



Scientific Paper

Educated young women's employment decisions in Egypt: A qualitative account

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Abstract

Despite decades of increased access to education, women's conspicuous absence from the labour market in Egypt, and the Middle East in general, has been the focus of a large body of research. These studies have often focused on the role of culture and the regional political economy trajectory in curbing the potential of women's participation in the labour market. This study seeks to address the interplay of social policies, family and culture in defining women's employment decisions in Egypt. Building on the stock of evidence on women's employment in Egypt, this study provides qualitative data through in-depth interviews with both married and unmarried working women in Egypt to explicate this process. In their own voices, the study documents the torrent of challenges educated women face as they venture into the labour market. Single women highlighted job scarcity and job quality challenges pertaining to low pay, long hours, informality, and workplace suitability to gender norms as key challenges. For married working women, the conditions of the work domain are dwarfed by the other challenges of time deprivation and weak family and social support. The paper highlights women's calculated and aptly negotiated decisions to either work or opt out of the labour market within this complex setting. The analysis emphasises the role of social policies in the domains of employment, social security, housing and education in this process; and how inhospitable working conditions and compromised support often make opting out a sensible decision. This, in turn, augments regressive values of female domesticity. The paper urges serious discussion of women's employment as an area for policy action not just culture

Keywords: women's employment, gender, Egypt, family, marriage, qualitative.

Introduction

Young women's labour force participation rates in Egypt, and in Arab countries in the Middle East in general, are low in comparison to global averages (World Bank, 2011). The majority of women are outside the labour market. Those who manage to join it experience long spells of unemployment that sometimes end with them leaving the labour market instead of employment. In fact, the Middle East region has the lowest female labour force participation rate among all the world's regions, stagnating at a low of 21.9%.¹ In Egypt and Tunisia, two countries that have witnessed women play a large role in political action, the labour force participation rate is less than 30% (World Bank, 2013:45). One of the key research questions in the region has been to explain the absence of women from paid employment despite the growth in educational attainment (World Bank, 2011). This is the gender "paradox" of Arab countries in the Middle East as described by the World Bank (ibid.). The paradox stems from the fact that increasing levels of women's education in the region are not matched by labour force participation.

Building on interview data, the analysis in this paper applies three arguments from the now-classic historical study by Tilly and Scott (1987) on France and England to the context of Egypt and the Middle East. The first argument is that "Women, Work and Family" are inseparable and interactive. Women's position in the labour market is also related to their family position and the existing opportunities to reconcile family life and working life. Second, that the level of economic development defines women's employment opportunities. Third, that women's employment does not necessarily mean empowerment. By bringing these three arguments to the analysis of women's situation in Egypt, the analysis in this paper brings to the fore the role of social policies in shaping women's employment decisions along with the complexities and intersectionality of such decisions. The analysis in this paper shows that women's employment decisions are a dialectic of their household arrangements and the quality of jobs offered them in the labour market. This argument takes the debate on women's work in Egypt away from the determinism of culture to the realm of social policy. It eschews a simplistic answer to women's ostensible absence from the labour market for a more sophisticated discussion of the structural barriers women face in the labour market.

¹ Based on: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=ZQ>.

For too long, the debate about women's conspicuous absence from the labour market in Egypt and the Middle East in general has been locked in a culturalist framework (Abu-Zahra, 1970: 1080–2; Abu Nasr et al., 1985; Hatem, 1988; UNDP, 2005; Ross, 2008). This framework assumes that religion, values of decency and family honour are the key barriers to women's entry to the labour market. To argue that women's work decisions are related to labour market condition, social policies and family dynamics is not to eliminate the role of culture. I concur with Bourdieu's (1984:12) notion that "there is no way out of the game of culture". However, culture is far from being a static variable in an equation. To again echo Bourdieu's (1977:3) theory of practice, the analysis in this paper is an attempt to look at the "dialectical relations between the objective structures" which are, here, the working conditions facing women as they enter the labour market, and the "structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized", which, here, are the views of women towards labour market participation. The voices of the women interviewed as part of this study de-essentialise the debates about women's work in the Arab region and bring to the fore less studied issues related to social policies supporting women's employment and the role of labour market institutions.

