

*Postcolonial Europe and  
its Construction of Female  
Citizens in Jordan*

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Introduction

Ulrich Beck famously argued that one of Europe's fundamental values was "the moral duty to relieve the suffering of others" (Beck 2003, 34). International development cooperation between Europe and Jordan seems to operate under the slogan that it is Europe's moral duty to relieve the lack of democracy of others. Both the European Union as well as individual member states

are actively funding, promoting, or implementing a great variety of international development projects in Jordan that operate under the umbrella of democracy promotion and women's political empowerment, the latter being the focus of this paper.

A postcolonial perspective on Europe suggests that its others are always already "*implied* in the theoretical and practical work which produces the unity of European space and the concepts which articulate that unity" (Mezzadra 2006, 32, emphasis in original). The fact that European actors are involved in the 'making' of female Jordanian citizens outside of its borders therefore leads me to explore what these citizen-making interventions reveal about postcolonial Europe through its construction of these others/othered citizens. Citizenship as a fundamentally gendered and colonial/Eurocentric concept is turned back to its origins which allows me to argue that it is actually postcolonial Europe that reveals itself through its development interventions in Jordan.

I understand postcolonial to be not only a chronological signifier for the condition of both colonised and colonisers after the formal end of Europe's colonial endeavours in the Middle East and elsewhere. There needs to be space for both continuities and ruptures in the relations between metropole and (former) colonies up until the present day in an analysis of the postcolonial

(Shohat 1992)<sup>1</sup>. Following Sen, here postcolonial as a descriptor for Europe, Jordan, and the relations between them “also refers to the resilience of colonial structures, institutions and discourses whereby, even in the era of the postcolonial state, impressions of the era of colonisation persist” (2021, 50). In this article, I hope to highlight these legacies in Jordanian-European interactions as they present themselves in development discourses as well development work’s material underpinning.

On analysing the figure of the empowered female Jordanian citizen who emerges in the discourses of these interventions as well as the structures that condition her appearance, it becomes clear that both Europe’s geopolitical interests in the region and its self-image are preserved through this figure. As the marker of both change and stability, she is supposed to consolidate the status quo insofar as the present situation lets Europe simultaneously uphold its identity as the promoter and exporter of democracy and liberal values, ensure that the change it actually seeks to make does not interfere with its foreign policy strategies, and maintain its inward-looking gaze that is inattentive to a postcolonial analysis of its role in the region.

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1 As such, I take seriously Shohat’s reflections on the potential of ‘postcolonial’ to universalise and depoliticise the analysis of a variety of historical and geographical contexts. Yet as a category, it is useful here in order to question Eurocentric claims to universalism by highlighting the particularity of European (citizenship) values and provincialise them in their application in the specific Jordanian case.

The development projects funded or implemented by European actors<sup>2</sup> in Jordan that target women's empowerment as citizens include a range of interventions. A lot of particularly the European Union's work focuses on strengthening institutions such as the Jordanian parliament but more broadly this also includes interventions to train and support female candidates for parliament or other elected bodies ahead of national or municipal elections; to support particularly youth and female members of political parties; projects in local development whereby women are trained in soft skills, (social) media usage, grant and project proposal writing for CBOs, or which implement discussion sessions in rural areas, e.g. about gender equality and women's role in politics. So while many of these projects seek to integrate women into formalised politics, there is also a strong focus on strengthening civil society through facilitating women's involvement in different forms of associations and organisations. Most of these interventions also describe their work as citizen empowerment or encouraging ac-

2 This refers to the European Union as a direct development actor (such as through the European Centre for Electoral Support or the programme "EU Support to Jordanian Democratic Institutions and Development, EU-JDID"), as well as individual EU member states' development agencies and organisations directly funded by them. German and Dutch organisations are for instance particularly active in this kind of political development work through projects that seek to strengthen political parties in Jordan and the role of women and youth in them, but women's political and civic empowerment is also a component of Danish or Spanish development strategies in Jordan, among others.

tive citizenship in some capacity. These interventions to promote democracy and women's political participation happen in the context of Jordan as a constitutional monarchy with deeply authoritarian political structures. Power lies predominantly with the Royal Court and the intelligence services, not with an elected body. Apart from a political system that is in large part undemocratic, Jordanian civil society is repressed and closely state-monitored so that there are very limited avenues for contentious political activity (Schuetze 2019).

In this paper, I want to explore whether the idea of training someone from the Global South as to how to be active as a citizen is conceptualised in accordance with Eurocentric citizenship discourses, as critiques of developmental models that make Europe its centre and reference point would contend (e.g. Escobar 2015; Mignolo and Walsh 2018). My way of approaching these interventions is informed by literature which critically engages with the term and effects of women's 'empowerment' in development, taking seriously its "disempowering work" particularly in neoliberal development discourses (Miraftab 2004, 239; Batliwala 2007; Cornwall 2018; Sardenberg 2009; Sharma 2006). I want to explore the structures from which the female Jordanian citizen emerges in these development projects, what her assigned role post-'empowerment' might be, and what this can teach us about postcolonial Europe and the way it sees itself.

