

## **Female Tourist Guides in Jordan: Why So Few?**

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### **Abstract**

In many Islamic countries, women have limited participation in the workforce, including the tourism and hospitality industry. This study examines the barriers that prevent women from becoming tourist guides in Jordan. Based on qualitative interviews with 34 women from three main tourist cities in Jordan namely, Petra, Amman, Aqaba, Jarash, Ajlun, Madaba and Irbid, a list of factors were identified that can be subsequently subcategorized as barriers and motivators for career development in the tourist industry for women. The responses indicated that women, overall, have an interest in the careers offered by the hospitality and tourism industry. However, certain factors hinder their efforts to secure employment in this field and in the profession of tourist guides, in particular. The main barriers include religious beliefs as well as social traditions and culture around women's role in the family life, i.e. main caregiver. On the other hand, the positive impact that women's employment in this field may have on a societal level was emphasized and several areas for improving women's role in this sector were identified.

**Keywords:** women, tourist guide, tourism, hospitality, Jordan.

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In many Islamic countries, women have limited participation in the workforce, including the tourism and hospitality industry. This study examines the barriers that prevent women from becoming tourist guides in Jordan. Based on qualitative interviews with 34 women from three main tourist cities in Jordan namely, Petra, Amman, Aqaba, Jarash, Ajlun, Madaba and Irbid, a list of factors were identified that can be subsequently subcategorized as barriers and motivators for career development in the tourist industry for women. The responses indicated that women, overall, have an interest in the careers offered by the hospitality and tourism industry. However, certain factors hinder their efforts to secure employment in this field and in the profession of tourist guides, in particular. The main barriers include religious beliefs as well as social traditions and culture around women's role in the family life, i.e. main caregiver. On the other hand, the positive impact that women's employment in this field may have on a societal level was emphasized and several areas for improving women's role in this sector were identified.

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### **Introduction**

In today's modern world women play an important role in society, contributing to the scientific, technological and economic progress of many advanced and emerging nations. According to statistics, 67% of the daily hours worked globally are supplied by the female population.

In Europe, the participation rate of women in the workforce has increased to 50%. The rate is similarly high in most nations around the world. The only exception to this emerging global demographic shift is found in Islamic countries. In most Muslim countries, women are viewed as frail, and dominated by their husbands, a phenomenon that stems from the religious 'laws' which greatly inform social life in these countries (Würth, 2004). Moreover, pursuit of careers by women is perceived to be 'detrimental' to their role as mothers and to the overall composition of the family. As such, women have limited participation in the workforce, including the tourism and hospitality industry (Baum, Amoah and Spivack, 1997), a sector with important female work participation in most other countries worldwide (Baines, 1998; Lee and Chon, 2000).

Although a number of studies have examined the role of women in the workplace, little research exists regarding women in the hospitality sector. This type of research and data is even more difficult to be found for Middle Eastern countries, including Jordan (Masadeh, 2013).

A successful tourist guide, like any knowledgeable university lecturer, must possess broad knowledge of history, geography, economy and tourism. He/she must possess certain character traits which enable the guide to clearly communicate and develop better relationship with the tourists. The guide must be a good listener, show courtesy and have the ability to clearly communicate in a language understood by tourists. It is also incumbent upon the guide to be conscientious of the country's culture, regulations and systems.

This paper examines women's perceptions regarding working as tourist guides and potential barriers or facilitators for doing this type of work in Jordan.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Women's Status in the Tourist Industry in Relation to Men Worldwide and in the Middle East**

According to a 2011 report, women represent a significant proportion of the tourism workers worldwide (UNWTO and UN Women, 2011). This is particularly true for countries with established tourism industries, where women make up almost half of the tourism sector workforce. While the percentage of women working in tourism (catering, restaurant and hotel industries) varies greatly from region to

region, in general, women's employment in this sector is higher than in any other sector of the workforce. This is not the case in Arab countries where women employees still remain a minority in the tourism industry (Megablih, 2006).

