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How Private Lives Determine Work Options: Reflections on Poor Women's Employment in Egypt

Hania Sholkamy

Introduction

This chapter examines the articulations between private/personal and market/work choices, decisions and conditions. It reviews the empirical evidence on women and work in Egypt in order to explore the reasons why rates of labour-force participation remain low and why the currently significant political demands for women's exit from the labour market have currency, despite the conclusive evidence for a strong relationship between women's work and family well-being. By drawing on ethnographic and survey data, it highlights the importance of understanding the articulations of work and family lives which define women's work experiences. I will use women's personal narratives to indicate that family dynamics significantly inform patterns of female employment, sometimes by discouraging labour-force participation and at other times by leading women to engage in income-generating activities not against but in conformity with traditional gender norms that define their familial responsibilities.

As has been widely discussed, female employment not only empowers women but also contributes to economic growth and the alleviation of social and economic inequalities (Esping-Andersen, 1995, p. 7). It has been argued that there exists a two-way relationship between economic growth and gender equality, whereby gender equality ensures that economies are optimizing their use of labour resources, rather than allowing discrimination to impose barriers

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to labour mobility. In a parallel vein, one would expect economic growth to promote gender equality by destabilizing traditional patriarchal norms and alleviating economic scarcity as a cause for gender discrimination (Kabeer and Natali, 2011). As Kabeer has argued in a review article, greater gender equality in employment and education, particularly at the secondary level, has a positive impact on the rate of economic growth, but female labour-force participation and education, even independently of rates of economic growth, 'also appear to contribute to progress on other aspects of gender equality, helping to close the gender gap in life expectancy, promote women's political participation and challenge stereotyped views about women's role in society – among women but also among men' (Kabeer, 2011, p. 2). Resources in women's hands also contribute to the inclusiveness of growth, as studies have shown women's altruistic choices in spending on children, home and the family (Kabeer, 2008).

Despite the positive impacts of female employment, the relationship between private and intimate experiences and economically productive ones may limit female labour-force participation, and the conservative rhetoric that urges women to stay at home can still resonate in public debate, regardless of widespread economic deprivation. At the same time, the increased presence of women in paid work does not necessarily fracture the edifice of unequal power within the family, nor does it challenge the gender segmentation of occupational structures.

In the case of Egypt, a series of factors – including the absence of social protection and care policies, as well as the diminished role of the state as an employer – have influenced both the availability of jobs accessible to women and the desires of women themselves to work. Economic hardship, on the other hand, has mandated work as a survival necessity for poor and poorly educated women. Under these circumstances, the 'empowering' or liberating potential of paid and unpaid work remains unrealized, and work becomes a feature of women's complex lives and struggles to balance needs, chores, burdens and relationships. This is a travesty not only from a gender justice perspective but also from a gender-neutral one of growth and equity.

According to the latest round of the Egypt Labour Market Panel Survey (ELMPS), women are entering the informal labour market in droves and taking up employment in informal and family

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occupations, sometimes without pay or benefits, but always without protection except for that afforded by family obligations. In other words, work has not leveraged the female worker into a better position, neither within the family, nor in the workplace. Educated women with access to white-collar jobs or those who have capital to become employers may have fared better than the poor who are over-represented in informal and unregulated labour markets (Anker et al., 2003; Kabeer, 2008b). The decisions of the latter to engage in this type of work are significantly influenced by the gender norms and roles that shape women's intimate lives and might often determine the degree to which work yields well-being or power. The correlation between women's economic activity and women's well-being and empowerment is not necessarily a positive one; poor women might become economically active while remaining socially vulnerable. In order to understand the patterns and implications of female employment, we need to investigate not only market-based transactions and relationships but also delve into the private sphere and register changes and transformations in family formation and gender norms.

There is a complex and sometimes misconstrued dynamic between women's personal and working lives. The endogenous associations between women's work and their reproductive lives and choices confound an understanding of linear causality. The dynamics of family life affect decisions to seek employment in different ways. The introduction to this book has pointed not only to low levels of labour-force participation by women in both Egypt and Turkey but also to decreasing rates of employment among groups of women in both countries. There are diminishing opportunities for employment in some sectors and increased competition for limited jobs in others. In Egypt, women face a resilient and vocal patriarchal narrative that places women inside the home and privileges reproductive roles over productive ones, but this does not necessarily preclude the expansion of informal or unpaid family work.

Social, sexual, and market contracts

Marriage is a sexual contract, citizenship is a social one, and work is a market-based transaction. The three types of contracts together define the realm of the possible in which women and families make

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individual choices. This is not to say that contracts determine behaviour, but rather that these contractual arrangements have implications for how individuals make decisions to manage benefits, risks and opportunities. The patterns of work and income generation examined in this chapter indicate that the majority of women are engaged in work that precludes them from the benefits of market contracts (either virtual or actual). They are engaged in unpaid or informal work with no formal rights (or at least none that is enforceable) (Assaad, 2007).

