and one-way ANOVAs were used to recognize the differences in perceptions and understand the relationship between the independent variables (gender, age, college, place of residence, monthly income of the family, educational level of the mother) and the dependent variable (Youth's perceptions of gender equality); these tests also showed any statistical significance at the level of $p \leq 0.05$.

To determine students' perceptions of gender equality on the study's scale, the mathematical averages of the responses were divided into the following categories: 1–1.74 = traditional perception; 1.75–2.24 = nontraditional perception; and 2.25–3 = gender-balanced perception.

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4. Findings

4.1 Students' perceptions of gender equality

Table (1) shows the frequencies, arithmetic means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the scale, for which they were asked to decide whether they agree, stay neutral or disagree on a given statement related to gender equality. The overall average response was 2.01 indicating nontraditional perceptions of gender equality among students. The highest average among student responses was 2.26, corresponding to statements that refer to "Women's education is useless because they will become housewives in the future" and "It is important to shed light on women's leadership success stories" while the lowest was 1.69, on statements referring to "University curriculum need to be modified to reflect better image of women" and "I encourage the amendment of laws in Jordan to achieve gender equality".

Table 1

Students' perceptions of gender equality

#	Statement	Agree		Neither Agree Nor Disagree		Disagree		Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
1	Women's education is useless because they will become housewives in the future	227	26,77	177	20,87	444	52,36	2,26	0,80
2	It is important to shed light on women's leadership success stories	230	27,12	168	19,81	400	53,07	2,26	0,86
3	The performance of female students in mathematics is better than male students	234	27,09	172	20,28	442	52,12	2,20	0,86
4	I prefer my manager to be a male	224	26,42	196	23,11	428	50,47	2,24	0,84
5	Female students excel in humanitarian subjects while male students master in scientific subjects	223	26,30	197	23,23	428	50,47	2,24	0,84
6	Women are abler than men to lead	223	26,30	199	23,47	426	50,24	2,24	0,84
7	Women don't master sports activities like men	236	27,83	171	20,17	441	52,00	2,24	0,86
8	Policy makers and politicians must be men	242	28,04	108	18,63	448	52,83	2,24	0,87
9	The university curriculum enhances the language of maleness	239	28,18	170	20,64	431	51,18	2,23	0,86
10	Women are more capable of solving administrative problems than men	249	29,36	182	21,46	417	49,17	2,20	0,86

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11	The performance of female and male students in scientific subjects is similar	173	20,40	400	03,07	220	26,03	2,06	0,78
12	The university curriculum shows that women are inferior to men	198	23,30	433	01,06	217	20,09	2,02	0,70
13	It is preferable that the teachers of scientific subjects to be males only	217	20,09	402	47,41	229	27,00	2,01	0,73
14	Leadership jobs must be filled by men	442	02,12	167	19,69	239	28,18	1,76	0,86
15	Controlling women is easier than controlling men	449	02,90	171	20,17	228	26,89	1,74	0,86
16	It is preferable to have a mixed-gender education in Jordan	402	03,20	173	20,40	223	26,30	1,73	0,80
17	Jordanian society is oriented towards male values, standards and, experiences	462	04,48	104	18,16	232	27,36	1,73	0,86
18	Education is the best profession for women	444	02,36	194	22,88	210	24,76	1,72	0,83
19	The excellence of men is due to their intelligence, while it is due to luck for women	462	04,48	172	20,28	214	20,24	1,71	0,84
20	University curriculum need to be modified to reflect a better image of women	469	00,31	170	20,64	204	24,06	1,69	0,83
21	I encourage the amendment of laws in Jordan to achieve gender equality	480	06,60	102	17,92	216	20,47	1,69	0,80
Total								2,01	0,13

Note: 1–1.74: traditional perception; 1.75–2.24: nontraditional perception; 2.25–3: gender-balanced perception.

4.2 Students' perceptions of gender equality according to student gender

Table (2) presents the results of the t-test, which help us to better understand the differences between the participants' average scores on the study's scale. There are statistically significant differences between male and female students on the scale, in favor of females, for whom the value of t is 15.16, and its statistical significance is $p < 0.000$. In general, female attitudes toward gender roles on this scale are gender-balanced, with an average of 2.50, while male attitudes are nontraditional, with an average of 1.91.