This paper is based on qualitative research with multiple organisations in Jordan and Europe, including qualitative interviews with development professionals in different organisations, participant observation of events and trainings (all of this both online and in-person), and an in-depth discourse analysis of the organisations' communication materials and online presence. Data collection took place between September 2019 and March 2020 in Amman, Jordan and between October and December 2020 remotely and online. All my interlocutors, unless otherwise requested, have been anonymised. All translations into English, where applicable, are my own.

### **Postcolonial Europe and Citizenship**

Postcolonial theorists have suggested that the construction of Europe's Other reveals more about those doing the constructing than about this other subject that is conceived in colonial and postcolonial endeavours (Mbembe 2001; Spivak 1999; Said [1978] 2003). Similar arguments have been made about the Western or European, developed, benevolent subject that comes out of international development interventions in which it seeks to develop or empower its Other (Loftsdóttir 2016; Escobar 1995; Ferguson 2006; Kapoor 2008; Tabar 2016). Based on this thinking, I use the category of citizenship here as a lens to turn back to its origins in Europe. I contend that postcolonial Europe reveals itself through its development interventions targeting

Jordanian women as citizens (to be), particularly in view of the expressly colonial and gendered character of citizenship as a concept which is what I now briefly turn to.

When citizenship as an institution governing the relationship between the state and the individual took shape in Europe after the French Revolution, “the subsuming of women’s rights under male authority was formally codified” as women were classified as passive citizens and largely relegated to the private realm conceived as the opposite of the public sphere (Boatcă and Roth 2016, 194). They remained devoid of the political rights that (certain) men were awarded (*ibid.*). The fundamental assumption of the citizen as male then relied on the exclusion of women from political subjecthood and despite the incremental wins of citizen rights for women and their acknowledgement as political actors and subjects, the institution of citizenship remains a fundamentally gendered one that is underpinned by the tension between its premise of equality among citizens and a gendered hierarchy of difference (Brown 1995; Lister 1997; Vogel 1994).

Other hierarchies have structured European citizenship from the beginning but began to crystallise along racial lines in particular through Europe’s colonial projects. The colonial subject contrasted with the European citizen was essential to generate ideas around civilisation and superiority associated with European modernity,

and to position the European citizen as the bearer of political legitimacy and authority (Dussel 1993; Mezzadra 2006; Sadiq 2017; Taylor 2013). Citizenship in its liberal European construction has therefore historically needed this juxtaposition, engendering a spatial and ontological division of Europe into white, Christian, modern, and developed as opposed to its Other outside of Europe's borders (Boatcă 2019)<sup>3</sup>. In this construction, modernity, civic rights, democracy, and citizenship rights are situated as occurring initially within Europe and consequently translated to the non-European world, omitting the violence of imperial and colonial structures through which they were allegedly exported outside of its borders (Bhambra 2009). The 'white man's burden' of Europe's civilising mission in its colonies is worth examining here to highlight the confluences of European citizenship, race, gender, and development. To legitimise colonial endeavours, racialised notions of civilising colonial subjects or supervising their progress were mobilised, measured according to Eurocentric standards (Wilson 2011). This construction also co-constituted the inferior racialised subject and the European man's whiteness. Non-white women were thereby turned into objects of liberation from patriarchal regimes and their

3 It is important to note that these seemingly stable borders need to be treated with caution as the European Union for instance in its inception still consisted mainly of colonial powers with overseas territories and its borders until today stretch into the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa (Bhambra 2009; Boatcă 2020).

backwards-minded men who were upholding them (e.g. Spivak 1999). Post-independence, even “as the binary oppositions of race went ‘underground’ within dominant discourses” the emergence of modernisation theory meant that these racialised hierarchies “were mapped onto those of development/underdevelopment” (Wilson 2011, 316). These colonial legacies subsist in racialised and gendered development theory and practice albeit now cloaked in terminologies such as traditional vs. modern(ised) or under/developed. Indeed, contemporary “humanitarian and development discourses reinforce a *post-racial* ideal” whereby “racism is no longer recognised as a cause or condition of global poverty” and humanist ideals are equated with “the transcendence of racial thinking to value and care for all humans” (Jefferess 2015, n.p., emphasis in original). This postcolonial (as the problematic, concluded temporality against which Shohat cautions us) amnesia about how development interventions’ subject came to be in her racialised and gendered construction is also tangible in the Jordanian case.