As Olmsted has noted, within the context of Southwest Asia and North Africa, although the decline in gender gaps in education and life expectancy indicates an overall improvement in the status of women, their levels of economic independence and labour-force participation remain low and suggest a continued reliance on the patriarchal family as the source of economic well-being (Olmsted 2005, pp. 113, 132). This may be interpreted as suggesting that, despite the power imbalances that reside in patriarchy as a social model, social and family resources are able to provide certain benefits that lead to some improvement in the position of individual women living according to these arrangements. This conclusion is of a nature so as to support these economic theories of the family as a unit which acts to maximize a single-utility function and invests in children. In these approaches, the investments of both mates are assumed to be equal. Such rational behaviour explains why women and men choose to marry and pool their resources to maintain the family unit (Becker, 1974, p. 326). But this is an ungendered and ideologically neutral approach to families. In contexts where gender biases persist, these investments may not be equal, nor are they made without biases affected by the gender of the child in whom the parents are investing. Analysis from Egypt has shown that parents invest less in girls than they do in boys. Differentials in investments relating to health and education between boys and girls point to the necessity of gendering the model of the altruistic family (Sholkamy, 2001).

Studies on marriage patterns in Egypt confirm the importance of marriage as a rational choice mandated by individual, family and community needs for survival and reproduction. In societies where sexual activity is constrained by religious and social norms, marriage is the route not only to social and economic survival but also to sexual agency (Singerman and Hoodfar, 1996). However, this does

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not necessarily mean that marriage partners are equal or equally able to make decisions and choices. Feminists have argued that the sexual contract that forges marriage is prejudicial to women. This contract effectively gives men a monopoly over a woman's sexual, household and economically productive labour, without offering women a similar monopoly in return (Okin, 1989; Pateman, 1988).

While contract theorists have famously ignored women in the construction of individual equality, the sexual contract signals the division of society into two separate spheres: the private/natural and the public/political. The private is relegated to women and considered irrelevant to public life, which is then constructed as an exclusively male domain. Women are thereby conceptualized as belonging to and remaining in a natural, pre-political world, whereas men enter civil society. As Pateman has written, 'civil freedom is a masculine attribute and depends upon patriarchal right' (1988, p. 2). The social contract, then, is an exclusively male enterprise that transforms patriarchy into its modern form which is 'fraternal, contractual, and structures capitalist civil society' (Boucher, 2003, p. 25).

Okin has also criticized contractarians for their exclusion of women from the polis by ignoring the significance of family life and intimate relationships. Theorists may include women, as has Rawls done in later writings, but they ignore the *experiences of women*! This critique of contracts is of significance to an informed and gendered understanding of women's work experiences. Economic citizenship is mediated by family and by the sphere of the personal. It is women's positionality in families that makes them cheap and available workers ready to take jobs that offer little more than immediate income and so precludes women from the benefits and rights of economic citizenship, as outlined by Kessler-Harris. In western industrial society, the sanctity of the market makes market work the only practical route to empowerment for women (Kessler-Harris in Kabeer, 2008, p. 17). If civil contracts ignore women, and if markets exclude them, the family becomes the only and most important resource for women's welfare (Esping-Andersen, 2002). It is therefore rational for women to privilege the 'sexual contract' over all others.

The male-breadwinner model is still dominant in Egypt; it is enshrined in religious juridical codes. In the case of Muslims, Quranic texts that confirm male superiority over women in marriage, called *qawameh*, are referenced in order to argue why women are excluded

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from polis and market. In this formulation, families are conceptualized as units that maximize the utility of all members equally and where welfare is pooled and equally distributed. In this case, the complimentary norms and relationships of men and women within families (sometimes called the gender pact) negate the need for formal equality. Male provision and support are balanced by female nurturing and care work. Islamic law permits women to work, retain their income and hold property, but social norms frame women's work as optional or supplementary, since women are not obliged to provide for their families. Yet, the women interviewed for this chapter and those surveyed by the ELMPS tell a different story. They work so as to sustain their sexual contracts, support their children and suspend the strife that blights families in times of economic hardship. The intersections of markets, state and family are ones where gender norms work to not only discourage formal work for women but also suggest informal work as a necessary tactic that enables survival without threatening power within the family.

However, as has been widely discussed in the literature analysing the position of women in paid employment, work is not only a means to economic survival (Dupre and Gagnier, 1996; Elson, 1981; Kabeer, 2008b). It is indeed important to recognize that women are driven to work by a variety of motivations. This underlines the importance of work for agency and personhood and avoids the trap of economistic arguments. It is also important, however, not to overlook the fact that work may be fulfilling or alienating – it may be a choice or a chore, an escape or a prison. Work that is taken up under duress or because of distress is usually 'inherently undesirable, entailing hard physical labour [...] socially devalued or stigmatized' (Kabeer, 2008b, p. 28). The meaning of work for women should be assessed beyond its immediate economic implications, with reference to wider strategic ends that affect the choices of women to participate in working life.