The debates on women's employment in Egypt and the Middle East

"The prevailing masculine culture and values see women as dependents of men. As a result men take priority both in access to work and the enjoyment of its returns" (UNDP, 2006: 91). The Arab Human Development Report, from which this quote is taken, has repeatedly highlighted the role of "persisting tribal culture" (ibid.). However, this argument is not unique to the report. The value system of *sharaf/ird* (honour) was postulated by Abu Nasr et al. (1985:6, 31) as an explanation of women's limited labour participation in the Arab world. Family honour depends on the conformity of females to "modesty codes" of gender segregation, parental surveillance, early marriage and rigid female gender roles, all of which limit women's activities to the home (ibid.). Similarly, Kandiyoti (1991) connects female labour participation to kin-ordered patriarchal and agrarian structures or the overall "gender ideology". This view, however, fails to recognise the historical continuity of women's economic participation and the fact that women have always worked in pre-modern Arab societies (Taplin, 1987), as they have done elsewhere. It is only their employment in the modern sector as wage workers that is a twentieth century phenomenon (ibid.).

The culturalist view locks the debate on women's employment in a static corner of ideology. This, in turn, hampers any meaningful discussion of the barriers women face as they enter the labour market and as they balance mothering with the work options they have. It also prevents it from being a social policy issue. Hoodfar (1997) challenges this view, noting that the focus on gender ideology reflects an unrealistic vision of the Middle East as living in the realm of ideology while the rest of the world lives within an economic structure. Similarly, Abu-Lughod (2009) and Adely (2009) both express their discomfort with the Arab Human Development Report's uncritical view of the patriarchal structures constraining women's education and employment in the Arab world. Research that focusses on this culturalist argument, however, fails to recognise that notions of domesticity are not unique to this part of the world. In the United States, despite having some of the highest rates of female labour force participation in the world – to the extent that the World Bank (2012:13) takes it as the yardstick for measuring the status of women in other countries – the debate about domesticity and women “opting out” is all well and good. It is a debate that many researchers (see, for example: Williams, 2010; and Damaske, 2010) seek to debunk.

An alternative approach has been to focus on macro-economic policies and their impact on women's employment. Specifically, the role of what has been termed the social contract in the Middle East (e.g. Assaad, 2014; World Bank, 2013) impacting women's employment options by offering subsidies that economically supported households and augmented the role of a male breadwinner. Moghaddam (1998 and 2005) offers an explanation building on the changing political economy in Egypt and the Middle East. She argues (1998) that the oil embargo following the six-day war of 1973 increased the wealth of oil-rich Gulf countries and the influx of male Egyptian migrants to these countries for employment. The migration of men of different education levels meant that women would be required to shoulder all family responsibilities. Men's work and the money they brought also raised what economists describe as the “reservation wage” of workers (Assaad, 2003). This means that for a woman to be able to leave the house, the earnings she would make would need to be sufficient to compensate for the trouble. Karshenas and Moghadam (2001) further argue that the oil boom came at a crucial time, interrupting the transformation process of the Egyptian economy from a traditional agricultural economy to a large-scale urbanised economy. Assaad (2002) offers an alternative explanation of the impact of the 1970s oil boom on

women's work. He notes that the oil boom did not affect the supply side of female labour as much as it affected the demand for their labour. Oil-related revenues distorted the structure of the economy by increasing jobs in sectors that are traditionally male-dominated non-tradable sectors such as construction work and services. These revenues also reduced the international competitiveness of tradable industries that are traditionally dominated by women. The oil boom of the 1970s was followed by the bust of the 1980s and the eventual implementation of structural adjustment policies. Moghadam (1998) argues that the implementation of neoliberal policies made it harder for women to work with the retrenchment of jobs in the public sector.

Most of the scholarship on women's employment in the Arab region in general is based on the premise that the women there are not economically active. Boseroup's (1970) seminal piece "Work and Economic Development", in which she labels Arab women as non-working with low economic activity, seems to have set the tone for the scholarship in this region. While an expansive global body of literature emerged on the subject of women's employment, the debate on women in the Arab region remained focused on their conspicuous absence. For example, Assaad (2005) argues that unlike the global pattern of the feminisation of the labour market with globalisation, women are participating at very low levels in the labour market in Egypt. The problems of women's work measurement have, therefore, taken much energy from researchers puzzled by the documented low economic participation of women (e.g. Anker, 1990; Assaad, 1997).

Ostensibly missing from the debate on women's employment in Egypt, and the Middle East in general, is an application of the vast scholarship on the role of social policies in defining work options for women, particularly women with children (e.g. Williams, 2010; Iversen and Rosenbluth, 2010; and Damaske, 2009 and 2010). The conflict and ambivalence facing women as they leave their children to undertake paid work have largely remained undocumented in the Arab world. Similarly, the division of household chores between husband and wife is less discussed. There is also little, if any, discussion of the relevance of Hochschild's (1989) now-classic discussion of women's double day burdens and "second shift" at home in the context of the Middle East. Moreover, the vast global literature on job precariousness and the feminisation of poverty (e.g. Kudva and Beneria, 2005) are under-

studied in Middle East labour markets. A few studies have focused on the challenges educated women are facing (e.g. Barsoum, 2004) as they venture into the labour market.