The citizen that supposedly materialises in the projects that target Jordanian women’s political participation and subjecthood is then Europe’s gendered and racialised other citizen. European actors are funding and implementing these projects and thereby are directly involved in constructing her. Female citizens are either positioned as citizen-to-be who are still outside of the political

realm in the first place and need to be activated by way of development projects. These projects to advance her knowledge about the political system and train her in the skills to actively participate in it as a modern subject particularly target rural women, as the website of a German political foundation in Jordan that acts as a funding body for such development projects describes: Jordanian “[w]omen often lack sufficient knowledge and experience to be professional in political and social issues. They have knowledge gaps in terms of constitutional, national and international rights, lacking basic knowledge of policy-making processes and policy tools” (Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung Jordan, n.d.). These development interventions then assist her to enter the public sphere and pursue politics there. If the targeted participants are already active in either civil society or in some capacity within the political system (e.g. as members of political parties or office holders in governance bodies), interacting with institutions is framed as meaningful political activity. Enhancing women’s skills to do so effectively is seen as development intervention’s contribution to making active citizens out of Jordanian women.

The European Union has made the promotion of rule of law and democracy one of the primary goals of its foreign policy, reasserting the image of Europe as a global champion of these foundational liberal, democratic values (Kleinfeld and Nicolaïdis 2009; Nicolaïdis 2015). After all, Europe’s way of seeing its own iden-

tity as underpinned by “values believed to be quintessentially European” such as its commitment to human rights and liberal democracy ultimately endows it with the authority for this “European culture to be exported to the rest of the world” (Bhambra 2009, 76). This is also the case in Jordan where the European Union as a whole and in particular Germany as a bilateral partner are major foreign aid donors (OECD 2021). The results of direct democracy promotion interventions, but also of general democratisation processes such as the current decentralisation reform that is directly and indirectly supported by European actors, have not been very promising though<sup>4</sup>. Rather than bringing about new democratic openings, these reforms and interventions have reinforced authoritarian structures and helped consolidate the power of the current regime (Karmel 2021; Karmel and Linfield 2021; Schuetze 2019). Largely out of its financial dependency on these donors emerges “the regime’s commitment to a democratic minimum and an image of reform” which is an image that serves both donor and recipient (Karmel 2021, 13). European

4 The decentralisation law that was passed in 2015 introduced new local and governorate councils that are directly elected. Despite the fact that these new subnational governance bodies were praised for their democratising potential by Jordanian and international stakeholders alike, observers have noted how decentralisation in Jordan effectively centralised and solidified existing power structures (cf. Karmel 2021 for an overview of these analyses). These decentralisation reforms are also often framed as an important opportunity for women’s political empowerment.

donors can claim their efforts at aiding democratisation outside of its borders and thereby reinforce the image of the liberal European self committed to its democratic values, whereas the Jordanian regime can point to the large number of development interventions which on paper promote democratic structures and as in the case of this study, women's integration in them, positioning themselves as committed to gender equality and democratic values while changing relatively little about the authoritarian status quo.

The development work of European actors in Jordan does not only buttress the image of Europe as rightful promoter of these foundational values, it also serves its geopolitical interests in the region. In the following sections, I want to examine these development interventions in the country from a postcolonial foreign policy perspective.

## **Geopolitical Development and Docility**

S: What is Germany's real political interest in Jordan? I'm not sure whether I'm supposed to be this honest, but is it really structural change in Jordan? Which would be very very desirable, from my point of view? Or is it rather Jordan taking care of Syrian refugees in the best possible way so that they stay in the region and do not come to us?

B: Well I guess you can't really deny that this is precisely the principal interest not only of Germany but also of Europe.

S: Yes... exactly. And that is also part of the problem<sup>5</sup>.

Seen from across the Mediterranean, Jordan serves as a geopolitical buffer for countries of the Global North, most notably for European countries and the United States. Jordan has retained Palestinian,<sup>6</sup> Iraqi, and Syrian refugees, absorbed local conflicts yet remained a stable ally for Europe and America's interests in the region, making sure that their military and geopolitical interests are safeguarded while conflicts and wars do not reach Europe directly, least by migrants arriving at its borders (Jabiri 2016). Still, I was surprised when Stephanie, who works at the Germany Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, was so frank (though somewhat hesitantly so) in our conversation and openly acknowledged the underlying foreign policy priorities of Germany's involvement in Jordan: neither a humanitarian responsibility for Jordanians or Syrians in need of assistance nor a commitment to democratisation, but an interest in Jordan's stability and thus ability to retain refugees in the region. But this was a very rare statement that was rarely mirrored by any similar acknowledgement by people working in Jordan on the funding or implementation level of development work, indicating

5 Stephanie, development policy official at the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, online interview, November 2020.

6 More than half of Jordan's population consists of Palestinians (some of which hold the Jordanian passport) that were violently displaced from their homelands west of the River Jordan, most during the nakba in 1948 and the Six-Day War of 1967.

that a more substantive optimism about their work, its outcomes and underpinning values conditioned their attachment to it.