Table 2

T-test results for perceptions of gender equality by student gender

Scale	Gender	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Value of t	Sig.
Perceptions Scale	Male	284	1.91	0.46	10,16	0.000
	Female	564	2.50	0.58		

Note: 1–1.74: traditional attitude; 1.75–2.24: nontraditional attitude; 2.25–3: gender-balanced attitude.

4.3 Students' perceptions of gender equality according to student age and place of residence

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Table (3) shows the differences between the average student perceptions with respect to gender equality according to the students' age and their place of residence ².

Table 3

Students' perceptions of gender equality by student age and place of residence

Scale	Age	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceptions Scale	<18 years old	132	2,06	0,62
	18–22 years	203	2,12	0,09
	>22 years	463	2,48	0,06
	Place of Residence	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation
	Outside Amman	131	2,14	0,69
	Eastern Amman	406	2,21	0,08
	Western Amman	261	2,00	0,03

Note: 1–1.74: traditional attitude; 1.75–2.24: nontraditional attitude; 2.25–3: gender-balanced attitude.

To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was applied, the results of which are shown in Table (4).

Table 4

Results of One-Way ANOVA for perceptions of gender equality based on student age and place of residence

Scale	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F Value	Sig.
Perceptions Scale	Between groups	30.47	2	15.23	45,34	0,000
	Within groups	283.91	845	0.34		
	Total	314.38	847			
	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F Value	Sig.
Perceptions Scale	Between groups	23,30	2	11,68	33.90	0,000
	Within groups	291,03	840	0,34		
	Total	314,33	842			

It is evident from Tables (3) and (4) that the highest average responses with respect to the perceptions scale belong to the third age group, which is the eldest (> 22 years), where the average response to this category is 2.48 and therefore gender-balanced. The results of the one-way ANOVA based on student age show statistically significant differences on the scale, where the F value is 45.34 ($p < 0.000$).

As for the place of residence variable, the highest average responses on the gender perceptions scale are from participants from West Amman, at 2.55. The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences on the scale, where the F value is 33.90 for ($p < 0.000$).

² The socio-economic status in Amman west is the highest in comparison to Amman east and areas outside Amman.

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4.4 Students' perceptions of gender equality based on students' college

Table (5) displays the results of the t-test, which help us to better understand the difference between the average responses according to the variable of student college. The average responses of students enrolled in humanitarian colleges are higher than those of students registered at scientific colleges. The results of the t-test show statistically significant differences between the students' perceptions according to the college variable on the study's scale, in favor of the humanitarian colleges, with t-values at 6.16 ($p < 0.000$).

Table 5

Results of T-test for perceptions of gender equality based on students' college type

Scale	College	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Value of t	Sig.
Perceptions Scale	Scientific	453	2.19	0.59	6.16	0.000
	Humanitarian	395	2.44	0.60		

Note: 1–1.74: traditional attitude; 1.75–2.24: nontraditional attitude; 2.25–3: gender-balanced attitude.

4.5 Students' perceptions of gender equality based on students' monthly income and their mother's educational level

Table (6) shows the differences between the students' average perceptions according to their monthly income³ and their mother's educational level.

Table 6

Students' perceptions of gender equality based on students' monthly income and mother's educational level

Scale	Monthly Income	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceptions Scale	<200	127	1.72	0.28
	200 - < 400	85	2.03	0.63
	400 - < 600	201	2.33	0.58
	600 - < 800	184	2.37	0.59
	800 or above	251	2.62	0.51
	Mother's Educational Level	Number	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation
	Illiterate	109	1.59	0.12
	Primary	115	1.69	0.21
	Preparatory	101	2.15	0.53
	Secondary	240	2.58	0.54
	Community college	132	2.65	0.45
	Bachelor's	133	2.63	0.47
	Postgraduate	18	2.77	0.11

Note: 1–1.74: traditional attitude; 1.75–2.24: nontraditional attitude; 2.25–3: gender-balanced attitude.

³ 100 Jordanian Dinar is equal to almost 122 Euro.

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To determine whether these differences are statistically significant, a one-way ANOVA was applied, the results of which are shown in Table 7.