Young unmarried women, on the other hand, have received better attention: justifiably, since they constitute the largest share of wage-working women (Hendy, 2016). For example, Amin and Al-Bassusi (2004) argue that young women in Egypt would only work to save for marriage costs. Joekes (1985) reminds us that the labour market institutions are gendered (Acker, 1990), showing the use of gender ideology in justifying how male and female labour is rewarded differently among factory workers in Morocco. However, this scholarship focuses on the gendered aspects of women's work options and fails to take account of the implications of labour market conditions, job precariousness and the relevance of the education they received to the needs of the labour market. Social policies pertaining to education, employment and social security are little discussed with a gendered lens in the region. This is the case despite the fact that young women constitute almost two-thirds of the unemployed in Egypt (Barsoum et al., 2014). An effective discussion of employment policies in Egypt has to be gendered (Barsoum, 2015).

Background: Women's work in Egypt and the interplay of neoliberalism, globalisation and social services

The evolution of women's wage work in Egypt has been part of a modernisation project pushed forward by the state in the 1950s and 1960s. Hatem (1996) argues that in the sixties, a vision of the role of women was incorporated into the state's industrialisation and modernisation plans with the establishment of "state feminism", whereby women's reproduction and work opportunities became the state's responsibility. The promulgation of higher education as a free right for all Egyptians in 1962 followed by the guaranteed public sector/government employment scheme in the same year significantly increased secondary education enrolment for both males and females (McDonald, 1986). Women were guaranteed equal opportunities in government and public sector hiring and started to appear in the policy sphere, holding public office. A weakened private sector due to nationalisation policies did not surface as a major employer of women at the time. The policy changes boosted women's education and employment opportunities. Historical data shows that between 1961 and 1974, the percentage of females in the student body of universities leaped

from 16.3% to 30.4% (Supreme Council of Universities, 1998). The expansion of women's education and the guaranteed employment scheme heralded a cultural change, particularly among the educated, where women's work outside the house was respected and valued (Rugh, 1984). Although Abu-Lughod (1998) highlights the cost of this state-building project in curtailing the women's movement, the political and economic gains by women were still unprecedented.

As with the global experience with state-centred development, neoliberal policies and globalisation forces came to shake up such arrangements. Sadat's (1970-1981) "open door" policy was one of the early privatisation waves in the countries of the Global South and primarily sought to open the economy to private sector investment. The impact of these policies was augmented with the implementation of structural adjustment policies in the early 1990s. A key direct change was the stalling of public sector hiring guarantee policies. This coincided with the acceleration of access to higher education by both men and women and the narrowing of the gender gap in access to education. This meant a growing problem of educated unemployment, with the unemployment rate among the educated consistently higher than among other groups. It has also been consistently higher among women than among men (Assaad and Krafft, 2015). Assaad (2015) argues that the decline in employment opportunities in the public sector has disproportionately affected the employment opportunities of educated young women. He shows that nearly 50% of employed women in Egypt in 2012 were working in the public sector, compared to 20% of employed men. These figures show the important role of public sector jobs in women's employment in the country. However, Assaad (ibid.) also notes that the proportion of young women finding employment in the public sector declined from a high of 55% in the early 1980s to reach 35% in the mid-2000s.

While more women are educated, there is little evidence that the higher education women receive is relevant to the needs of the labour market. This is an issue that is at the heart of education policies in Egypt (Barsoum, 2016). Krafft et al. (2012) show that women in Egypt are more likely to graduate from higher education specialisations that are theoretical and have little relevance to the needs of the labour market, such as religious studies and arts. The compromised quality of the higher education system (World Bank & OECD, 2010) further undermines the potential positive role of higher education in improving their employment

outcomes. Barsoum and Rashad (2016) show that fewer women join private higher education institutions, and that the majority join free public institutions.

Globalisation impacted women's employment opportunities in Egypt in different ways. The size of the formal (registered) private sector doubled during the 1980s (Moghadam, 1998:104) and has continued to grow to contribute to building a cosmopolitan elite class of workers (de Koning, 2009). The emergence of a new segment in the labour market of private sector companies with support from foreign direct investment, or with local investment and ties to global markets, opened the way for new jobs in this sector that would have certain requirements. Primarily, these companies sought graduates with access to foreign languages and a refined demeanour (Barsoum, 2004). Since access to foreign languages was only attainable for graduates of expensive private schooling in Egypt, these requirements served as exclusionary class-based measures (ibid.). Female graduates with the right skills had a smoother transition to the labour market compared to those from a lower socioeconomic background who had no access to foreign languages or the other valorised forms of class-based attributes. The latter had to make do with jobs in small-scale private sector entities, usually with compromised job quality conditions, or rely on connections (*wasta*) to land jobs in the formal sector (ibid.).