In the European-Jordanian development coordination, there is no mentioning of the structural economic and political conditions that render Jordanian women (and Jordanians as well as other residents more generally) allegedly in need of foreign assistance and the role institutions of the Global North have played in bringing about such a state. The authoritarian system of Jordan as a postcolonial state and the ways in which the British colonial project in the region has entrenched these authoritarian structures (Massad 2001), the neoliberal restructurings imposed by international financial institutions such as the IMF over the past thirty years that have exacerbated people's economic hardship and their lack of social security (Ababneh 2018; Martínez 2017), or the substantial dependency on foreign financial flows of the Jordanian regime that puts it in a position of dependency vis-à-vis the US and Europe are not openly acknowledged (Paragi 2016). Rather than discussing the structural reasons behind their presence in the country, European actors instead focus on a particular form of stability as desirable, both as condition for and outcome of their work (*ibid.*). European development work in Jordan prioritises social peace over social justice as its main interest lies in keeping Jordan and its political system largely as is.

My European interlocutors stressed the importance of stability and social cohesion for long-term change as opposed to more disruptive and antagonistic processes, for instance the popular protest of the Arab uprisings in Jordan and across the region that started in 2011. Christine, a senior development official based in Amman who was working for a large European development agency, for instance argued that in view of the events of 2011, “I am convinced that for people here [in Jordan], it is really more important to have an economic basis and a perspective and concomitant with this, to demand changes and implement them as a slow kind of progress”<sup>7</sup>. While she and her colleagues acknowledged the impact the uprisings had on the region and on people’s political vision across the countries where they occurred, they pointed to the current situation that was less stable and more violent or repressive in most countries compared to pre-2011, particularly in Syria, Egypt, and Yemen. But the uncertain or negative outcomes of large-scale protests are not the only factor strengthening their belief in incremental change, brought about (in part) through development work, over disruptive political action. The overall stability, the coherence of the political system and the certainty about particular political processes that are threatened by large-scale, people-led movements condition much of the work their organisations are doing in Jordan. In Christine’s work, this includes support-

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7 Christine, European international development professional, online interview, November 2020.

ing women holding public office in local governance institutions particularly through soft skill trainings and offering mentoring programmes led by local women in decision-making positions. These kinds of programmes aimed at successfully integrating women into the state apparatus of course both hinge on and further reinforce the smooth workings of government institutions. Consequently, Christine and her fellow development professionals shun uncertainty and antagonistic action, also in the form of popular protests. The focus on social cohesion then serves both the Europe-funded development system that can subsist as well as the geopolitical goals of its funders as a Jordan that is stable can continue to play its role as the Global North's reliable ally in the region. The kind of stability that the European actors construct as desirable necessitates a balance between largely leaving the political system unchanged but allowing for enough reform (or its appearance) and change to prevent large-scale contestation.

What does this mean for the role these actors envision for the female Jordanian citizen post-empowerment in the country's political system then? Political empowerment projects for Jordanian women largely envision women as active participants in formalised or institutionalised politics and organising, such as in elections on all governmental levels, joining formal associations, organisations, and political parties; or as active members of civil society in organisations such as NGOs or community-based associations. This of course strengthens and lends cred-

ibility to the political system and anchors it in the population it seeks to govern. It is important, nonetheless, to explore in more detail what it means for women to be integrated into civil society organisations. The Jordanian state closely monitors all international and local development organisations working in Jordan as well as political parties and civil society organisations by controlling budgets and activities through the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation and the Ministry of Social Development which need to authorise and formally approve them. Through the bureaucratic localisation, classification, and governance of development and civil society actors, the Jordanian state remains omnipresent in the development sphere even as it can hide behind its paper trails while monitoring all development actors, relationships and activities through bureaucratic governance. This means that women who ‘successfully’ participate in those projects and consequently start or join a civil society organisation or association become governable in important ways as they become localisable through bureaucratic approvals and activity monitoring. Through the work of development actors, the Jordanian state can “governmentalize women’s everyday lives and tie them to the networks of bureaucratic power and disciplinary rule”; the women, their ambitions and interests enter the reach of state governance (Sharma 2006, 75; Cruikshank 1999).<sup>8</sup>

8 Similar points have also been made about youth empowerment projects in Jordan whereby neoliberal entrepreneurship initiatives serve to renew a social contract between the authoritarian Jordanian regime and its elite subjects (İşleyen and Kreitmeyr

Overall, the female citizen constructed in European development interventions is not one whose citizenship finds expression in civic action and contentious or antagonistic practices of citizenship. Instead, the neoliberal female agent of development as a “hyper-industrious, altruistic, entrepreneurial female subject[...]” emerges (Wilson 2015, 807). This newly empowered female citizen is supposed to work towards her own betterment and that of the people around her, yet remain docile and in reach of the Jordanian state, sometimes as part of the current political system.