Notably, however, several reports confirm the phenomenon of horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the tourism workforce worldwide, with women generally occupying lower-paid seasonal and part time positions (Jordan, 1997). Even in developed countries, such as in Europe, Japan and the USA, women in the hotel industry 'constitute an underutilized and undervalued... resource' (Maxwell, 1997: 234; Lenehan and Scullion, 2001: 222; Treven, 2003) and are recruited to do semi- or unskilled, low-paid, gendered, operative and non-managerial jobs (Biswas and Cassell, 1996; Davies, Taylor and Savery, 2001, UNWTO and UN Women, 2011).

According to a study on Australian MNCs, conducted by Timo and Davidson (2005), only 34.5 per cent of hotel managers were female. Li and Leung (2001) reported that across 77 hotels in Singapore and 72 hotels in Hong-Kong (Pine, 1997, cited in Li and Leung, 2001), only two and three females respectively held general management positions. On the other hand, in the U.S.A., Woods and Viehland (2000) reported that 46 per cent of managers in the country's 11 hotel chains were female.

Some research indicates that the main barrier preventing women from reaching senior managerial positions is the instilled negative perception towards them (their gender) within the organization (Biswas and Cassel, 1996: 23). For example, as reported by Biswas and Cassell (1996) in a case study of an international hotel in England, organizations prefer some hotel jobs to be occupied by women, such as reception, sales and marketing department because of their appearance and their display of sexuality. Other research has identified cultural and social barriers as the main obstacles for restricting females moving up the managerial hierarchical structure (Li and Leung, 2001).

In the Middle East region, female career advancement can be illustrated by the following statement:

*'A female holding a 'general manager' position is still too complicated a situation to be accepted in the Middle East culture. Business there is generally a men's world, not to mention that precedence in management must be prevailed by males. Therefore, it is an extremely rigid road for females to find an easy chance to reach such managerial positions.'*

(Kattara, 2005: 246)

Kattara's study (Kattara, 2005) is the first of its kind in the region, researching the neglected area of female career development in the Middle East.

According to Kattara (2005), in Egypt (a typical Arab country), only 13.2 per cent of hotel managers were women. In Jordan, the hospitality industry is also a predominantly male environment (Megablih, 2006).

### **Women's Status in the Tourist Industry in Jordan**

In recent years, there has been a steady rise in tourist labour in Jordan, mainly as a result of increased investment in tourism and the government's emphasis on national tourism strategies. According to the Tourism Statistical Newsletter of 2011 released by the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the number of employees in tourism-related businesses, including restaurants, hotels and tourist agencies, had increased from 21,293 in 2002 to 41,879 in 2011. Only 10.5 (4,391 workers) were female. During the same time period, according to the same source, the number of male employees in hotels reached 15,174 while the number of female employees was 1,265 (8.3 per cent). Despite the overall increase, the ratio of female to male workers has remained similar. Moreover, out of a total of 1,140 tourist guides, only 60 (5.3 per cent ) were female, having broken the 'invisible barrier' of traditional social and cultural norms to become tourist guides (Tourism Statistical Newsletter of 2011 :the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities).

In an effort to rectify this issue, the Jordanian government introduced a quota system in tourist guide training programs by allocating places for women and charging them only token admission fees,

to encourage them to train and work with their male counterparts. This initiative had partial success in that a number of women are now working as tourist guides in Jordan and the number of women employees has increased in other tourism activities (Magablih, 2006). However, the nepotism practices in the country still preclude Jordanian organizations from applying the basic principle of equal opportunity among men and women in this field (Hayajenh, Maghrabi and Al-Dabbahg, 1994:66). Similarly to Egypt, in Jordan, male domination is more prevalent in managerial positions (84 per cent male vs. 16 per cent female managers), even in international hotel chains which are known for fair training and equal job distribution among men and women (Wong and Chung, 2003; Timo and Davidson, 2005).

### **Common Perceptions in Islamic Culture Towards Women's Participation in the Workforce**

Kattara (2005) has identified four factors that contribute to female employees in the Middle East not getting promoted to senior levels: 1) the belief that women once married would not function as well as their male counterparts; 2) in hotels, promotions could be associated with transfer of assignment to another hotel chain, and there is a belief that married females are not as mobile as males; 3) usually female employees have to work much more than males to be as effective; and lastly, 4) the presence of cultural barriers that prevent women from advancing their careers (Kattara, 2005).

