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Graduate Studies

Embodying abortion: approaches to sexual and reproductive experiences of the Cairene youth

A THESIS SUBMITTED BY

Ruth Morales Cosano

TO THE

Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies.

SUPERVISED BY

Martina Rieker

July 12, 2023

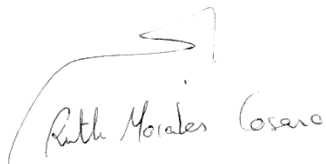
*in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of,
A Masters of Arts degree in Gender and Women's Studies.*

Declaration of Authorship

I, Ruth Morales Cosano, declare that this thesis titled, "Embodying abortion: approaches to sexual and reproductive experiences of the Cairene youth" and the work presented in it are my own. I confirm that:

- This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University.
- Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated.
- Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed.
- Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work.
- I have acknowledged all main sources of help.
- Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ruth Morales Cosano". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Ruth Morales Cosano

Date:
July 12, 2023

**STUDENT TO INSERT HERE THE PAGE WITH
THE SIGNATURES OF THE THESIS DEFENSE
COMMITTEE**

Abstract

Whilst abortion in Egypt has been sorely neglected in academic literature, and highly criminalized by state institutions, women in Egypt have by no means ceased to perform it and, what is more, upon reasons that exceed any institutional or legal reasoning. The thesis stems from the need to give voice and continuity to the experiences of women who abort in Cairo. Given the almost complete lack of material showcasing this reality, this research project investigates the meaning-making process of abortion among Cairo's middle and upper classes. Understanding this construction requires studying abortion in its embeddedness in the material, social, and political context. Shaped by all social actors, this happening is ultimately operationalized in women's bodies. Its meaning, which takes up form in a contested everydayness, is inherently linked to sexuality, and reproduction for they all engrain in the construction of the gender-based continuum. Abortion exists through the body in production and that is why this paper approaches gender embodiment from a time-mediated approach. Placing the focus on time and embodiment allows seeing abortion not as the moment of emergence in which a woman decides to interrupt pregnancy, but rather as a continuum of bodily experiences throughout the woman's life. Understanding this bodily experience as a life process helps us dislocate the practice of abortion as concrete (concrete moments, concrete places, and concrete people), and relocate it to unimaginable sites of experience and practice.

Acknowledgements

To all the participants of the research. Thank you for opening your heart to me, for sharing your intimacies and vulnerabilities.

To all people that enable, facilitate, and support the process of abortion for women in Cairo. Thank you for holding, believing, and constructing better life possibilities.

To the women who abort. This thesis is for you to know you are not alone. This thesis is for your memories to remain alive. This thesis is for you.

To the people that have sustained me during the research and writing process. This thesis would not have seen the light without your support and love. No words can contain my gratitude and love toward you.

To my father that has always been there with me and even when he is not now he always is.

Para mi padre que siempre ha estado conmigo y, aun cuando ahora no está, siempre está.

Contents

Declaration of Authorship	i
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Contents	v
Chapter 1	1
Introduction	1
Prologue	1
Research Questions.....	2
Contextualization.....	3
Literature Review.....	5
Methodology	14
Chapters' Summary.....	21
Chapter 2.....	23
Sexuality	23
2.1 Embodying sex: accounting for the desiring body.....	24
2.2 Non-reproductive sexualities: birth control and social control.....	36
2.3 Alternative sexual futures: practices and imaginaries.	43
Chapter 3.....	50
Reproduction and motherhood.....	50
3.1 The triple axis: womanhood, wifehood and motherhood.	51
3.2 Balancing the nuclei: family regulations.	61
3.3 A punishing health institution: abuses and misinformations.	74
3.4 The desired parenthood: parenting reimagined.....	81
Chapter 4.....	86
Abortion	86
4.1 Crafting the political: the violence of disappearing.....	87
4.2 Summative experiences: causal decisions, consequential events.	94
4.3 Arranging possibilities: procedures, temporalities, and topographies.....	105
4.4 The ever under construction network: envisaging abortion otherwise.	114
Chapter 5.....	126
Conclusion	126
The body.....	128
The network.....	130
References.....	133

Chapter 1

Introduction

Prologue

In September 2021 I held a conversation with the reproductive and sexual health activist Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty to discuss abortion in Cairo. To my surprise, to the question "What do women currently need during the abortion process?", she responded "time". Cairene women struggle with the material and social possibilities in order to get an abortion whereas time runs against them. After finding out about an unwanted pregnancy, time starts to stretch and compress, accelerate and decelerate, framing their bodies' experiences during this time period.