Table 7

Results of One-Way ANOVA for perceptions of gender equality based on students' monthly income and mother's educational level

Scale	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F Value	Sig.
Perceptions Scale	Between groups	76.09	4	19.02	67.29	0.000
	Within groups	238.30	843	0.28		
	Total	314.38	847			
	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Squares	F Value	Sig.
	Between groups	153.61	6	25.60	133.93	0.000
	Within groups	160.77	841	0.19		
Total	314.38	847				

It can be seen in Tables (6) and (7) that the highest average responses on the study's scale are in from those with a monthly income above 800, with average responses of 2.62. The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences in the study's scale, with F values of 67.29 ($p < 0.000$). The tables also show that the highest average responses on the study's scale are from students whose mother has earned a postgraduate degree, at 2.77. The results of the one-way ANOVA show statistically significant differences on the study's scale, with F values at 133.93 ($p < 0.000$ for both).

5. Discussion and Way Forward

The results of the study indicate that female youth's perceptions of gender equality are gender-balanced. This suggests that female youth in Jordan understand the concept of gender justice and believe in equality between male and female without showing bias for their own sex. The responses of female youth on the study's scale illustrate that they are aware of the patriarchal hegemonic discourses that have a strong impact on the Jordanian society as they are promoted by different social structures and apparatuses. Female youth showed that they are in a position of resisting these controlling discourses drawing on new ones that enhance equality between men and women in all aspects of life in Jordan. The role of women's movements in Jordan is recognized here due to their efforts in spreading awareness about the concept of gender equality, its social and cultural dimensions.

Surprisingly, the responses of male youth on the study's scale were neutral in general. This means that they neither agree nor disagree on the scale's statements as they try to position themselves outside the competing discourses of gender equality. The results of the study agree with Boxley et al. (1995), Hoover and Fishbein (1999), Ampofo (2001), Evertsson (2006), Crouter et al. (2007), Levant et al. (2008), Skelton et al. (2010) and Lundgren et al. (2013) that female youth and adolescents are more into combatting discourses of inequality than their male counterparts.

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The results of the study showed that the perceptions of gender equality tend to be less stereotypical as per the increased age of students. Maturity plays an important role in exposing youth to new ways of thinking about the world around them. This comes in agreement with studies Galambos et al. (1990), Mchale et al. (2001) and Crouter et al. (2007). Furthermore, the responses on the study's scale highlighted that the perceptions of students in scientific colleges are more traditional than those of students in humanitarian colleges. This can be clarified by the idea that the educational materials at humanitarian colleges deal with gender equality issues more often than in scientific colleges. Consistent with LaFont (2010), Japaridze et al. (2013) and Shteiwi (2015), the results indicated that students who live in urban areas hold less patriarchal views toward gender equality. Finally, the results confirmed a positive relationship between the monthly income, the advanced education of mother and youth's liberal perceptions of gender equality.

As a concluding remark, it is vital to mention that achieving gender equality in any society requires that the perceptions of its people be impartial and unprejudiced. This can be done through the integrative efforts of all institutions to enhance liberal discourses that aim at eliminating all forms of discrimination against women. The study recommends conducting future empirical researches that are based on qualitative data to enhance the comprehension of the discourses that shape Jordanian youth's views and perceptions of gender equality. Furthermore, this study sheds light on the importance of institutionalizing the concept of gender in higher education institutions and work on modifying the curricula to reflect a better image on the role of women in society.

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Appendix 1:

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Women's education is useless because they will become housewives in the future	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
It is important to shed light on women's leadership success stories	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
The performance of female students in mathematics is better than male students	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced	Traditional
I prefer my manager to be a male	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
Female students excel in humanitarian subjects while male students master in scientific subjects	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
Women are more able than men to lead	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced	Traditional
Women don't master sport activities like men	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
Policy makers and politicians must be men	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
The university curriculum enhances the language of maleness	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
Women are more capable of solving administrative problems than men	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced	Traditional
The performance of female and male students in scientific subjects is similar	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
The university curriculum shows that women are inferior to men	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
It is preferable that the teachers of scientific subjects to be males only	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
Leadership jobs must be filled by men	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
Controlling women is easier than controlling men	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
It is preferable to have a mixed-gender education in Jordan	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
Jordanian society is oriented towards male values, standards and experiences	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
Education is the best profession for women	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
The excellence of men is due to their intelligence, while it is due to luck for women	Traditional	Nontraditional	Gender-balanced
University curriculum need to be modified to reflect better image of women	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional
I encourage the amendment of laws in Jordan to achieve gender equality	Gender-balanced	Nontraditional	Traditional