### **Increasing Recognition for Women's Contribution in the Tourist Sector**

Interestingly, the importance of the female contribution to hotel management has been increasingly acknowledged and the future role of females in hotel management has been recognized (Maxwell, 1997; Li and Leung, 2001). Kattara (2005) states that women are ideally and naturally suited for people-oriented and human resource positions due to their natural abilities and qualities. Moreover, senior managers have started to recognize and acknowledge that women, when fully committed, achieve better results than men do (Maxwell, 1997). Women translate success in the hotel industry as customer satisfaction, while in contrast, male managers are more focused on achieving financial goals for the hotels (Peacock, 1995). Liu and Wilson (2001) have argued that women are more determined than their male counterparts and tend to be more democratic in management, which encourages staff commitment. Maxwell (1997: 233) also reports that female senior managers' approach to management style such as 'good communication, deeper insight into their staff, flexibility and adaptability, attention to detail, and teamwork' aid in providing good outcomes for the organization.

As a result, the negative attitude to women working in the hotel industry has recently started to recede. Although it will take time to fully surmount it, it will change, largely thanks to globalization, public awareness of tourism and international hotel chains, which are renowned for their leading policies and practices in the field of equal opportunities (Gröschl and Doherty, 1999).

*'Quite adept at juggling work and family life, and have gained various job-transferable skills such as interpersonal, communication, organisation and 'fire-fighting' ability. It is these and other skills that have proved to be quite valuable in the workplace.'*

(Liu and Wilson, 2001:172)

Therefore, women should be emancipated from social restrictions and given new opportunities (Magablih, 2006).

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative methodology consisting of interviews with residents of Jordan's major tourist centres. Respondents were drawn from the cities of Petra, Amman, Aqaba, Jarash, Ajlun, Madaba and Irbid. In order to ensure the greatest breadth and depth of responses, given the relatively scarcity of existing research in this area, interviews involved open-ended and in-depth questions with

34 women, averaging one hour and twenty minutes each, constituting a representative cross-section of these cities' population.

Participants were selected on the basis of their age, ranging from 25-40 years, the same range as the average female tourist guides. All interviewees were current undergraduate students or graduates, reflecting the minimum degree requirements to enter tourist guide training programs.

The interviews explored participants' thoughts and feelings concerning women's employment as tourist guides in Jordan. Interviews were held predominantly in university meeting rooms.

With participants' consent, the interview sessions were audiotaped and transcribed on an anonymous and confidential basis, with results disclosed to participants, in keeping with some of the cultural sensitivities in the region.

Data analysis techniques included content analysis, with the goal of condensing and categorizing responses into relatively few classifications (Krippendorf, 1980; Weber, 1990) while quantifying results in terms of frequency, percentage and pattern identification and coding.

In many cases, participants responses are reproduced word for word in order to enrich the analysis and more colourfully illustrate the data (Maxwell, Watson and Quail, 2004; Taylor-Powell and Renner, 2003: 5; Carey and Asbury 2016).

Female interviewees were questioned as to, first, the overall cultural attitude about female tourist guides; second, their own attitudes on working tourist guides; third, any rationale for their willingness or refusal to pursue such work; and, finally, any inhibiting factors preventing their employment as tourist guides.

Key barriers identified in the analysis of focus group results included women's difficulties with issues like taking on night shift work and being required not to wear the veil, both deemed problematic by some.

## **Findings**

Women's responses to the interview questions revealed a wide spectrum of views and attitudes regarding female employment in the tourist industry in Jordan. These views varied from extreme opposition 'Women should work in another domain, pure and simple' (respondent 7), to views of extreme support 'Stop strangling women, release them from slavery and let them do what they want to do!!' (Respondent 23)

Seven key themes emerged from the analysis of the women's responses to the interview questions. The most prominent reasons for impeding women's involvement in the tourist industry were religion, societal traditions and culture, and the role of women in the family life. On the other hand, women indicated that the current situation in Jordan can be improved by changing governmental policies, increasing awareness regarding women's abilities and equality in the workplace, as well as the positive impact that women's employment in the tourist industry can have on the society and the country.