Job precariousness is a characteristic phenomenon in globalisation (Standing, 2011). In Egypt, Roushdy and Selwanes (2015) showed that only 42% of workers had access to social insurance. This is a key marker of informality (ILO, 2002). Barsoum (2015) shows that informality has become the norm among the working youth, even among the educated. There is also a large difference in access to social insurance and other benefits according to sector of employment (ibid.). Employees in the public sector have universal access to social insurance, health insurance and other benefits such as maternity leave. When public-sector employees retire, they are entitled to monthly pension payment (Law 79 of 1975). This pension payment also extends to their survivors with stipulations for the wife, under-age sons, and daughters at any age unless they are married or employed. These benefits are denied to the majority of workers in the private sector, particularly the informal private sector. Such levels of disparity have contributed to a continued preference for jobs in the public sector and the government among both young men and women (Barsoum, 2016).

The Egyptian labour law (Law 12 issued 2003) stipulates that public and private sector entities should provide childcare facilities if they have 100 female employees or more. In reality, this stipulation is only implemented in public sector entities. Law enforcement issues aside, the fact that most private sector companies hire below this number of female workers limits the implementation potential of this stipulation. Privately owned day care facilities or those run by civil society organisations came in to fill this gap. These are regulated by the Child Law (Law 12 of 1996; modified by Law 126 in 2008), which sets criteria for space requirements and staffing. However, many of these facilities are sub-par and there is little inspection, particularly in low-income areas. The fees vary greatly, and there is little research documenting this issue. Newspaper reports show fees as low as LE 90 per month and others reaching thousands of pounds (Al-Ahram Newspaper, 2012; Al-Arab Newspaper, 2016).² According to some accounts, Egypt has 12,500 day care facilities (Al-Arab Newspaper, 2016). This number is low by any count in a country with a population of 90 million people.

Data on women's employment in Egypt show that marriage and mothering are key defining factors, as they are elsewhere (Hendy, 2015:156). In fact, Hendy (ibid.) analyses panel data from Egypt and shows that the year of marriage is a clear turning point for women's decision to continue in the labour market. Only women working in the public sector continued to work after marriage. The data from Egypt shows that women engage in wage work mostly when they are single or if they are employed in the public sector (ibid.). For women in the private sector, marriage drastically reduces labour force participation (ibid.). Assaad (2015) argues that employers are generally unwilling to take on some of the costs of women's reproductive roles either by providing paid maternity leave or by having to comply with legal mandates on the provision of childcare services. He further argues that the absence of social policies for maternity leave and childcare support further contribute to limiting women's economic participation in Egypt.

Methodology

Women's employment in Egypt and the Middle East is a "wicked" problem, in the sense that it is complex and defies simple explanations or solutions (Rittel and Webber, 1973).

² Less than \$10 per month based on 2012 exchange rate (year of source article).

Wicked problems require diverse transdisciplinary methods to untangle them (Brown et al., 2010). Most of the research on women's employment has relied on quantitative methods (e.g. Assaad, 2014; Karshenas et al., 2016). This stock of knowledge has provided ample understanding of the size of the problem but less on the how and why of this phenomenon. A few qualitative studies have provided an analysis of these figures (De Koning, 2009; Elyachar, 2005). More qualitative studies are needed to help explain the context of the figures provided by quantitative studies and delve in depth into this complex issue. It is, therefore, more appropriate for understanding a complex issue such as women's employment. Qualitative research spans the micro-macro spectrum (Ambert et al., 1995).

The data included in this paper builds on ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of the SAHWA Project and earlier. The SAHWA data was collected through focus groups discussions, narrative interviews and life stories as well as focused ethnographies. In total, the study benefited from data from four focus group discussions with both male and female young people held in four urban centres in Alexandria, Menofia, Giza and Beni Seuf in 2015 and in-depth interviews with young women along with others conducted earlier by the researcher. The focus of the interviews was on married and unmarried educated women (with post-secondary education) in their prime productive and reproductive years (between 23 and 40 years old). These women either worked at the time of the interview or had experience working. The criterion was to focus on women in middle- or lower middle-income neighbourhoods. The education criterion actually filters out women who are in the poorest wealth quintile in Egypt (Assaad, 2010a). I also consciously avoided including working women with children who could afford expensive day care facilities or those from the elite who had the option of having housekeepers. Women were reached through snowballing with the help of three research assistants. Most interviews were conducted in the women's homes. All interviewed married working women had time constraints to set a timing for the interview, which were mostly conducted during the weekend. Non-working women were met during the week in daytime visits. In total, 18 unmarried and nine married and working women were interviewed as part of this study. All interviewed unmarried women were living with their parents, as is customary in Egypt. All interviewed married women were living in nuclear families. All interviewees lived in urban areas, mostly in Cairo.