Female employment in Egypt: Socio-economic changes, demographic trends and cultural values

In Egypt, the sexual contract is still a potent factor defining women's agency. Women's sexual/intimate lives and their work options and opportunities are closely linked, and female employment patterns are to a large extent shaped by the gender roles that women choose

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or are compelled to play. This does not only mean that women do not stay out of the labour force by choosing not to contest traditional views on gender roles but also that the decisions to undertake income-generating activities also might be taken in conformity with and as an extension of the traditionally defined family responsibilities that women feel obliged to assume. Under these circumstances, and for poor women in particular, income from work, which might help to alleviate women's financial strictures and burdens, does not necessarily transform power imbalances in their lives or enhance their security and autonomy.

Since the 1970s, there has been a globally observed increase in the availability of low-skill and low-wage jobs for women, as examined in the literature on the feminization of labour (Standing, 1989; Elson and Pearson, 1981; Buğra and Yakut-Çakar, 2010). Although the Egyptian industry is not as fully integrated in globalized production systems as that of other countries in the Mediterranean, including Morocco and Turkey, there have been some important changes in the structure of the economy that have influenced the structure of employment and the availability of jobs. Successive changes in economic policies that have transformed a protected, state-dominated and centralized economy into a liberal one that assigns a more important role to the private sector have implied a shift in work opportunities from formal state employment to employment in private services and industries.

The impact of these changes on women has been immense. Observers have noted a decrease in the availability of 'good' jobs, mostly in the formal sector, and a proliferation of informal activity (see Assaad, 2007). There are conflicting trends that show decreased female labour-force participation in some sectors and an increase in others. This uneven picture renders the understanding of female labour-force participation and its social implications difficult to read. Will Egypt follow the path of South European countries in the social transformation associated with women's work, which has led to de-familialization, increased gender equity and a cultural change that sees women recognized as income earners? This pattern is not evident in Turkey, as it is discussed in Chapter 5 of this volume, and it seems that the case of Egypt is similar to the Turkish one.

Egypt has relatively low levels of female labour-force participation by international comparison. According to the World Bank (2011)

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data, the female economic activity rate was only 21.1 per cent in 2006. Egyptian statistics, on the other hand, indicate that 28 per cent of women in urban areas and 26 per cent in rural areas were engaged in paid work in 2006 (Assaad and El Hamidi, 2009, p. 224). Needless to say, women do work and are economically active in informal, unpaid, occasional productive work, as well as in the routine care work within the family. Female employment statistics can in fact vary significantly, depending on the way in which survey questions are formulated either to depict or ignore those types of work that do not conform to typical patterns of wage employment. For example, the 2006 ELMPS added about 4 million jobs to the labour market in one decade, from the 1998 to the 2006 survey, based on a question that better detects the transformations in the character of rural, occasional, for-market, or for-family processing and agricultural work (Langsten and Salem, 2008). Given the proliferation of home-based, non-remunerated jobs particularly in the rural and lower-income areas of Egypt, it becomes rather difficult to analyse female-employment patterns in terms of conventional employment statistics. Another confounding factor is the spread of micro-credit arrangements driven by civil society initiatives in the realm of social assistance. Women who use micro-credit to enter the labour market as self-employed workers might actually regard themselves as beneficiaries of social assistance and not report their work as paid employment.

The majority of new female entrants into the labour market are women who are entering 'familial' markets. It is therefore important to distinguish in any analysis of the female labour-force participation in Egypt between the rates of economic activity and the interpretations and implications of such economic activity. Certain types of work can have a truly transformative impact on gender relations, while others might actually lead to the entrenchment of patriarchal relations. The latter do not avail women to income, networks and avenues of collective action, political rights, meaningful mobility or even economic independence. They cannot be considered as empowering at a social or political level, although they may enable women to better fulfil ascribed gender roles. Economic activity, which women choose to undertake in order to facilitate their private lives and shoulder their family obligations, thus enables women to 'subsidize' patriarchy, by making up for shortfalls in male provision or compensating for male unemployment.