## **Identified Barriers to Women's Participation in the Tourist Industry**

### **Religious Beliefs for the Role of Women**

Many women indicated that working as a tourist guide entails activities that are not in agreement with the religious culture and rules in Jordan. While religion seems to have a very significant influence i) on women's decision to join the tourist industry and ii) on the social acceptance of this female occupation, the points of view that were raised during the interviews ranged in intensity. For example, one respondent said:

*'Working as a tourist guide? I believe it is the end of the world!!! You want your women to work and depreciate your dignity and honor. This is not acceptable in our religion at all!!!'*(Respondent 16)

Others emphasized that the main issue is that women in this profession will have to work directly with men, which according to the religious tradition this is not acceptable:

*'... women are not allowed to travel without husbands or Mehram (a male relative allowed to interact with Muslim women under Islam) as this would expose them to intermingling with men, which is not acceptable in our religion and traditions'.(Respondent 13)*

*'Women working as tourist guide are required to intermingle with men which is forbidden by religion (is considered haram), and this could lead to negative consequences'.(Respondent 32)*

On the other hand, more neutral views on the religious influence were also expressed:

*'God endowed women with the ability to function according to their capacities, just like men. Of course men can handle the toughest jobs. Women do not necessarily need do these kinds of jobs unless there is an absolute need to do so'.(Respondent 30)*

According to another participant:

*'Should men also not be allowed to work as tourist guides as religion restricts men from with women as well'(Respondent 27)*

A few respondents acknowledged the significance of religion and emphasized that working as a tourist guide does not affect women's respect for religious values and practices. For example, one female noted that:

*'...she did not mind working as a tourist guide and she did not see anything wrong in doing it, despite that fact she was very conservative. She said she covered herself with the veil and does not wear any make-up, and further her job would not affect her prayers and religious practices'.(Respondent 9)*

### **The Role of Veil**

In addition to intermingling with men, another important religious factor that was considered by some respondents was the use of veil. Working in the tourist industry was perceived by some as posing a threat to the religious practice of women wearing a veil:

*'... if women want foreign tourists to interact with her, she should take off the veil otherwise, there would be a barrier between them'.(Respondent 11)*

*'I have been told as a veiled woman I will never be accepted in the tourism or any tourist field, such as tourist guide, or working in a hotel...'(Respondent 19)*

However, despite the perceived limitations associated with wearing a veil when working as a tourist guide, it does not mean that veiled women cannot work in the industry. According to one respondent:

*'.. surprisingly my friend, who also wears the veil, was accepted and was extremely glad that she is going to work in the tourism industry'.(Respondent 10)*

### **Society, Traditions and Culture**

In addition to religious restraints, many participants cited societal and cultural issues as limiting factors for women getting involved in the tourist industry:

*'... Our society revolves entirely around customs and traditions...'(Respondent 4)*

*'Unfortunately our society, in spite of the development that has taken place it, due to more women participating in the workforce, is still not fair to Jordanian women. To me Jordanian women are very conservative and follow religion. And religion does not forbid women from working in this domain. It is just the mentality of our society and traditions that are very old and from different times'.(Respondent 33)*

*'The idea of women working as tour guides is thwarted by lack of open-mindedness from local community. They are not fully aware of the right for all to engage in employment, and mostly this ignorant point of view is held by those who are uneducated'.(Respondent 31)*

In fact, some believed that the religious rules dominate and shape societal rules:

*'An employee at the tourism center denied allegations about the local community forbidding women from working as a tourist guide, due to there being a rule strictly prohibiting an intermingling of two sexes'. (Respondent 34)*

*'... men and women working together would damage the societal coherence...'(Respondent 5)*

*'Tourist guides are required to intermingle with men and be alone with foreigners; this is unacceptable and would lead to corruption in society'.(Respondent 25)*