The life story approach adds depth to the analysis of a specific research topic by spanning different intertwined domains. During the interviews, issues of employment, family, relationship with husband, extended family dynamics, help extended by other family members to working women, family finance, and transportation were all intertwined. As a mother with children myself, these different domains flowed seamlessly into one another during interviews. The life history approach is commonly used in feminist research and helps elucidate how women's lives and work experiences evolve (Lawless, 1991). All interviews were conducted in Arabic. Pseudonyms are used in the presentation of data.

Because the interviews with married and unmarried women varied significantly in terms of the focus and the issues women raised, as well as for conceptual clarity, I divide the analysis into two sections based on the marital status of informants. As the following two sections show, single women highlighted job quality challenges pertaining to low pay, long hours and difficulty finding work. For married working women, the conditions of the work domain are dwarfed by the other challenges of time deprivation, exhaustion and the need to work to meet financial needs.

“It's a job anyway”: Young and unmarried women facing unemployment and job quality challenges

Young and unmarried remain two key characteristics of working women in Egypt's labour market (Hendy, 2015). Despite being the most common group in the labour market, the women interviewed from this group described the difficulties they faced finding jobs. They also describe problems at the heart of education policies in relation to availability of jobs in their own education specialisations. Job quality issues and the prevalent precariousness and informality of jobs are also issues discussed. Interviewed women aptly show the interrelatedness of these issues and how they define their employment opportunities. For clarity of analysis, I separate these three issues to highlight women's arguments.

Unemployment is high among young men and women, particularly the educated (Barsoum et al., 2014). The point of insertion to the labour market, however, is the point of highest unemployment in Egypt (Assaad, 2010). Esraa studied accounting and graduated from college in 2012. During the interview, she described her dissatisfaction with a number of issues with her job. However, she was quick to note:

Thank God I found a job. It is not in my specialization of study (accounting) because I have searched for work in my specialization but could not find any. Thank God I found a job, it is in data collection for a market research company ... I don't really like this job, it is not what I studied for. But it is a job anyway (Esraa, October 2015). Her gratitude for finding the job reveals the difficulty she faced in searching for it. Job scarcity should be understood in the light of the nature of the economy, where a large informal sector does not offer jobs that suit a woman with an education. The higher level of education contributes to this sense of scarcity, particularly given Esraa's interest in working in her area of specialisation, accounting. Finding an accounting job would have been ideal for Esraa and she highlights the challenges she faced trying to find one. This was repeated by Mona, who graduated from college in 2007 and started applying for a number of vacancies that were not all related to her degree. After remaining unemployed for a year, she finally landed a job in a government organisation. Her undergraduate degree in statistics, a relatively rare specialisation, helped her. However, she notes:

There are many people who are not working. If they work, it is not in their specialization. They just sit and do nothing (Mona, October 2015).

In the case of Esraa, with her degree in accounting, a data collection job in a private firm was the only option. The issue of education specialisation is central and is best exemplified by comparing Esraa and Mona. Esraa's specialisation is quite common, with more than 75,000 accountancy graduates entering the labour market in Egypt every year (CAPMAS, 2012). These primarily aim to compete for jobs in the formal private sector, above all the banking sector. Esraa describes her job search journey, noting:

There aren't any (jobs) ... banks is the sector (where I should work), and I took several exams and still I need *wasta* (nepotism) not my grade. I know a "Physical Education" graduate working in a bank. It's all about *wasta* to live or die, I applied in smaller companies ... they do not need accountants (Esraa, aged 23, October 2015).

The issues highlighted in the above quote are at the heart of the education and employment policies in Egypt. The fact that she had failed in many job entry exams may be related to her skills deficit, despite her degree specialisation, which raises issues about the quality of higher education in Egypt (OECD & World Bank, 2010). The second issue relates to her explanation for the reasons she did not get any of these jobs – the role of contacts, *wasta* – in helping fresh graduates to find jobs. The above quote is not enough evidence that Esraa did

not get the job because she did not have the right contacts. However, it is enough evidence of the lack of transparency in the hiring process, where she could only speculate about the reason for her non-selection. This does not negate the possibility of nepotism, and the case she mentions of an employee with a physical education qualification working in a bank shows that *wasta* can be a class-based exclusionary mechanism. Through contacts, children of the privileged are able to obtain prized jobs in the formal economy. Finally, Esraa's understanding of her work options aptly describes the labour market in Egypt for graduates in her specialisation. The banking sector is highly sought after for its benefits and compensation packages. The smaller companies that "do not need accountants" are part of Egypt's large informal economy, where economic transactions are under-documented or not documented at all.