Nawal did not remember whether the response of the pregnancy test was positive, but she has a clear memory of her urge after a week's delay in her period to arrange a clinic abortion. From the moment Zahra found out she was pregnant until she got a termination procedure, less than forty-eight hours passed. Mona got two consecutive abortions because from one to another, she could not calculate her ovulation times. Reem was exhausted from being compelled to perform normalcy and resume her routine even though she had just gone through termination a few weeks before. For Heba, the time has helped heal the negative emotional footprint that abortion left on her. Some women cannot get a clinic abortion because their pregnancy is too advanced and then they turn to Youssef, who practices clandestine abortions himself at his own place when there is no other available resource for these women. Some women do not have enough time to gather the money to get a

supervised abortion in a clinic and therefore call Essam, who can smuggle in abortive pills from abroad.

Time structures bodily experiencing, and gender frames that timing. Being a woman in Cairo starts to forge from the time of birth. So does being a man. Abortion engrains in this gender picture. When termination occurs, bodies have already accumulated a life experiencing of gender. Through time, bodies accumulate gendered behaviors, patterns, feelings, expectations, and performances.

Research Questions

The term abortion contains a vast array of relationships, meanings, experiences, images, silences, calculations, desires, and promises, which correspondingly can be engaged through a myriad of methods. The possibilities of interrupting pregnancy operate on different levels simultaneously, generating multiple forms of address. Studying abortion as a social phenomenon requires more than simply adding analytic frameworks and social theories; it pushes for being attentive to how bodily accumulation through time (of experiences, of subjects, of significances) creates meaning. Therefore, the purpose of the thesis study is to investigate the Cairene youth's opinions and understandings of abortion through a time-mediated approach. Bodies, subjectivities, temporalities, and spatialities shape in certain forms the specific possibilities of interrupting pregnancy. By tracing the connections between possibility and experience, this research aims to shed light on the process of meaning-making of abortion, which if ultimately operationalized in women's bodies, is shaped by all social actors. Placing the focus on embodiment allows seeing abortion not as the moment of emergence in which a woman decides to interrupt pregnancy,

but rather as a continuum of bodily experiences throughout the woman's life.

Understanding this bodily experience as a life process helps us dislocate the practice of abortion as concrete (concrete moments, concrete places, and concrete people), and relocate it to unimaginable sites of experience and practice.

Therefore, the questions that set up this investigation are: How is abortion embodied and performed in women's bodies inhabiting Cairo? How does time frame the gendered experiencing of the bodies? How does abortion mesh in this accumulative experience? How is the relationship between women's bodies and abortion perceived and shaped by different social actors? How do class belongings craft specific understandings of the body?

Contextualization

It is all a matter of time. Understanding the social configuration of abortion in Cairo and appreciating the nets that mobilize are also part of a long process – at least that is my experience. For me, it started in my first semester of the master's program, in Fall 2020, when I was confronted with reading a one-page press release about abortion in Egypt. When I first went through this article, 'Feminist bodies demand action to make abortion safe for women' by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (2016), I realized that socio-political arrangements around abortion were not fully understandable to me. Therefore, I decided to go for a bit of research to understand better the societal configuration of abortion in Egypt. However, the internet was almost devoid of this content. As I had a growing interest in learning about the interruption of pregnancy and its effect on women's bodies, I determined to write the course's final paper on the topic. For current information was barely not

available, my paper mainly focused on exploring bodily laws in Egypt, with an emphasis on abortion, and their relation in shaping women's bodies and subjectivities. It was in between this exhaustive investigation that this thesis research project started to forge for I realized how much fieldwork was necessary to account for the women's experiences.