As discussed, these toothless interventions mean that Europe can simultaneously safeguard its “real political interest” in Jordan, as Stephanie remarked, and reinforce its image as a promoter of certain quintessential European values, thereby also positioning these values as exportable, universally applicable, and desirable. But if Europe’s involvement in democratisation and citizen-making outside of its borders implies a certain universality of the values mobilised there, this “always remains an impossible universal” as it is dependent on the production of difference between that which is modern/Western/European and its other, producing an ever-present “possibility of some shift, displacement, or contamination” (Mitchell 2000: xiv). In a sense, this failure to produce a Jordanian female citizen who mirrors the European universal subject but who is positioned as

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aspiring to this model reinforces the European imaginary of citizenship. It reproduces the difference between the universal and its non-modern other, simultaneously reinforcing its universal desirability and its unattainability in a context allegedly marked by tradition as modernity's negative. If tradition is to blame for the female citizen not fulfilling her democratising potential, this means that the authoritarian character of the Jordanian state as obstructing this potential also remains unspoken. I will expand on the role of modernity in this some more in the following.

### **Approximating Modernity, Approximating the Public Sphere**

It is worth looking at the Jordanian female citizen in a bit more detail, at what characterises her, or the structures from which she emerges, and what does this potentially tell us about the European actors who conceive of these discourses that fashion her emergence. The empowerment projects that target Jordanian women envision two possible starting points for them. Either they are already a member of a political party or a comparable high-profile association in the political system or civil society, meaning that they “are so close to become leaders” as Abeer, a Jordanian employee of a European development agency supporting women's political empowerment, put it during our interview in Amman in

January 2020. They might be in need of some rhetorical skills training or other soft skill fine-tuning but are largely ready to be politically active. The second starting point is that of a Jordanian woman constructed as agent-to-be who is yet to become an active citizen or, as Abeer contrasted it, “other women where we really need to start from scratch. To build them up.”<sup>9</sup> In both cases, the woman to be empowered is fundamentally characterised by that which she is not (yet) and by the lack that defines her: of the knowledge, the skills, even the self-esteem to be what constitutes an active citizen and to actively participate in society and the public sphere. These projects are then designed to ‘activate’ them politically and to make them from deficient subjects into active ones.

This is more so the case for the second set of projects which seek to construct pathways out of the pre-political space their targeted participants seem to inhabit. My interlocutors often named this as the home and the sphere of the family, a conceptualisation that is productive of a strict division between a public or political and a private sphere. This assigns different activities to their particular place where they can authentically unfold, either the political sphere or the private, yet transgressing them seems largely precluded (Arendt [1967] 2019; Benhabib 1993; Cruikshank 1999). The women’s perceived subordination within their family, often described as a

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<sup>9</sup> Abeer, Jordanian employee of a European development agency, interview in Amman, January 2020.

rather closed-off sphere they inhabit, together with their lack of knowledge and skills constitute a barrier in these women's way towards becoming active, political citizens and it is precisely this barrier that European development actors seek to dismantle. The idea of Jordanian women in the pre-political familial private sphere makes interventions to construct a path out of their homes necessary, even indispensable. As argued above, these women consequently become governable not only by the development actors but, importantly, by the Jordanian state as well.

In addition, this way of thinking is taking Eurocentric capitalist modernity as its reference point where the emergence of the public thus political sphere relegated the home to a purely private realm and assigned it apolitical, emotive qualities. The public sphere was in turn inhabited by the rational modern (male) self. As such, the idea of overcoming tradition to aspire to modernisation by way of entering the public sphere follows this conceptualisation, particularly for women for whom modernisation often means that as the "traditional woman bound by the past," they finally must be folded into the advancement of history too (Mitchell 2000, xiii). This is not to say that there is no such thing as a Jordanian public sphere or that women should not enter it, but rather, to point to the inability of this particular conceptualisation to destabilise a public-private division in the first place. If we take the feminist critiques of androcentric

European citizenship seriously (Pateman 1988; Lister 1997; Werbner and Yuval-Davis 1999) and apply them in a postcolonial context, we must ask what a gendered, differentiated way of thinking about citizenship specific to the Jordanian context might look like instead of assuming that the private sphere is a fundamentally apolitical or at least politically neutral space. After all, this idea has been challenged in important ways by feminists of colour and Black feminists as a white bourgeois way of thinking (Anzaldúa 2012; hooks 1990; Mohanty 2003; cf. also Boryczka 2017). Indeed, homes become spaces of care where oppressed people's dignity and sense of self can be restored given the injustice and hardship they systematically face in public. The private sphere of the home can in particular serve as a space to develop political subjectivity, often in relation to other members of the family, when the structure of the public sphere is predicated upon inequality and marginalisation (ibid.). Thinking about women as 'stuck' at home with their families holding them back from becoming politically active means being unable to account for the potential of the home to be either a site of political subjectification or even resistance, and to question the very idea that being at home is in itself an apolitical state. Importantly, it also neglects the question as to why extended family networks might be important for Jordanians and Jordanian women in particular to rely on. The material structures underpinning the familial connectedness of Jordanians are deeply marked by the neoliberal restruc-

turing programmes that have meant the steady decrease of state subsidies and a shrinking social security network for large numbers of the population. In view of the demise of the welfare state and the socioeconomic hardship and insecurity of many Jordanians, it makes sense for women to be embedded in a close-knit kin network to ensure their families' survival and wellbeing.