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While the personal gains that women derive from formal work outside the home might be important, such gains are clearly very limited in the case of work at home. Women's freedom of spatial mobility, for example, significantly varies with their employment status. Women with formal paid employment have the highest levels of mobility. The next-highest mobility is for women with informal paid work outside the home, while those who work in their own home and those who do not work have similar and lower mobility factors. These results suggest a strong bivariate relationship between mobility and the kind of employment in which women are engaged.[1]

Geography, age, wealth and education are important, but they are also associated with the specific type of work. Women who work inside the home for or without wages or those who are engaged in informal work but reside in communities that are conservative or patriarchal, are less able to enjoy the freedom of mobility. Assaad et al. (2008) have shown from their analysis of the ELMPS that the current trend is favouring these familial marketplaces, noting that

> [t]he evidence available indicates that this segment of the labour market, which constituted over 36 per cent of total employment in 2006, has not only seen a decline in its real earnings over time, but has also expanded in size relative to other segments of the Egyptian labour market. It thus appears that household enterprises, and in particular family farms, have served in recent years as a sort of sponge that absorbs excess labour in the Egypt labour market, with as much as one third of new entrants finding work as unpaid family workers. Nonetheless, this labour absorption role appears to have come at the cost of a higher incidence of marginal employment, lower productivity and therefore lower earnings.
>
> (EHDR, 2008)

Apart from societal norms that privilege women's nurturing roles, the lack of availability of jobs for women in a growing private sector, dwindling opportunities for public-sector employment and lack of migration opportunities (Hoodfar, 1997; Amin and Bassussi, 2004; Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2009; Barsoum, 2004; Assaad, 2008) also explain the low level of formal female employment in Egypt. Analyses of cross-sectional data have made it clear that location, education, the employment status of men in the household and a

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woman's stage in her life course are also important determinants of women's work (Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2001; El-Kogali and El-Bassusi, 2001; Assaad and Arntz, 2005; Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2009).

The clear priority that women and their families give to marriage over work is evident in the labour market exodus that occurs as soon as women get married. The modal age of participation in the private sector, 23 years, is almost exactly the median age of marriage for young women in Egypt. It is noticeable that after this age the employment rate declines steadily (El-Zanaty and Way, 2006; Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2009). Women often work to save up for marriage and leave employment, specifically in the private sector, as soon as they have a husband on whom to rely, or at least a partner whose pleasure lies in having a fiancée or wife stay at home. Only women who have access to formal, stable and secure employment will return to the same job or sector after marriage – hence, the ageing formally employed female population. The rest will go back to work, but in insecure and occasional jobs. The meaning and implications of work for women are determined by the societal context of patriarchy.

Although World Values Surveys have certain limitations in depicting the reality of social life, the results of the 2008 survey for Egypt can be said to correlate with the sentiments that pervade public life. These results confirm, for example, the contest between work and home as evinced in opinions concerning female employment. Compared to 55 other countries for which there are data in 2008, Egypt commands the conservative end of the spectrum, specifically in connection with religion and gender. In this respect, 95 per cent of those surveyed said that religion is very important to their daily lives. This is a result higher than in all other Muslim countries surveyed, which include Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Morocco. On gender issues the message is clear. Three questions on gender illustrate the state of public discourses on gender:

1. When the number of jobs decreases, men should be given priority over women in employment (89 per cent strongly agree);
2. A woman's role as homemaker gives her complete satisfaction, just as paid work would (66 per cent strongly agree); and
3. Men are better than women in completing tasks (63 per cent strongly agree).

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These scores rank as the highest compared to all other countries. Moreover, when adding those who agree that staying at home is as gratifying as paid work to the above score of 66 per cent who strongly agree, the result increases to over 90 per cent of respondents. This includes 93 per cent of men and 87 per cent of women interviewed.

In October 2008, a study on early divorce in Egypt conducted by the National Centre for Sociological and Criminological Research put the blame for 36 per cent of divorces on women who, after going out to work and gaining economic independence, had stopped obeying their husbands who 'like to be obeyed unquestioningly' (*El-Hayat*, 22 October 2008, p. 24). Women's economic independence was associated with neglect of care-giving and home-making duties. This is another illustration of dubious research yielding findings that closely correspond to popular sentiments.

These popular sentiments are not unrelated to the changing conditions of work. Work now is no longer family-friendly, and women who go out to work are making a choice that undermines their familial duties. Women leave the labour market when they get married, except for those lucky enough to work in the formal public sector. A full 83 per cent of ever-married women who were in the labour force in 2006 were employed in the public sector, compared to 34 per cent of unmarried women (Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2009, p. 239).

The public sector in Egypt is probably the only truly gender-blind employer in its recruitment practices and guaranteed employment to employees, both male and female. It secures a variety of benefits, such as day-care, a full one-year (renewable) maternity leave, guaranteed return to pre-leave position with acknowledgement of time on leave as working time, annual holidays, access to credit and subsidized goods, membership in unions and collective action committees, and most importantly a guarantee of legal recourse and due process if they challenge their institutions or superiors or seek redress or compensation (MacLeod, 1991; Singerman and Hoodfar, 1996; Assaad and El-Hamidi, 2009).