Job quality issues are central to young women's employment decisions and options. Doaa (38 years old and unmarried) was one of eight siblings in a large family with a low income. She relates her delayed marriage to her family's poverty. Despite her ability to get a university education, studying accounting, she had many difficulties finding a job. She describes her trajectory, noting:

My father has supported us (referring to her siblings) until we finished higher education ... when I finished my education at Faculty of Commerce with specialization in accounting, I kept searching for a job. I soon learned that a good job requires contacts. It also requires knowing foreign languages (mainly English) and good knowledge of computer technology. I came from a government school and had poor English and no computer skills ... (Doaa, October 2016).

As with Esraa, Doaa is ready to blame her lack of the right contacts for her employment problems. She shows a similar scenario of a long search for a job and a similar education specialisation. However, her quote shows the hierarchy imposed by globalisation in Egypt's labour market. Her limited access to foreign languages, she believed, has limited her work options from the beginning. Most importantly, it closed doors to the top segment of Egypt's formal economy. Instead, she recounts a journey with many employers and short spells of unemployment. She describes one of her first jobs upon graduation in 2003 at a bookstore:

I worked in the XX bookstore in Shobra (a middle-income old neighbourhood in Cairo). When I went for the interview, the owner kept me waiting for an hour. I got bored and wanted to leave. Then he called me and asked me about my earlier jobs. I

told him that this was the first job. He understood that I needed the job and because I told him that my father had died. He said I would give you a salary of LE 150 per month.³ This was in 2003. I agreed because I needed the money. But I left the job afterwards (Doaa, October 2016).

The details of Doaa's first job interview, recounted 13 years later, were unpleasant in many ways. She remembers the disrespectful treatment and the long wait in a small store where the employer could see her but just kept her waiting. The long wait was seemingly a test of her level of desperation for a job. After the wait, it was easy to bargain her down to very low pay. This was an early job that she later left, as she notes above.

The more details about this first job and the reasons for her decision to quit provide a picture of the nature of jobs in Egypt's small-scale business and the limited role of protection policies for workers in such enterprises. She notes:

I left because the working hours were too long. Every day I was doing the same thing. I was responsible for the copying machine. I would copy books and lecture notes for students. I had back pain. My feet hurt from standing for long and my eyes also hurt from the smell of the machine. Whenever I was late for fifteen minutes, he would deduct a quarter of a day's wage. I also had to work on vacations and holidays. If I wanted to stay home in these days, he (the employer) would deduct from the salary saying that the full salary is for a full month (Doaa, October 2016).

The above conditions of long hours, monotonous work, physical strain, unfair payment conditions and lack of paid leave were enough reasons for Doaa to quit her job. This is aside from the fact that copying course materials and books is an infringement of copyright laws (something that Doaa does not dwell on), but which is indicative of the nature of some jobs in the informal economy. Doaa landed another low-paying job as a bus matron for an elementary school, where she stayed for a longer period but eventually left due to the low pay and the fact that the summer months were without pay. Her third job was in a shop, which she eventually left due to the late hours, then she was a secretary at a dentist's office. At the time of the interview, Doaa was not working. Because her father was a government employee, she was eligible to take his survival pension as an unmarried nonworking daughter as stipulated by Law 79 of 1975 (mentioned above). At age 41 and unmarried, she decided to quit the job market and benefit from the protective system that covered her father

³ In 2003, this amount was the equivalent to approximately US\$30

as a government employee, especially as she was delegated by her siblings to be responsible for taking care of their elderly and sick mother.

Two strategies seem to be optimally adopted by many women in the face of these situations of job scarcity and employment precariousness. The first is to seek employment in the public sector, which offers favourable working conditions even to those without access to foreign languages or a higher socioeconomic status. These jobs, however, are unattainable given the many challenges described in the background section. Doaa describes her disappointment when she did not get this job. She describes the experience thus:

A friend of mine once told me about job vacancies in the government. It was an advertisement in the newspaper. My friend and I went to the post office and we bought all the required documents for the application. We copied our graduation certificates and sent them all with express mail. We applied to more than one government vacancy. All with no response. We just wasted the time and money to apply (Doaa, October 2016).

Many reasons are provided for this preference for a job in the public sector. Shaimaa, 28 years old with a BA in Social Service and currently working in a small-scale private sector company with similar conditions to Esraa's job, notes:

The best work is in the government (public sector). There will be (social) insurance and your (paid) leaves and your (retirement) pension. The private sector is not like this, even if you work till age 60 (they don't provide social insurance) (December 2012, Cairo).