One woman expressed a different point of view in terms of why she disagrees with women working in the tourist industry:

*'I disagree with women working in a humiliating or stressful environment. Women are sensitive, calm and are as soft as flowers. One touch could tarnish her reputation and create problems for her in the future, as she would be perceived to have loose morals'. (Respondent 29)*

On the other hand, many other women expressed the view that the societal stigma attached to the female work in the tourism industry should be eliminated:

*'Generally speaking, I agree that these jobs provide decency and honest employment. Our mentality based on customs and traditions lead to narrow minded judgments...'(Respondent 2)*

*'The present restrictions lead to many negative consequences such as increasing unemployment amongst Jordanian women. Equilibrium in society could therefore be ruined as well as its social fabric which depends on both men and women'. (Respondent 14)*

*'...our society prevents women from working as tourist guides and I personally vehemently oppose this...'(Respondent 33)*

Despite the societal obstacles, some women thought that female work in the tourist industry can be adjusted to satisfy the societal rules. At the same time, female work in this domain can act in a positive way for the Jordanian society.

*'... I agree that it is inappropriate to stay away from home, while working as female tourist guides. Hence women should work at local archaeological sites which allows them to be near their family and homes...However, we would be expressing the culture and traditions of our country in a way that foreigners would respect and locals would view as a source of pride'.(Respondent 28)*

*'In many countries the role of women in the tourism sector is indispensable. Women are equal partners in all sectors. We have to determine how to allow women in our society to play more active roles and in order for that idea's need to be generated and perceptions changed'.(Respondent 22)*

## **Family Life**

According to religious beliefs and societal values, women are meant to be wives, mothers and housekeepers. The general perception is that working as a tourist guide requires women to work long hours away from the house, something that, according to these views, will jeopardize the coherence of the family life.

*'Religious minded people have made a sustained effort to vigorously debate women's employment. Amongst the religious lobby there is a unanimous agreement that*

women are meant to be housewives and further once women start working, it would result will in jeopardizing their family's safety, women's manners and their religion'. (Respondent 12)

'Work as a tourist guide stipulates that women should work till late at night with tourists and in some cases sleep in a hotel away from her family'. (Respondent 20)

Women expressed strong views regarding their role in the family life:

'...women have a role in ensuring their children are well brought-up. And raising children is the highest honor and most satisfactory job any women could ever do. Raising their children to be good citizens and avoid delinquency is the ultimate goal of all mothers'. (Respondent 6)

'A wife is to provide a house with a loving and warm atmosphere. Should she spend the day working and night resting, the family would get lost. She does not achieve her goal as a successful wife; this undoubtedly can cause a family to become dysfunctional'. (Respondent 1)

'...women should focus first on getting married and being a good housewife'. (Respondent 17)

'...women are not made to work in tourism, and women should solely be housewives'. (Respondent 26)

'Even if the government encourages such jobs, you cannot force a girl to work there. A decent girl would stay home. Otherwise, she can willingly find a job'. (Respondent 18)

Due to the perceived impedance that a job like this would pose on the family life, it was expressed that this type of job is more appropriate for men.

'... Human economics has always been more dependent on women's productivity compared to that of men'. (Respondent 4)

'The right thing to do is to leave this job for men. If women are to work as tourist guides, there should be certain limitations. Such as local guide's being from the surrounding area and not having to stay away from her home'. (Respondent 24)

## **Identified Areas of Improvement for Facilitating Women's Participation in the Tourist Industry in Jordan**

### **Government Support for Women's Employment**

Some respondents stated that:

'...current government legislation dealing with the employment of women is inadequate': (Respondent 10)

As such, women expressed the view that the government can play an important role in supporting women's involvement in the tourist sector. It was mentioned that the role of women in the tourist industry can be strengthened if the government changes its current practices and implements policies that will support women's involvement in the workplace and, in particular, in the industry of tourism.

'The government should stipulate strategies that promote the integration of women in this vibrant sector and implement policies that lead to equal opportunities for women to participate in the tourism industry'. (Respondent 3)

Some of the views expressed, also emphasized the fact that governmental support for women's employment in tourism not only will improve women's status but will also be beneficial for the country's economy.