According to the Assaad (2008), however, high rates of female unemployment should be expected, since the only genuine equal-opportunity employer, also known as the Egyptian state and public sector, is currently changing its recruitment practices and offering men and women fewer jobs. Faced with this shrinking supply of good jobs, women can either attempt to find tolerable private-sector

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employment or brave the jungles of informal occupation and self-employment. The two options embody the proverbial rock and hard place. They fall outside the state's direct control and have yet to adopt the gendered and equitable policies that have made the public sector attractive to educated and skilled women. The practices of the state and the public sector made women's work respectable, desirable and not too arduous or taxing. But the public sector has faded and in some instances even failed.

In the general overview of labour-market transformations in Egypt, it is possible to depict three transitions that are precipitating a sense of crisis around women and work. There has been, first, a limited but sustained increase in female labour-force participation since the 1980s. The second transition is a demographic one, which has delayed the age of marriage. Women are now spending more years as single never-married adults. The third transition concerns education. The vast majority of Egyptian women now get some education at least at the primary level. These three trends suggest that many of our assumptions concerning the productive and reproductive roles of women merit revision. The most important change to note is that women are spending longer periods of their lives without the assumed economic and social support that marriage in patriarchal societies provides for women. The majority of women have years that they did not have before as single and productive individuals, and those living in poverty have to be economically productive so as to provide for their families and for their own futures. The conditions created by economic, social and demographic transitions are pushing women to work, but the political and cultural currents of invented tradition are denying women the benefits of work.

The characteristics of working women

The Working Women Characteristics Survey (WWCS), which forms part of the 'Understanding Women's Work and its Empowering Potentials in their Everyday Life', was designed to gauge the relationships and associations between different indicators that reflect on women's ability to make strategic choices in everyday life, choices that concern both them and their families, including women's mobility, political participation, opinions on women's work and other attitudes and opinions related to gendered well-being, women's decision-making power, mental well-being and the type

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of their employment. The relationships between the type of work and the different empowerment outcomes shed light on a broader discourse on gendered well-being, which provides the opportunity to look at issues regarding intra-household inequity, particularly relating to the association of gendered violence with work.

The WWCS fielded in Egypt in 2009 had the objective of understanding 'how women in different categories of work reposition themselves in public and domestic spheres to change attitudes, break barriers, achieve recognition, enhance their bargaining power, and exercise their rights at home and at work'. The WWCS looked at the dynamic relationship between women's private lives and their participation in the workforce, with the aim to differentiate between work that conforms to feminists' position on work as a route for economic and personal empowerment for women on one hand and work that may burden and further undermine women's status on the other. The findings from this study question the relationship between female employment and the empowerment of women by taking into account the type of work in which women are engaged. The survey sampled from the original frame used by the ELMPS of 1998 and 2006 and conducted household questionnaires and individual women's questionnaires with a total of 934 women and 986 households.

The study looked at the relationship between the following four types of work: Formal Outside Work (FO) for work outside the home that includes a contract or social security; Informal Outside Work (IO) for work outside the home that does not include a contract or social security; Market-Inside Work (MI) for production for purposes of market exchange, in which the woman engaged inside the home; and Not Currently Working (NC) for women who have not reported any market work for the last seven days, but who may be engaged in subsistence or care work. Of this sample, 54 per cent of women had engaged in work in the seven days prior to the fielding of the questionnaire. Of these, almost 70 per cent had no contract and therefore no access to formal papers that would support their status as working women. The breakdown of this group is as follows: work for family without wages accounted for 58 per cent; self-employed or employer made up 25 per cent; and informal wage workers totalled 17 per cent. The majority of women engaged in formal employment – that is, the remaining 30 per cent of working women – worked for the

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government. These findings are consistent with the analysis of previous rounds of the ELMPS (see Assaad, 2007a, 2007b).

The study found that women who are engaged in formal work have positive outcomes regarding their mobility, their ability to make decisions, their attitudes and opinions, as well as their mental well-being, including their capacity to deal with problems. These are typically better educated and wealthier women. On the other hand, women engaged in informal and market-inside work have poorer empowerment outcomes. These women are likely to be uneducated, poor and hold more conservative views on gender roles. Women engaged in informal and market-inside work reported less of a sense of control over their lives, had less mobility, less power in making critical decisions and were less likely to report being happy. Formal work outside the home was found to have a positive relationship with women's increased decision-making power, whereas informal market-oriented work at home or outside the home only marginally improves decision-making power when compared to non-working women. Finally, regarding mental health, the survey found that working women are more likely to be stressed. Formal work outside the home is only for the highly educated, although not all women with education work. However, informal work outside the home has an excess of women with little or no education, as does market work inside the home. The following section will discuss what work means for these women, by drawing on the findings of an ethnographic study conducted in a Cairo slum.

The working lives of urban slum dwellers

The ELMPS and the WWCS document the reality of women's work, but they also show that work does not necessarily have a transformative impact on family relations and the social position of women. It is as though each working woman has 'special' conditions or considerations that have 'forced' her to work outside the home, and a change in these circumstances that required her to seek employment would lead to her leaving work and staying at home. Moreover, for poor women the only reason to work seems to be material need, and there are no benefits expected other than the short-term monetary ones which enable her to fulfil her role as wife and mother.