The reasons cited in development discourses for why women are allegedly held back by their families and why they are not-yet political agents in a way that is discernible to European eyes are different from those mentioned above though. The predominant explanation is "tradition" or "culture" which finds expression in backward societal norms connected to women's position within their families. Project objectives along the lines of challenging cultural norms and traditions that prevent women from becoming active participants in Jordan's social and political life is an omnipresent descriptor in development interventions: "prevailing cultural and religious norms" are blamed for women "confinin[ing] themselves to submissive roles" and for being "discouraged by their families and community members from attempting to assume leadership positions" (Hivos, n.d.). Here, vague concepts such as "culture" or "tradition" are able to absorb all other explanations for why these women are not active political actors (yet). It is not the limited possibilities for meaningful political participation in the Jordan political system, or the ways in which local

and international actors enable the techniques of control to foreclose it, or even the economic and political structures underpinning women's position, but rather an often unspecified 'traditional' or 'tribal' mindset. "Families" and sometimes "tribes" are then quoted as structuring Jordanian society which become markers of its Otherness and Jordanian local "culture" is turned into the thing despite which women have to become politically active, reflecting the entrenched Eurocentric notion "which equates tradition with ascription and modernity (as its overcoming) with achievement" (Boatcă and Roth 2016, 198). This discourse is subsequently productive of a connected, familial, traditionally-minded Arab or Jordanian self.

It is at this moment that the European citizen quietly enters the stage again. A connected, traditional Other only makes sense in opposition to an individualistic, autonomous, and modern subject. The quintessential liberal values of the European citizen serve as a benchmark when talking about Jordanian 'culture' and how it holds back Jordanian women from approximating the modern, autonomous citizen that has its origins across the Mediterranean in Europe. While it might not be a form of citizenship that is directly replicated in development work in Jordan, it nevertheless shapes how development actors think of public and private spheres and the skill set and characteristics a woman needs to possess to undertake the necessary crossover. The private sphere, in

this way of thinking so deeply anchored in Europe, cannot serve as a political space and the elect way to leave it is one that means leaving behind some of that which marks her as Europe's Other, namely the familial connectivity.

### **Of Eurocentrism: Development structures and designs of denial**

Zahra: We know best what we need in the governorates.

Basma: In development work, it is usually people in their offices in Europe or America who decide what's the problem or which project to do.

Zahra: Yes, we know best.<sup>10</sup>

Zahra and Basma are two young Jordanian women around the age of twenty, both from the governorate of Karak southwest of the capital Amman. I met them at an event where they presented their project idea to empower women in taking on leadership roles in the Karak governorate. This event, organised by a local NGO, was the culmination of a competition between groups of young Jordanians from eleven of the country's twelve governorates in cooperation with other local and European organisations, using European funding. The groups' ideas ranged from connecting existing civil society initiatives, to locally strengthening political par-

10 Conversation with Zahra and Basma, cultural centre in Amman, January 2020.

ties, to creating job opportunities in the tourism sector for women. When I spoke with Zahra and Basma, they expressed very quickly and very clearly their awareness of one of the most obvious inequalities in Jordanian development work, namely the fact that it is often not people's lived experience of their political, social, and economic reality that determines what kind of projects are implemented in the country, but the priorities of donors situated in the Global North.

Of course, the domain of international development has not been ignorant of its (postcolonial, decolonial, and postdevelopment) critics so that within the sector, there seems to be widespread awareness of the criticism aimed at its imperial roots and lingering neocolonial discourses, or at least of the power imbalances enshrined in the North-South funding flows and epistemological hierarchies between Eurocentric development models and the Global South that Basma and Zahra also point to. Influential development actors in recent years have been organising large conferences on decolonising aid and most international organisations by now explicitly proclaim that they aim for sustainable and locally rooted approaches in their work. Reflective of this growing overall awareness in the sector, many of my interlocutors brought up questions about localised approaches in our conversations and shared their thoughts on them, stressing that their goal was not to directly apply solutions from their home countries and that they did not

have all the answers for questions that arise in the context of Jordan: “we do not stand for the idea of exporting [a certain model of development]. You need to look at things holistically and not as an opportunity to copy-paste a solution” as Helen, a senior western European development professional, told me for instance<sup>11</sup>. Often without me prompting them, Helen and her fellow development professionals argued that local knowledge and solutions as also using local structures and networks was central to their work. Similarly, Abeer, who is Jordanian but works for a European organisation, opined that Jordanians would “take what’s applicable, they adopt the international experience [...]. Because you can’t impose and you can’t say, this is the best way to do it.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet for European development actors, this seeming rejection of European standards also meant that in order to measure the success of development projects, “[y]ou should definitely not make the mistake of applying Western standards,” as Carl, the head of a European development organisation in Jordan, put it. He affirmed that in international development, “there is no universal approach.”<sup>13</sup>

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11 Helen, European international development professional, online interview, November 2020.