One female employee who was interviewed indicated that:

'... in order to promote employment of women in the tourism sector the government should call off the strict guidelines for Jordanian women who are willing to



*work in hotels, as well as tourist guides, stating that if such a decision was not taken it would increase unemployment amongst women in Jordan*'. (Respondent 22)

Another employee stated that:

*'... Women are capable of generating as much profit as men, if they are given access to respectable jobs....'* (Respondent 7)

It is believed that the government should create conditions for merit-based selection and equality for work for men and women in Jordan.

*'There should be no disparity between men and women in any profession. Everyone should take his or her responsibility seriously. Women should be given maximum opportunities based on merit. What is needed is a push towards changing the present culture on a national scale, which would allow women to take decisions and participate more actively in the tourism sector'*. (Respondent 33)

*'We need to give equal opportunities to men and women regardless of gender, based strictly on performance and merit'*. (Respondent 14)

### **Increasing Awareness for the Role that Women can Play in the Workplace**

Lack of awareness regarding the role that women can play in the workplace in general, and in the field of the tourism industry in particular, was brought forward by a number of respondents.

*'There is a lack of awareness that a well-educated girl can adequately perform in any kind of work as proven by the success of numerous women in Western Europe and North America.'* (Respondent 11)

Lack of awareness was viewed as an important contributing factor for the current status of women in relation to working in this field. As such, the need to raise awareness in respect to women's abilities for working in the tourism sector was expressed. Moreover, it was stated that the society should be informed of the benefits associated with women participating actively in the workplace and in the tourism sector:

*'We should raise awareness as to the role of women in the tourism industry globally, educating the general public to the vital and positive contribution that women can make to this lucrative industry. The result of such awareness would result in employment opportunities not just for women but for men as well. As merit based employment would ensure better service and more tourists visiting.'* (Respondent 15)

*'Raising awareness is a sacred activity that a society a whole must engage in, if it wants to achieve development and better standards of living.'* (Respondent 3)

*'It is time we abolished these stereotypes and raised awareness amongst our society. Women should be involved in the various jobs available in the tourism industry: tourism center, travel agency, tour guides etc.'*(Respondent 31)

One participant also mentioned that the fact that women work in the tourist industry does not mean that religion and culture are not respected:

*'...I see no point in people rejecting my job which I perform with the highest standards and I have a contract with the travelling agency, at the same time I respect my religion and family. I hope society comprehends the need for women to work and demand that associations raise awareness about the importance of working women and their rights'*. (Respondent 2)

### **Recognizing Women's Equal Rights for Working in the Tourist Industry**

Notably, despite the religious, societal and governmental impediments, most of the women who were interviewed felt that:

*'...it is perfectly normal for women to be employed in this profession (tourist guide)'*. (Respondent 15)

Participants emphasized that women are as equal as men:

*'...to me, both women and men can work as tourist guides', (Respondent 9) while  
'...in some instances they outdo their male counterparts in terms of performance'.  
(Respondent 4)*

It was stated that it is not justified for women not to work in this field, particularly since women are accepted in other work sectors in Jordan.

One of the women interviewed stated that:

*'As long as women are working in other sectors, they should be eligible to work  
in the tourism sector, as tourist guide and this profession should not be restricted to  
men'. (Respondent 31)*

Others said:

*'...the local community does not have the right to stop women from working.  
Women and men work together everywhere: government offices, factories, firms,  
hospitals, shops and health clinics seem to be everywhere, why is tourism different?  
Intermingling is not illegal in religion as long as you're respectful'. (Respondent 3)*

*'We admit that outside Jordan travel agencies are having a lot of women  
working as tourist guides. Other sectors in the country hire women as interpreters,  
which is no different from working as a tourist guide. I assume women are not hired for  
invalid reasons and not because they are less competent, patient and tolerant than men  
are'. (Respondent 11)*

Women acknowledged the cultural, religious and traditional issues surrounding this topic, however, they emphasized that that women are capable and highly competent in this domain and as such, they should be accepted in this industry. Moreover, they feel that working in this industry, just like in any other work, does not mean that traditional and religious values will be affected or disrespected.