This observation largely follows a universal trend, where private-sector employers prefer to hire young single females, as these

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employers expect that they will not continue in the labour market after marriage or at least after childbirth. In fact, women in employment are often willing to accept low wages, and they do not require benefits such as maternity leave. This type of female labour can also be assumed to be more flexible in shift and overtime work. Enterprises struggling to secure a well-established position in a competitive market are likely to find such female workers particularly attractive. It is therefore not surprising that female workers with education/skills will prefer employment in the public sector, where discrimination is legally prohibited and where benefits enhancing women's social reproduction role are more assured (CAWTAR, 2001, p. 83).

The results of an ethnographic field research conducted in a Cairo slum over four years present a rather dismal picture of the forms that disadvantaged women's work can take and show how paid employment or the existing mechanisms of social support fail to help these women to escape the double trap of poverty and indebtedness.[2]

Ain el-Sira is a *shiyakha* or district located in Old Cairo, or *Misr el-Qadima*. It is home to 29,349 individuals and covers an area of 0.71 km^2. The inhabitants are not exclusively poor, but the area has deep pockets of extreme poverty. Consequently, it has been the site of choice for several civil society organizations which have been active in poverty reduction and alleviation efforts in Ain el-Sira for a number of decades.

The area was originally the site of the first low-income housing project in Cairo. Popular accommodations or *masakin sha'biya* built between 1958 and 1960, comprised of four- or five-storey building blocks for low-income families eligible for subsidized housing. They were gradually sold to their inhabitants as of the 1980s. Adjacent to this nucleus of buildings, private homes began to appear, some of which were connected to the *masakin*. Other types of dwellings also sprang up in Ain el-Sira during the same period. Little more than urban slums, they consisted of shelters built from corrugated iron, wood and mud-brick. In some areas, these were originally temporary shelters built for earthquake victims and victims of other natural disasters. They have become permanent features of the area, with electricity and running water connected, and they house approximately 1000 families. It is here that numerous civil society organizations have been established to engage in poverty alleviation efforts that almost exclusively cater to women: micro-credit schemes,

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income-generation activities, illiteracy eradication classes and campaigns, food distributions, faith-based philanthropic projects, and many reproductive health services and awareness campaigns.

This area is home to a mix of lower-middle-class women who are engaged in formal employment and working-class women engaged in market-based work, such as trading, cleaning homes, working in the nearby slaughterhouse and selling the offal that they receive as payment, or working at home in sewing, packaging or food-processing activities. For example, a large group of women who participated in a series of focus-group discussions (a total of 106 women participated) packaged small toys or small denominations of money that are inserted as prizes in packets of salty snacks. For every 1000 packages, they receive 10 to 15 Egyptian pounds (approximately USD 2). They have to use their own equipment to seal the small plastic bags; they are lucky to get the work, so when they are hired, children are required to help with the sealing. Other types of work include trading in discarded food.

Sayeda, for example, is known as Sayeda *Groppi*, the latter word referring to the premier cake shop, tea salon and delicatessen in Cairo between the 1950s and 1970s. She buys damaged or broken cakes from an intermediary and sells them to her neighbours and others. This intermediary is a sales assistant in a famous patisserie, who resells the discarded items once or twice a week. On average, she receives 6 or 7 kgs at a time. She buys them for 2.50 EGP/kg and resells them for 4.00 EGP/kg. She feeds them to her children when they have nothing else to eat. Her son goes to school where he receives tuition for 20 EGP/course instead of the customary 25 EGP/course, because she is on welfare. She was told that she is entitled to welfare when she tried to get some help from a local mosque. She gets food from a food bank via this local mosque. It is delivered twice a week; sometimes the meat is off, but otherwise the meals are good.

During in-depth interviews with 27 women from this sample, a number of aspects of work and economic life became apparent. Fifteen of these women said that they did not work and explained their inactivity with reference to their 'inability' to work due to poor health. For 12 out of the 15 non-working women in this sample, their lack of control over cash is compounded by their bad health, which in itself is a financial burden. These women depend on their

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family members, usually their husbands, to give them money to be able to settle their debts, and to pay for food and *magamee'* for their children. Two of these women are taking care of ill family members, one a mentally disabled child and the second a bed-ridden husband. The remaining ten have chronic health problems or injuries keeping them from working, including diabetes, severe chronic asthma, liver problems, heart disease, broken legs that have not healed properly, or multiple C-sections that have left them unable to move. Of the three who do not have health issues, one said that her husband does not allow her to work; the second said that she cannot find work; and the third said that she cannot work because she has a small child. Since many of the men in the families of these 27 women work irregularly, allowance given to women is also largely irregular. Therefore, the women who do not work are particularly insecure, borrowing money, just like all of the other women, but largely unsure of how they will be able to pay it back.