The second strategy, adopted by Doaa as noted above, is to opt out of the labour market. For younger women, opting out comes with more social benefits that use cultural symbols as signs of social status. In a focus group discussion, Ebtesam, a university graduate aged 24 notes with confidence that she would not work. She puts this in the context of protection from her family and from her future husband. She notes:

My parents will not let me to work. They gave me the education and I have a degree. I am already engaged and will get married soon, neither my parents nor my husband will let me work, I should stay at home (Ebtesam, October 2015).

The above quote, mentioned in a focus group discussion, shows the social desirability of being a stay-at-home young educated woman. Ebtesam, similar to Doaa, Mona, Esraa and Shaimaa, is a university graduate. However, her socioeconomic background and education

would not allow her to compete for jobs in the formal private sector with its benefits and relatively higher pay scales. Barsoum (2004) shows interview data with young women who also highlight reputational fears associated with employment in the private sector and fear of sexual harassment as a serious problem for young women. This can explain why Ebtesam would make the above statement about parental interference to protect their daughters from jobs that offer no prospects, little compensation and would cause reputational harm. As a competent social agent, she is also aware of the limited opportunity to work in the public sector. The desirability of the stay-at-home status is augmented by the low salaries and the compromised working conditions of jobs in small-scale predominantly informal workplaces. If opting out is a socially desirable option for young unmarried women, married women offer stronger reasons for opting out as responsibilities of marriage and children compete for their time. In the following section, I discuss the interview data from working mothers.

“Because we need the money”: The discourse of guilt among married young women

While most of the interviewed young unmarried women spoke of problems relating to the labour market and job quality, married women were more focused on the balance between work and family. Married working women speak of long hours at work, combined with impossible tasks dealing with unhelpful husbands and limited access to affordable, trusted day care options.

The case of Maha is very telling. She is a university graduate who was 36 years old at the time of the interview. She studied Social Science and earned her degree in 2006. Maha got married during her undergraduate studies and finished her undergraduate degree in six years, attributing the delay to marriage commitments. When her two children were aged eight and five, she started looking for her first job. After a long search, she found a job at a day care centre. She described the early years:

When the kids were young, I used to leave them with my sister. I would drop them there (in the morning) and pick them up in the afternoon. When my sister was busy, I would leave them to my mother in law. But we always had fights (she and her mother in law). So I used to leave them alone in the house. I would lock the door and leave them food. My son used to cry a lot. One day I remember I left them eggs and milk in the fridge. They spilled the milk and broke the eggs and had nothing to eat. I called them from work and tried to leave work early to go feed them. The

administration refused. So I called my sister and asked her to go throw them food from the balcony (we were on the second level). My husband said I should stay at home but when I confronted him that we need the money he changed his mind. But he reprimanded me for neglecting to feed the children (Maha, June 2015).

The above quote summarises many of the problems facing working mothers. The first key challenge is the limited access to affordable and trusted childcare facilities, which leaves women seeking help from relatives and may create edgy situations, as Maha experienced with her mother-in-law. At the time of the interview, Maha's daughter was 14 and her son was 10. She was still working in the same day care facility. The above incident of the children left without food, recounted by Maha almost seven years after it happened, shows the intensity of the guilt that women are confronted with as they join the labour market. The image of her crying son and the memory of children left without food and then the husband threatening to stop her from going to work and accusing her of "neglecting" the children all convey the heavy burdens potentially facing women in continuing in the labour market.

Throughout the interview, Maha continued to be apologetic for her work decisions. She notes:

We need the money. We need to pay for the private tutoring and the lessons are very expensive because they study in experimental schools ... I have Fridays and Saturdays off. I cook for the whole week during these two days and I clean the house. I sleep from overwork ... But I might wake up at night (during the week) to do quick meals or sandwiches for the kids (Maha, June 2015)

The decision to work, according to Maha, is to be justified by reasons related to the children's needs. The need for private tutoring to support the children in school outweighs any other argument about her decision to work. She is quick in the above quote to show that she does the cooking for the family diligently and that they are never left without food, although the children are now older and can help. However, Maha treats their meals along with the house cleaning as her sole responsibility. She justifies this by noting that the children will need to focus on their studying and, of course, the private tutoring that takes place after school hours.

Mariam is another working woman interviewed as part of this study. At the time of the interview she had a six-year old son who was starting school. She worked at a private-sector company selling water filters from 10am to 5pm and was getting a salary of LE 1,000 plus a

sales commission.⁴ Because of her long commute, she arrives home around 7pm. Similar to Maha, she starts by justifying why she has to work:

The private sector knows that you need the job and that there are many who would take this job if you don't. We (she and her husband) need money in the house. We live in a rented apartment and we pay LE 1,000 as monthly rent. Let alone the water, electricity and gas. School tuitions are high. I have to help (Mariam, September 2015).