Notwithstanding, drawing present-day information on the topic was quite challenging due to the fact that during the last two decades, academic engagement with the topic of abortion in Egypt has been scarce. At the same time, family planning programs issued by the Egyptian government have received greater attention. The last one, on November 2020, was intended to improve "the quality of life, through the provision of social and public services in terms of quantity and quality for all citizens, social groups and all regions of the state" according to the Minister of Planning and Economic Development (Egypt Today, 2020). The topic of abortion seems to be out of the public debate in Egypt, not considered a topic for academic research, and not considered a possible legal service in the government's agenda. It is almost only some sexual rights activists along with local and international organizations that raise the issue.

Whilst abortion has been sorely neglected in academic literature, and highly criminalized by state institutions, women in Egypt have by no means ceased to perform it and, what is more, upon reasons that exceed any institutional or legal reasoning. In such context, this paper looks at recording the experiences, harms, and strategies of young women who have decided to terminate a pregnancy in Egypt's capital city, Cairo, and thus aims at reconstructing the particular kinds of violence that are inscribed in their bodies. To further understand the societal configuration from

which the arrangement of abortion emerges, the research delves into the youth approaches to sexuality and reproduction. This effort ultimately stems from the acknowledged necessity by several scholars to track the traces of abortion in women's lives because when data is absent, “the women who face this harm become officially invisible” (Lane et al., 1998, p. 1098).

Emerged in its fortuitousness, the initial internet search escalated until becoming a thesis project that has spanned more than two years. From the moment it was conceived, this research has always ambioned at tackling six issues. First, the research aims to elucidate the current effects, perceptions, and understandings of abortion for Cairene youth, more concretely for women. Second, it seeks to add current perspectives to the debate on abortion in Egypt and, more ambitiously, to remove from neglect women's experiences of abortion. Third, it seeks to understand the criminalization of abortion as part of a larger societal configuration of gender. Fourth, it looks to identify the textual, contextual, and specific complexities of abortion in Egypt and the social tropes through which is articulated. Fifth, reading women’s current strategies of subversion may ultimately help envisage which specific actions could be taken to topple the existing detrimental system against women. Sixth, reconstructing abortion through local experiences may illuminate us in tracing common experiences globally. Common experiences of violent encounters with abortion processes could ultimately point to creating feminist transnational solidarities.

Literature Review

In order to answer the above-mentioned questions, I have established four

main areas of research that turn out relevant for the thesis's topic of concern: the meaning-making processes of abortion by the Cairene youth, more concretely of women. Four areas have emerged as particularly important in this research.

1. Gendered bodies, reproduction, and sexuality in Egypt

The European presence brought a major transformation for Egyptian socio-political institutions in the nineteenth century, which has to a certain extent permeated to the current date. The importance placed on modernity by the colonial powers, anthropologist Kamran Asdar Ali (2002) argues, deeply affected the ontological perceptions and configurations. The local construction of gendered subjectivities, the family, the body, and reproduction came in contact with the colonial population planning programs and its particular ontology. The production of new bodies and selves drew on constructs of a new citizen-kind, guided by constructions of individuality, legal belonging, bodily autonomy, responsibility, and independence. What is more, colonization transformed legal, religious, medical, and social institutions in Egypt and, in such process, abortion became outlawed for the first time. According to sociologist Leila Hessini (2007), the legal and medical status of abortion began to change at the end of the nineteenth century due to the progressive professionalization of medicine (and its subsequent limit to practicing abortion to trained gynecologists) and the incorporation of European laws into the Egyptian legal system. In 1883 the interruption of pregnancy was for the first time encompassed in the Penal Code, which set up the legislation on aborting pregnant women and the legal punishments for every person involved in the interruption of the pregnancy,

articles that have remained in force until the present day.

During the twentieth century, major societal change came as a result of Egypt's modernization and integration into the global economy. Anthropologist Maria Frederika Malmström (2016) explores the ways in which historical transformations shaped gender subjectivities until the beginning of the present century. Focusing on the politics of female circumcision, her work explores the lived experiences and social meanings of gendered bodies in different generations of Cairene women.