Of those who do work, some have an employer outside the home, while a few are self-employed, and most work for family members. Of the women interviewed, only one has a formal contract. Working women, particularly those informally employed, suffer long hours of work for little pay. Despite this trouble, however, many of the women find contentment in having a job and report that they enjoy some aspects of the work. It seems that the women with the least control over cash are those who are working for family members or not working at all; neither of these groups have an independent source of income, little clarity as to how much money there is available, and how much they can ask for.

The burden that all of the women carry, regardless of whether they are working or not, is their debt. Many of those in debt do not feel confident that they will be able to pay back what they owe. The search for money stresses women's social lives within the household, where they suffer abuse for asking for money, as well as within their community, where they are stigmatized for borrowing and pressured to make good on forced promises. Women in need of large amounts or wanting to start a small business sometimes borrow outside of their community, from banks, loan sharks and NGOs. Most of the women borrowing with interest are unable to pay back their loans. None of the women report that they are able to save money, though all have dreams towards which they wish they could save.

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Most of the working married women in our sample help their husbands in family businesses without pay. Two of the six who fall into this category are Azza and Ne'ma who are married to the same man. They live together with their husband, eight collective children, and their mother-in-law in a three-bedroom apartment in the blocks of Ain el-Sira. They help their husband with his work as a butcher, cleaning the shop, helping him every Tuesday as he sells the meat, and then every Sunday collecting the money from the women who buy meat. Like the other women helping out in family business, Azza and Ne'ma work a few hours each week, 12 hours on Tuesdays and less on Sundays, and are flexible with the work and the hours. They estimate that the money they generate is around 150 EGP per week, since their husband does not own the sheep, but instead sells the sheep for someone else and makes only a small profit on what is sold. The money that the wives receive is irregular. During the week they borrow money from their neighbours to fulfil household needs, and when the earnings arrive on Sundays they settle their accounts, paying back what they owe and collecting what they are owed. Any surplus is promptly given to the husband, who then decides what it will be used for. When the husband does give them money for buying food for the house, the wives decide together on how it will be spent. The women report that asking for more money causes conflicts, often resulting in violence.

However, working for a family business does provide women with some security, in that they are not exposed to an uncomfortable working environment and have some flexibility with the working hours. Ghalia and Mahasin are distant relatives who work without a contract at the tannery where most of the men of Ain el-Sira make their living. They work side-by-side, separating black wool from white wool eight to nine hours a day, six days a week, taking only Fridays off. They make around 1 EGP an hour, or 40 to 60 EGP a week, depending on how many hours they manage to work. Although they used to work inside a factory building, the owner of the work stopped paying rent, since there is a decline in the tannery's productivity, and now they work outside, on the road. They both report that they do not feel safe or comfortable in their work environment. Ghalia, for example, is embarrassed by how she has to squat in front of her male co-workers in order to do her work. Both women struggle with the fact that they are not paid if they are unable to work.

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When Ghalia's mother-in-law died, she had to take two weeks off to go back to the village to bury her. This, she says, affected her family enormously and caused her to have to borrow more money than she typically does. She does not know how she will repay it.

Inshirah is the only woman of the 27 interviewed who has a formal work contract. However, this does not make her more secure or settled. Two years ago, her husband had a work-related accident and became unable to support his family. She tried to find work, but her search took over 18 months, by which time she had run out of money and relatives and neighbours from whom to borrow. She turned to a local woman who loans money at an interest rate of 10 per cent per month (120 per cent per annum). Inshirah borrowed 500 EGP and then 1000 EGP, and then another 100, and so on, culminating in a debt of 5000 EGP at the end of the 18 months. Paying her husband's bills and supporting her four children, Inshirah fell into insurmountable debt. Finally, she found work as a janitor in a museum in Giza. She is happy at work, taking Fridays off and making 450 EGP a month, in addition to receiving bonuses every three months and on major holidays. She feels safe in her work and has all of the benefits afforded to permanent staff, including health insurance and a pension. However, she is incurring even more debt, borrowing money to be able to pay back the interest of 500 EGP she owes monthly. She feels trapped in this cycle and during the interview exclaimed through tears: 'The money that I owe is a very heavy burden, I wish this hangman's noose would untie from around my neck, it's a collar that I cannot get rid of!'

Regardless of how much money women borrow, it seems that it is very difficult to pay the money back. One woman, Badreya, who sells corks and rope in the marketplace, explained that she owes 'nine EGP for onions, four for tomatoes, eight for a plate, and I owe a [male] neighbour 10 EGP'. Her husband refuses to help her pay back her debt. Another woman, Sabra, owes more than 2000–2600 EGP in instalments for an oven that exploded, and 600 EGP in medical bills incurred because of her husband's ill health.