On how she takes care of her child given her long work day, she notes:

My parents live in the street behind us ... my son stays with them after school. My father is 80 and my mother is 68. They take my son with them if they have to go see a doctor. My father complains that my son is noisy. I bought my son a tablet to play games while waiting for me. I don't know what to do ... My husband and I fight a lot because the house is not clean (Mariam, September 2015).

Mariam faces the same guilt highlighted by Maha. She is unable to express the same pride in a clean house and meals organised during the weekend. She too justifies her decision to work as action taken for the family.

In both situations, however, the husbands are not helping with the household chores. In fact, mention of them is limited to their accusations of not being good wives or mothers. Amira, a 32-year-old married woman, describes her day after work and after picking up her son from day care noting:

And when I get home at 5, there is my other child. (I interrupted asking if she has another child that I did not see). No, it is my husband who needs to eat and wants a clean house (Amira, April, 2016)

Husbands, extended family support, and the proximity of work are key issues that seem central to working women's decisions to continue in the labour market upon marriage. The decision to join the labour market in the discourse of these women is far from being ideological. It remains a dialectic between what can possibly be achieved by working outside the house. Women quit work because the way the labour market is organised and the way the family is organised make their "double burden" (Hochschild, 1989) difficult to bear. Cultural representations of gender roles in the family remain central to this data.

⁴ Interview was conducted in December 2014. This amount was the equivalent of approximately US\$150 at the time. Rent cost was about US\$100

Discussion and conclusion: Women's employment decisions and social policies

The analysis in this paper shows that social policies on education, the functioning of the labour market and society, social security and childcare provision are at the heart of women's employment decisions. Married and unmarried working women speak of facing specific challenges in the labour market. Young unmarried women focus on the jobs they get and the problems related to specialisation mismatch, job scarcity and nepotism, work benefits, and working conditions. Social policies related to higher education and its deteriorating quality, particularly for those from a lower socioeconomic background, are at the heart of the dilemmas facing these women. Social security policies, with their limited coverage of young women, weaken the ties between these young women and their employment. Undocumented and unregistered work relations are weak, encouraging women to drop them at any point since there is no benefit expectation. In fact, as the data from one interviewee above shows, the social security policies that offer provisions for the unmarried and non-working daughters of deceased retirees in the public sector establish an environment that encourages young women not to work. Married women, on the other hand, are primarily focused on the challenges they face as they work out the balancing act of their productive and reproductive roles. Social policies fail this group in the limited provision of affordable childcare facilities and other women-friendly workplace policies such as facilitating flexible hours or forms of leave.

The discussion of these policies is oftentimes shunned in favour of the discussion of macro-policies and the larger political economy. Macro-economic policies ultimately play a role in defining the opportunity structure for working women. However, the determinism of such an argument ignores the strong agency of individual women who make decisions pertaining to their working life. The focus on macro-economic policies leaves little space for the need to focus on social policies that address the immediate needs of women, both married and unmarried. Women-related work challenges are neglected, they are *their* problems to solve, not issues that should be addressed through effective and targeted policies. The literature on women's employment generally laments their absence from the labour market (e.g. UNDP, 2005). However, this literature fails to provide an ample understanding of the lived experience of working women and the challenges they face.

Similarly, the culturalist approach fails to take into account the dynamic nature of women's decisions to work and the strategies they adopt in negotiating their different options. In making this argument, however, the role of culture cannot be ignored. The strict division of responsibilities within the household, even when the woman is working is an enactment of culture. Gendered work relations, with women receiving subordinate work positions and being treated the way one informant shows above, are another enactment of culture. While we cannot escape cultural norms and their impact on women's decisions, this should not trivialise the calculated decisions of women who decide to either work or not. This paper eschews the paternalistic view that women should work. Women make the decisions that correspond with their work options and burdens in the family. What really matters is that these decisions are structured in such a way that, in the aggregate, women's withdrawal from the labour market is seriously hampering gender equity in Egypt and the Arab region.

While women's employment opportunities are the outcome of the functioning of the labour market and its limited labour demand, women face challenges that are specific to their gender. These challenges are at the heart of policies pertaining to the provision of effective and affordable childcare support, various forms of leave and flexible working arrangements. Women in Egypt and the Middle East have made strides in education that are actually unsurpassed by other regions in the same period of time (World Bank, 2013:32). To benefit from the advances in education, the challenges facing women should not be seen as "women's problems" but as an area for policy action.

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