Gendered socioeconomic and political structures in twenty-first-century Cairo are examined by feminist scholar Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty (2020) in her master's thesis. This work delves into the construction of the young female subject and the current possibilities of rupture that they perform through their bodies. Emphasis is placed on women's navigation of the city through the category of *istiqlal*, independency, and *mustaqilla*, independent woman. Understandings of the independent female self along with the power structures that challenge it lay a solid foundation to start approaching the bodily navigations of modernity by young Cairene women.

These texts provide a solid basis to investigate how the ontological and material construction of the bodies evolved due to different socio-historical contingencies during the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition to providing a historical understanding of the ontology of the body, they set an analytical ground from which to look at the disruptions and continuities in conceiving abortion and the materiality of the body to date.

2. Dispossession, performativity, and the state.

Even when the interruption of pregnancy is outlawed in most African countries and legalized in most European ones, the abortion rates are remarkably similar –respectively, 29 and 28 out of 1000 women (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008). To understand why abortion is still prohibited in spite of the fact that women perform it, I look at women and dispossession. According to Marxist-feminist philosopher Silvia Federici (2004), the dispossession of women from their reproductive and sexual capacities initially occurred in the transition to the capitalist economy. The reproductive elements of society were redefined and a "universe of [women] practices, beliefs and social subjects" (Federici, 2004, p. 165) was destroyed because they were incompatible with the capitalist work discipline. From that very moment, the patriarchal structures of the state appropriated women's reproductive bodies and sexuality, which has been replicated since then through the legal apparatus. The insubordinate bodies that challenged the productive and reproductive needs of the state by making up their own decisions on reproduction and sexuality have been historically exposed to being punished by legal, physical, psychological, and symbolical harm. My contention is that the framework of dispossession that Federici elaborated needs to be further examined in its application to specific contexts. Thus, in this research, I look at the social meanings and legal regulations that suffuse the process of abortion in Cairo through her theory. This framework turned out to be extremely sharp to unravel the process through which women are alienated from their bodies as well as to understand how this alienation is being reproduced.

Studying bodies' dispossession calls for conjointly examining the processes through which the state operationalizes this appropriation. Feminist political economist Adrienne Roberts (2016) argues that the state has used law throughout the

history of capitalism in order to coercively discipline people by way of regulating and constructing differences as well as controlling bodies and spaces. She describes the family and the state as inherently oppressive organizational systems and, thus, states that the ultimate target of social movements cannot be leading a radical change through them. The analytical frameworks of these authors needed to be contextually grounded so that they became applicable to exploring the relationship between the Egyptian state and women's bodies. Conjointly, these authors help examine the ways in which the state forces are navigated by Cairene women, which points to their understanding of the interrelation between bodily and law infrastructures.

Apart from the gendered historical and legal perspectives, looking at bodies also drives us toward performativity. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler's (1990) performative theory points out that subjects are brought to life through performance, i.e. subjects are when doing. The production and reproduction of our identity through performative acts, by which the subject is being ceaselessly constructed, is ultimately expressed through the body. Following Butler's performative theory, I delve into ways in which the performative subject body is shaped and shapes the possibilities of performing, not performing, or how to perform certain acts. Namely, I look at how the possibilities of accessing abortion ultimately come into being through bodies' performances. From this angle, the possibilities of getting an abortion are never congealed and neither are the subjects that give meaning to these possibilities. Apprehending abortion as a performative and embodied action that surpasses the moment of terminating pregnancy itself would destabilize the concept as a concrete practice. Rather such (im)possibility – which is traversed by a multiplicity of intersections – fluidly comes into being on women's bodies and permeates their lives

in unexpected ways.

These frameworks set a firm ground from where to study the interconnection between bodies, regulations, their performances and their possibilities of being. Yet, even more important is to trace their applicability to concrete settings and analyze how such theories speak to bodies in Cairo.