Self-employed/informally employed women have also been the beneficiaries of various charity and development projects. These projects were inspired by development agendas and fads that promote credit, literacy, suffrage and reproductive rights as strategies for women's empowerment. In Ain el-Sira, women have used the

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1 resources availed to them by civil society to negotiate public power
2 imbalances, but not private ones. Literacy is an asset used to find a
3 job. Credit has often come to be a way of supporting unemployed
4 males. Votes are sold for cash or for in-kind payments that go towards
5 supporting families. But here there are few patriarchal benefits – such
6 as protection, support, or respect for the rights of wives and mothers –
7 that are left to women. In conversations about women's work, the
8 subject of domestic violence came up a number of times. Men resort
9 to violence if 'you say you are tired' and are reluctant to honour
10 your duties as wife. Women who talked freely about domestic strife
11 said that men associated reluctance with work. 'They have no objec-
12 tions to us working', said Samia. 'Sometimes he helps me out when
13 I have jobs at home, he knows this is bringing in income and that
14 the income benefits his children and himself', she continued. 'But
15 when it comes to his wishes [for sex], he will get angry and blame
16 my work.'
17 One woman had left her husband because he was violent. 'I dumped
18 him after twenty years of being beaten with a broom handle, and my
19 sons support me', said Mervat. She had sat through a number of our
20 discussions and could offer her own analysis: 'Each woman knows
21 what she wants from her life and her man. Some will live with
22 being beaten and some even don't mind, as by tolerating a beating
23 she knows she will in the end get her way and get what she wants!'
24 Another young and educated woman who attended the discussions
25 had an abusive father who used to attack her and her brother with a
26 knife and frequently beat her mother, leading to her hospitalization.
27 She insisted that this was their lot and that they had more to lose by
28 exposing him and living with the shame of having done so.
29 The ethnographic evidence from Ain el-Sira helps to interpret some
30 of the statistical findings of the survey. Some forms of labour-market
31 activity/employment best realize the benefits of work to women, but
32 not others. The dignity that derives from work with some feature of
33 formalization is not forthcoming from work without wages or with-
34 out contracts, or from work that is performed at home and enmeshed
35 in relationships that are prejudicial to women. In other words,
36 drudgery is not empowering. The prevalence of informal, at-home
37 and/or not-for-pay work among Egyptian women requires a revision
38 of a number of current strategies that assume a benign relationship
39 between economic activity and gender justice.

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Conclusion

Recent surveys on women's work in Egypt have shown that context is key to understanding the substantive implications of work to women's personal and social lives. In Egypt, family relations defined around traditional gender roles often appear as the determining factor in women's decisions to engage in income-generating activities. Private life thus remains central to the choice made to remain outside the workforce, but also the choice to participate in the labour market. The reproductive and productive activities of women seem to be facets of a single survival strategy. Women work to support their families without challenging the patriarchal norms that continue to dominate and control their lives at home and often also in the workplace. They are often discouraged from identifying themselves as workers and encouraged to consider their primary personal identification as that of a female currently on loan to the market. Diminishing public employment opportunities and the scarcity of formal employment in the private sector together define a situation where the increase in female employment does not only remain limited but is also associated with the proliferation of 'bad jobs'. In the meantime, women receive little institutional support to enable them to combine employment with their role as care-providers within the family.

The circumstances that define the current position of poor Egyptian women trapped between traditional gender roles and economic expediency are extremely difficult. This does not mean, however, that these circumstances are impossible to change through deliberate policy intervention aimed at improving working conditions, enforcing formal job contracts and providing training and childcare facilities. Whether such policy intervention will be forthcoming or not conversely depends on political factors, especially on the will and the ability of women to speak in the name of gender justice and equality. Egyptian women have fully participated as equals and as leaders in the struggles of the past year. They have suffered bullets, humiliation, and attacks, yet continued to speak, shout and sing in the name of their own and every other citizen's rights. Yet, they are absent from parliament, as only 2 per cent of parliamentary seats have gone to women. The world average for female representation in elected legislative bodies is 19 per cent; the Arab world's average is AQ3

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13 per cent. Egypt is now in that tiny group of countries that includes Kiribati, Vanuatu and the Marshall Islands, who have excised half of their population from formal political representative bodies. Women are at the heart of a new and emerging Egypt, but they are not seated at tables where laws are negotiated, where rights are formalized, and where the people are represented. And as long as they are not seated at those tables, it is unrealistic to expect any desirable change in the current patterns of female employment in the country.

Notes

1. The statistical analysis for the mobility findings from the survey has been made by Ragui Assaad.
2. This is the research project on feminist social protection conducted by the Social Research Centre and the Egyptian Ministry of Social Solidarity. The project introduced conditional cash transfer in a slum area in Cairo, on the basis of a survey and qualitative research that investigated the landscape of social protection and assistance in the area. The CCT programme was designed with the participation of social workers and local women. It has been financed by the government of Egypt and is ongoing since 2009.

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