12 Abeer, Jordanian employee of a European development agency, interview in Amman, January 2020.

13 Carl, European development professional, interview in Amman, February 2020. Interestingly, the Eurocentric standard continues to loom in the background in this statement: it might

So, by way of stressing local knowledge, local ways of doing things, and participatory workflows with their local partner organisations, the epistemic domination and Eurocentrism of development work more broadly was denied. Interestingly, many development officials also drew parallels between their work in Jordan and similar aspects of gender inequality prevalent in European societies such as the gender pay gap or the lack of women in politics and elected offices. This active deconstruction of the binary between Europe as a model place for women's political participation and gender equality and the *other* place Jordan which lags behind this development produces a certain connection between development trustees and recipients, between the European and the Jordanian self by way of stressing common challenges and implicitly also the shared goal of gender equality.

All these instances of denying Eurocentrism and emphasising the localisation of empowerment work raises the question as to whether this is productive in a context where the aforementioned allegedly localised ways of knowing and doing citizen empowerment are still deeply structured by Eurocentric assumptions around modernity, the political or public sphere, and women's citizenship. On a material level, the development sector oper-

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have been discarded as a measuring stick for 'progress' but still seems to implicitly frame what kind of results count as successful.

ates as a system of deeply uneven financial flows and material assets which also reflect powerful geopolitical interests as most donors and funding organisations hail from the Global North. Many Jordanian development professionals and activists criticise unsustainable project-based funding patterns, donor agendas' alignment with government priorities, and the strong competition between local organisations for funding opportunities. These severely restrict their ability to determine their own, locally rooted priorities in their work and create a sustainable and meaningful impact (Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development 2021; Bruschini-Chaumet et al. 2019; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, n.d.) These material factors further make the production of dissent and contention within this system extremely difficult – after all, a truly participatory, localised approach to development that centres Jordanian (recipient) priorities should be able to allow for exactly this. I therefore believe that the denial of Eurocentrism in the form of localisation is largely non-performative, meaning that “the appeal of” anti-Eurocentrism “is looking good and feeling good, as an orientation that obscures inequalities like the obscuring of a rotten core behind a shiny surface” (Ahmed 2006, 121). By this logic, the declaration of something – the localised, non-Eurocentric approach to development work – forecloses an interrogation of the material realities of the system in which it occurs and obscures the fact that even though small-scale acknowledgments and changes to the overall system might be

possible, these fixes ultimately strengthen it and ensure that development work can continue to operate without systemic challenges. The presence of the European epistemologies is denied as if to say that the European actors' decolonial 'homework' has largely been done. Because it prevents a more systemic interrogation of the structures underpinning the development system in Jordan, this non-performativity of denying Eurocentrism ultimately helps to sustain power inequalities within this system.

The localisation approaches and participatory work flows some European development actors pursue potentially remedy some of these power imbalances. However, they do not fundamentally change the funding ecosystem, decrease the competition of local organisations over funds, or put decision-making power in the hands of those at the receiving end of development interventions, all of which are crucial elements for meaningful localisation efforts (Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development 2021; Bruschini-Chaumet et al. 2019). Given the context, concepts such as "participatory approaches," usually used when referring to the participants of development interventions but also applicable to the work flow between donors and implementing organisations, are reduced to mere buzzwords. They lend development interventions new legitimacy particularly in view of previous 'failed' projects and the emerging criticism at extant power imbalances and legacies of

sustained inequalities while not necessarily doing anything to bring about substantial changes to the system (Cornwall and Brock 2005; Rahnama [1992] 2010; Kapoor 2008; Wilson 2015). Some European organisations whose employees I spoke to had long-standing partnerships with local organisations that surely gave them more security beyond the typical three-year project cycle; there was, as one development professional put it, more room for trial and error, more time for meaningful learning experiences and also for capacity building activities led by the European partners for those local organisations<sup>14</sup>. On this smaller scale of cooperation between European development organisations and their local partners, there might be room for collaborative work to counter some of the systemic asymmetries in structures of development work that render Europe its material and discursive centre. At the same time, if European actors envision these participatory work flows to mainly consist in additional training and capacity building for their local partner organisations, the ultimate horizon of such collaborations can only be their optimised performance within the development system, for instance with regard to writing project proposals and being awarded grants, and an increased efficiency in their delivery of programmes and services, all of which will not fundamentally lead to questioning or changing a deeply asymmetrical development system.

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14 Sylvie, European development professional, interview in Amman, February 2020.

On a larger scale, the denial of Eurocentrism by European development actors also draws attention away from the geopolitical and material power they possess in the Jordanian context. The stressing of equal partnerships and localised approaches, however sincere, does not remedy the material, epistemological, or even paradigmatic dominance European actors possess in Jordan. It further ignores the historical emergence of this imbalance by refraining from interrogating Jordan's positioning in the global political system as partly resulting from its relations of domination and/or dependency in political and socioeconomic terms with Global North countries. This denial is another way in which international development demonstrates "its 'forgetfulness' of colonial histories and postcolonial entanglements" (Loftsdóttir 2016, 234).