3. Abortion Literature in Egypt

There are no recent publications on induced abortion in Egypt. All reports and investigations stress the difficulties of obtaining accurate data on induced abortion in Egypt due to that “little information is available on abortion practices outside the legal framework” due to that “subjects will often deny such practice” (Harb & Habil, 2013, pp. 159, 162). Even if there are some acknowledged difficulties in tracing women’s abortion experiences, some authors have endeavored to delve into the perceptions of women towards reproductive practices and ways of negotiating them. Some of the most renowned names that have been issuing claims, articles, and public campaigns recently are those of the EIPR, the RESURJ (Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice), Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty, and gynecologist Mahmoud Fahmy Fathalla, among others. Besides, some women’s movements have also arisen that call for re-interpreting and embracing religious texts in view of contemporary realities (Hessini, 2007).

Most research agrees that, despite the legal background, induced abortion is common in Egypt when women deem the termination of pregnancy necessary (Hessini, 2007). If choosing to interrupt pregnancy, legal and social condemnations turn clandestinity into the only possibility in Egypt. But even if all women have to

cope with illegality, an unlawful abortion does not always entail the same consequences nor it produces the same meanings (Fahmy Fatallah, 2008; Lane et al., 1998). Abortion is differently apprehended, perceived, practiced, and judged among Egyptian women. The research carried out by doctors Hany Harb and Ihab Habil in 2013 in hospitals identified at least four predictable determinants of induced abortions: sexual activity before marriage, an elder age (≥ 30 years), geographical location, and a high number of children (Harb & Habil, 2013). Other factors that emerge throughout published testimonies and research articles are: the couple's support (Ahmed, 2018), financial resources (EIPR, 2009), the health of the mother or the fetus (Ahmed, 2017), and (un)desired offspring (Ahmed, 2018).

The articles here presented allow placing the evolution of national debates on abortion, the tropes that have been identified as noticeable in affecting the process of abortion, and the social actors that have been ensembled to give meaning to abortion processes. These accounts set a basis from which to start understanding the multi-layered experience of abortion in the Egyptian setting. However, little has been recently published on how abortion reproduces on different levels of subjectivity – except by Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty. It is in this regard that my research looks to shed some light. My aim is to contribute to the feminist scholarship on the production, reproduction, and embodiment of abortion on women's bodies through researching its gender, material, symbolic and structural dimensions.

4. Placing feminist theories worldwide.

Revisiting feminist literature dealing with abortion in other locations lastly informs this thesis. My aim is to find grounded analytical tools on abortion to verify

its applicability in this research, and thus adapt them to the Cairene context. Besides, by delving into abroad-local approaches, I look to tracing possible transnational analogies which may point to establishing feminist alliances across national boundaries.

The idea of placing abortion within a continuum of gender shaping was brought in in research on the criminalization of abortion in Ecuador (Zaragocín et al., 2018). By placing the body as a territory where dispossession and resistance tactics intersect, the authors look to understand which violences are performed upon these bodies. A holistic approach to societal processes of gender meaning-making allows for identifying the tropes in which it emerges and the manners it reproduces: location, social actors, body impressions, social relations, behaviors, expectations, etc. The analysis of certain settings, reactions, decisions, and effects of gender configuration is used to show which specific social dimensions traverse abortion in the Ecuadorian context. Through such framing, the authors put forward actions that do not deal with abortion as something detached, but rather they assemble measures that holistically deal with the shaping of gender-based oppression in located social settings. Drawing from this analysis, I look at how abortion can be re-assembled in the Cairene context and thus, observe which social tropes and gendered dimensions traverse it.

To gain greater insight into how settings of legal and social punishment trace concrete temporalities and geographies, I look at sociologists Lucila Szwarc and Sandra Salomé Fernández Vázquez's article (2018) in Argentina. They give an account of bodily experiences of abortion through time logic. As a matter of a fact, one of their main inputs is their approach to the embodiment of abortion by means of looking at the connection between waiting, experiencing, and feeling. Likewise, they

delve into how clandestinity narrows women's possibilities to perform an abortion, turning support networks into a significant manner to reach out the means to interrupt a pregnancy. The importance of time and networks is equally considered in this thesis as they enable and frame the existence of abortion in Cairo. Szwarc and Fernández Vázquez's (2018) approach is engaged in my research to look at the state production of such areas of clandestinity, the institutionalization and exercise of time-based violence on women's bodies and the ways in which women challenge prescriptions by constructing undercover systems of help and support.