*'Equality between men and women is a must in our current world. Both men and  
women should have equal rights. Jordanian women have in recent times proven  
themselves in the professional world and established their presence in society and hence  
deserve equal opportunities. Women should be allowed to work as tourism guides as  
long as there is no risk of harm for them personally and for the overall society, and  
their work is within the boundaries of the local customs and traditions.' (Respondent  
22)*

*'Travel agencies do they really care about hiring women? If they think about it  
deeply, they will realize they are they are in need of female guides since sometime girls  
understand the need of tourist women better than men do'. (Respondent 10)*

The issue of high unemployment among women in Jordan was also brought forward to strengthen the argument for women joining the tourist industry:

*'Unemployment is high amongst university graduates, some of whom have been  
idle for years. Why not give them the chance to work as tourist guide?' (Respondent 15)*

*'In some cases women happen to be the only provider for the family. Women  
need jobs and unemployment is high amongst them. Some of them are highly educated,  
brilliant and have highly recognized diplomas'. (Respondent 11)*

*'Many households particularly in villages and the countryside with Bedouin  
surroundings depend solely on women to do all household chores. Hence women  
staying at home as a lot to do with cultural issues rather than economic compulsion.  
Such strict perceptions and stereotypes may result in increasing unemployment.'  
(Respondent 2)*

One participant summarized the current situation and emphasized women's rights to join this work sector as follows:

*'Points of view may vary. Some would say women are not capable of working outside her house. She can barely do the household chores, cooking, cleaning and running errands. Women proved they could do it and stood up to the challenge. She is an indispensable item in our society; her work complements that of men. A Jordanian woman is a hardworking individual both inside and outside her house.'* (Respondent 7)

### **Positive Impact for Women and for the Country**

Despite all the obstacles for women working in the tourism sector, it was stated that:

*'Public awareness, government support and initiatives have led to many job opportunities like working in airports, administrative positions, and ticket seller, accounting in the Jordanian tourism industry, for experienced and qualified women'*. (Respondent 3)

Several women expressed positive views on the role that Jordanian women can play in the tourism industry not only for themselves but also on promoting the country abroad:

*'Jordanian women have accomplished so much and contributed a lot to the development process in the tourism industry'*. (Respondent 14)

*'Female tourist guides could be an asset in improving the service provided by the tourism industry. By providing tourists with great service and an unforgettable experience'*. (Respondent 11)

*'Not only does a female tourist guide escort tourists through tourist sites, she also contributes to passing on either a negative or positive image of our country to foreigners'*. (Respondent 2)

Others described their positive personal experience:

*'.. I felt very welcome in the travelling agencies, especially when they came to know that I had specialized in tourism, they felt comfortable talking to me and consulting me since I have acquired some kind of experience in this domain'*. (Respondent 33)

*'...working in this industry, provides the opportunity to communicate with foreigners and to understand their way of thinking; this is most beneficial for me as an individual and as a professional. My knowledge of my country's image could be expanded'*. (Respondent 4)

### **Discussion**

The qualitative analyses of the responses of 34 women who were interviewed for this study revealed three main areas that act as 'barriers' and four main areas that may act as 'facilitators' for women's participation in the tourist industry and, in particular, in the profession of a tourist guide.

Religious beliefs; societal rules, traditions and culture; as well as the overall perception for women's main role as a mother, wife and housekeeper were identified as the main barriers that explain women's limited participation in this work sector.

In this study, it was evident that in Jordan, religion plays a detrimental role in women's life and career choices. In this traditional Islamic country, the religious belief that women should not intermingle with men has a significant negative effect on the social acceptance of this female occupation. The issue of women having to work with men (colleagues and tourists) seemed to transpire as the most important aspect of religion that was perceived to be violated if women were to work as tourist guides. This strong belief also seems to affect women's own decision to join the industry in a negative way; women are confronted with personal conflict due to their own religious beliefs but they are also being faced with the potential of social discrimination. In addition, the veil, a sacred symbol in the Islamic religion, is often perceived as a barrier to working as a tourist guide. The common

perception is that removal of the veil may be required in order for a tourist guide to interact effectively with tourists.