### **The European Self, Looking Inward**

The Jordanian woman-turned-citizen in development discourse is then made to inhabit the narrow space designated for her where she is the marker of both change and stability. She embodies a certain kind of progress and approximation of modernity as defined within Eurocentric frameworks but also becomes or remains intimately tied to the authoritarian Jordanian state. But the figure of the Jordanian female citizen who is constructed as a newly empowered active participant in the political system of the country while remaining largely docile ful-

fuls another function: she delineates the European self as one that may continue to look inward as its self-referentiality remains untouched. The essence of the European self as agent of superior values which it aims to spread through democratisation and women's active citizenship promotion in Jordan is unchanged as Europe can ignore the importance of its borderlands, i.e. of its others for the constitution of its identity and its image, both internally and globally, as an agent and promoter of liberal democratic values. These can be constructed as an inherent part of the European self that it naturally possesses rather than drawing attention to the need to constantly reaffirm them in relation to its other. Instead, it is these liberal democratic values that serve to justify Europe's presence and role in developing Jordanian women while allowing European actors to gloss over the functions and effects of their interventions that would pose a dissonance to those values.

If the empowerment work European actors are doing in Jordan is a way to ensure that the Jordanian political system changes enough for nothing major to change, this also has an internal effect on Europe. As long as Jordan continues to remain politically stable without open contention or resistance to its hegemonic, repressive political and economic system, difficult questions that would require Europe to wrestle with its colonial history and the postcolonial entanglements of its presence, or absence, in the region do not need to be addressed. What

does it mean for the self-declared “peaceful, cooperative Europe” (Habermas and Derrida 2003, quoted in Bhambra 2009, 73), the place where modernity and rule of law were pioneered, for its foreign policy to fail so utterly that more than ten years of war and violence in Syria could happen? The consequences of this in the shape of hundreds of thousands of Syrian people becoming refugees is largely felt by Jordan; only a minority of displaced Syrians actually reached European borders and brought the immediacy of Europe’s failure with them. Or how would Europe deal with Palestinian demands for their right to return if it took its postcolonial critics seriously enough to face its own involvement in their displacement, or its continuous failure to engage with their plights? These are questions that are grounded in Jordan’s everyday reality as well as that of a considerable number of its inhabitants. Yet, they never reach Europe in all their consequence. If Jordan remains stable and keeps fulfilling the role as Europe’s buffer in the region, absorbing conflicts and the people suffering from them, Europe is able to externalise conflicts and violence that it has had an instrumental role in bringing about or perpetuating. Ultimately, this also means that Europe’s colonial past and legacies in the region remain unspoken and the European sense of self is thus untainted by the continent’s colonial and postcolonial entanglements and continues to be rooted in a declaration of commitment to liberal, democratic values, their global promotion, and the embodiment of modernity rather than considering

their co-constitution with and dependence on its others outside of Europe's borders. The Jordanian female citizen that emerges from the development work European actors are doing to empower her tells us more about those actors and their self-image than about the citizen herself. Reflected in her docility and her role to ensure the efficient and smooth workings of the political system into which she has been integrated are Europe's ambitions for her to consolidate the status quo. This lets Europe simultaneously uphold its identity as a promoter and exporter of democracy and liberal values, ensure that the change it actually achieves does not interfere with its foreign policy strategies, and maintain its inward-looking gaze that is inattentive to a postcolonial analysis of its role in the region.

## Conclusion

The European Commission has made migration control one of its priorities during its 2019-2024 term. It has actually subsumed the goals of “[s]trong borders, modernisation of the EU's asylum system and cooperation with partner countries” under the theme “Promoting our European way of life” with the subheading “Protecting our citizens and our values” (European Commission 2021). The confluence of the European citizen's self-image, stressing *our* values and way of life, and securitised geopolitical interests that are translated into strong borders and protection once more imply an

other (citizen) against whom reinforcing these material and discursive borders is necessary in the first place. In this paper, I have argued that this reinforcement can take the shape of seemingly unrelated development interventions targeting women and their empowerment as citizens. Undoubtedly, the female Jordanian citizen that comes out of these interventions might have undergone a comprehensive soft skills or media training, could be ultimately elected to a municipal council, knows how to write grant proposals, or holds an office in a political party, all of which might have a positive effect on her and the people around her. But she also fulfils another crucial role in her function, which is to give authority to and enter the governance of the Jordanian regime and the authoritarian political system, and allow Europe to simultaneously present itself as a promoter of liberal, universal democratic values yet avoid questions about how this understanding is compatible with its colonial and postcolonial legacies in the region. The cooperation with partner countries that the European Commission stresses is indeed one that benefits both the stability of the Jordanian regime as well as that of Europe's identity. In this way, the coloniality of both the citizenship of the empowered Jordanian woman and of European-Jordanian relations can remain unspoken as long as she gratefully occupies the narrow space constructed for her.

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