Last, articles by Arocena and Aguiar in Uruguay (2017), Yogi, K.C. and Neupane in Nepal (2018), and López Tomás in Spain (2020) bring illuminating insights on the binomial legal-safe abortions. Whilst abortion is legal in these countries, this set of authors reveals the prevalence of high unsafe abortion rates. Here, legalizing abortion does not emerge as a definite answer to prevent jeopardizing the lives of women who decide to interrupt pregnancy. If the legal does not provide a solution or an explanation by itself, then it is necessary to study unsafe abortions transversely by way of their geographical, cultural, social, and historical dimensions. Especially revealing from Yogi, K. C., and Neupane's article (2017) is its comparative perspective, by which the authors trace similarities in abortion settings between Nepal and other countries (e.g. how concrete intersections of class, literacy, age, provenance, etc. impact abortion rates, practices, and profiles). Following the authors' perspectives, I investigate the factors associated with unsafe abortion in Egypt, beyond its legal status. In addition to thinking about how legal claims overshadow other claims by Egyptian women (e.g. over sexuality, reproduction, timing, household decisions, economic prospects, etc.), this frame enables examining the exclusions

attached to demanding safe abortion for legally constructed subjects. On a different note, I contend that Yogi, K. C., and Neupane's comparative approach needs to be further explored in other settings to understand the similarities that the intersection of certain factors may have (e.g. the symbolic, material, or territorial effects) in different parts of the world.

Methodology

1. Research design.

Abortion experiences of women in Cairo need to be studied more in-depth, especially since the majority of the mentioned studies do not provide recent insights on the issue. It is considered exploratory research since there is barely any information published on this topic. My research in this regard tries to make sense of a social phenomenon that has not been yet thoroughly approached, hence I explore different theoretical frameworks, evaluate their applicability to the social everydayness, and come up with categories to address local experiences. Still, I highly rely on description and explanation too. This assisted me in providing a picture of the complex realities and dimensions of abortion in Egypt as well as in giving meaning to these experiences in the frame of existing social theories. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in order to answer the proposed research questions. Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews constituted the quantitative component and content analysis and statistics research represented the qualitative method of data collection in the study.

Likewise, the research locates the study of a specific phenomenon, abortion, in a concrete time and place, which stems from feminist geographies of engagement

(Nagar, 2015). This methodology looks for producing spatially and temporally grounded knowledge. Rather than attending to universalist analytical frameworks, this thesis project seeks activist scholar engagement that accounts for the chrono-geographical specificities of abortion in current Cairo. Scholar literature can only be meaningful if constructed through deep and active involvement with local actors and social movements. Therefore, this thesis project seeks an activist scholar engagement that is able to grasp, at least partially, the contingent combination of processes, events, and social actors that enter into play in Cairo's abortion picture.

2. Participants

My point of departure in constructing the field ground was people related to abortion experiences in Cairo, especially the women that have, at some point, decided to interrupt pregnancy as well as people surrounding this process. Yet, what I did not anticipate is where this research would take me. The places, nets, expressions, meanings, connections, demeanors, and gestures that became meaningful in this project emerged circumstantially as the investigation moved along. At all events, this thesis is crafted from an interpretive reflexivity approach, drawing on Lichterman's term (2017), to critically look at the dialectic relationship between the process of knowledge-making and my situated experience in the field.

With the benefit of hindsight, my research branches out in the study of three subject groups: middle-upper class youngsters, women who have decided to induce a termination and other social actors directly concerned with abortion. First, I engage in case-study research involving women that have interrupted pregnancy in Cairo.