These religious beliefs seem to have shaped strict societal and cultural views on the role that women can play in the society and in the workforce. This finding supports the statement by Würth (2004) that religious laws greatly inform social life. It is believed that working as a tourist guide entails activities that may be unethical or disrespectful towards established societal values that dictate that women should be modest, respectful and agreeable to their husbands' demands.

Considerable emphasis was made on women's role in the family life; most women expressed strong views on this topic. Being a wife and a mother is considered a sacred privilege and a duty and many women defended this view. As such, the requirements of working as a tourist guide, i.e. traveling and working away from home, are viewed as important threats to the coherence of the family life.

These 'barriers', as stated by the 34 women participants of this study, are partially consistent with the factors that Kattara (2005) has identified to contribute to the limited participation and career advancement of female employees in the Middle Eastern tourist sector, i.e. cultural and family life barriers.

Interestingly, despite the recognition of these main barriers, women frequently expressed the view that a balance between these perceptions and women's actions can be achieved. For example, it was acknowledged that working in this field does not change women's respect for religious values or practices. Women can work in a way that can be adapted to satisfy religious and societal traditions and '*...work within the boundaries of the local customs and traditions*'. (Respondent 22)

Furthermore, several areas of improvement were suggested. Respondents expressed the view that government can play an important role in promoting equality among women and men in Jordan by establishing merit-based practices and legislations that will support women's involvement in the tourist industry.

Previous research by Maxwell (1997), Li and Leung (2001) and Kattara (2005) has acknowledged the importance of female contribution to the hotel industry. Maxwell (1997) and Peacock (1995) have even reported that women's approach to this type of work make them more effective compared to men in this area.

Some of the study respondents also expressed similar views:

*'... in some instances they [women] outdo their male counterparts in terms of performance'*. (Respondent 4)

*'Travel agencies...will realize they are they are in need of female guides since sometime girls understand the need of tourist women better than men do.'* (Respondent 10)

These views are in contrast with one of the factors that Kattara (2005) reports as a common reason for tourist organizations not hiring women in the Middle East, i.e. female employees have to work much more than males to be as effective.

Given the fact that women are accepted in other professions in Jordan, actions for increasing awareness regarding women's abilities in the tourist industry are also required. It was proposed that this can happen in conjunction with raising awareness regarding the fact that women's work in the tourist industry is not a threat to religious and cultural values. Finally, it was emphasized that such actions will benefit not only women's status in the Jordanian workforce but will also improve the country's economic and cultural prosperity.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the recognition of the strong influence of religious and societal beliefs on women's participation in the tourist workforce, women in this study expressed interest in participating in this work area. Conservative and progressive views were expressed among respondents regarding women's employment in this field. Except for almost a unanimous agreement that this type of work may pose

the biggest threat to family life, a balance between negative and positive views on the issue was observed from women's responses to the interview questions. In fact, the responses indicated that women appreciate the current religious and traditional values; however, they expressed the need for social evolution past the unjustified rules and stereotypes towards women.

Women's valuable skills in the workplace are slowly being recognized and the negative attitude towards women in the workplace and in the hotel industry, in particular, has started to recede (Gröschl and Doherty, 1999; Liu and Wilson, 2001:172). As such, women in this study emphasized the need for merit-based selection and increased awareness regarding women's equality in the workplace.

More importantly, it was widely expressed that with proper education and governmental actions the above-discussed barriers can be minimized and consequently, societal and economic prosperity in Jordan may be improved.

The government can also play an important role in improving the current situation. Recently, the Jordanian government implemented a quota system in tourist guide training programs to encourage women's participation; this program enjoyed partial success (Magaglih, 2006). It was widely expressed that further work on this domain is required. Governmental legislations for creating new opportunities for women in this sector combined with proper education regarding women's role in the workplace may minimize such social restrictions and may lead to social and economic progress in Jordan.

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