Setting the focus on a small group allowed me to further engage with each participant

and their context and thus explore their narratives and their meaning-making processes. Through this engagement I also looked at examining the link between the micro and the macro level, that is to say, the everyday of individuals in relation to the social, political, historical, economic and legal structures to which they belong. Second, Cairene youth as well as sexual and reproductive health activists, NGO members and gynecologists are engaged in the research through interviews. Interviews took a conversation format which served as a method to collect the narratives of these social actors on sexuality, reproduction and abortion and their relation to features of social life. The separation among research groups is carried out for practical reasons, yet I acknowledge the undeniable interrelation of these actors in the abortion processes (meaning-making, accessing, performing, etc.), an interconnection that is reassembled in the thesis writing.

In my thesis, I have focused on the understanding of sexuality and reproduction of the Cairene youth who belongs to the middle and upper classes. Therefore, the conversations brought herein need to be understood in their relatedness. That is, even when Cairo contains within itself a myriad of lifeworlds, the ones that were explored in the research held a significant number of common elements. The most evident ones are the location in time and space since fieldwork took place between June 2021 and February 2022 in Cairo. For greater concreteness, the places wherein the research was conducted were mediated by the subjects' possibilities and will, having the possibility to choose between online or face-to-face meetings. To a large extent, offline gatherings happened at up-scale meeting spots, such as high-end malls, trendy coffee shops in affluent neighborhoods, private obstetric clinics, pay-out meeting rooms, lavish gardens, and spots nearby private

universities. This leads us to the next shared trait, their socioeconomic status. The people that participated in this research belonged to the middle, middle-upper, and upper classes. One of my two requirements to participate was being an English speaker, which turned out to be intimately bonded with class possibilities. The second one was the research focus, for I was interested in investigating the youth's viewpoint on sexuality, reproduction and, more concretely, abortion. Therefore, the last bond that united participants was their generation, being all aged between twenty and thirty-five. The only two exceptions that bypassed this age were an abortion practitioner gynecologist and a human rights NGO worker. To sum up, the research and consequently its conclusions are mediated by the age and class of the participants, which need to be contextualized in a concrete spatiotemporal setting.

3. Data collection instruments.

Regarding the collection of quantitative data, I drew upon two methods: content analysis and existing statistics research. Content analysis was a useful tool inasmuch as one of my aims was to examine the written narratives of women on abortion. In this regard, I explored blogs and press releases in which women give an account of their experiences so as to find common concerns, happenings, feelings, narrations, and meaning-making processes. As for existing statistics, I made use of them in order to get a broad picture of some of the topics that directly concern abortion (e.g., contraceptive use, fertility preferences, attempted abortion rates, or rates of maternal deaths due to abortion). Yet, I am aware of at least two problems of drawing upon statistics when researching a legally and socially condemned issue. First, there is usually a great likelihood that people (consciously or unconsciously)

distort, hide or alter their life experience narratives; therefore, when asked about cumbersome issues, it is more likely subjects resort to concealment, alteration, and disruption on a conscious level. In this regard, Harb and Habil point out that the “study of induced abortion in a country like Egypt represents a challenge” (2013, p. 162) because subjects tend to conceal it. Second, as the World Health Organization stated in its 2014 report on Abortion Policies and Reproductive Health around the World, in countries where abortion policies are restrictive “privately performed abortions go unreported and are therefore not reflected in the available statistics” (UN, 2014, p. 3). Thus, the reliability of the tool has been widely called into question to study an issue such as illegal abortion (Fahmy Fathallah, 2008; Lane et al., 1998). It is through this awareness that I make critical use of statistics, exploring how and why they conceal certain information (the existence of certain subjects, preferences, practices, transgressions, and harms).

The importance of qualitative data relies on the need to gather first-hand information of lived experiences on sexuality, reproduction and abortion, for as argued before there are barely any existing accounts of how the youth’s approaches to these issues. Thus, this project relies to a great extent on interviews and field research. Interviews are used to get into the descriptions of abortion by different social actors related to such a process as well as to the women who engage in it. Interviews did not draw upon a set of fixed questions, as such format presupposes beforehand the direction the dialogue should take and the points that must be covered, leaving little room for the participants' perspectives and concerns on the topic to emerge (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Conversely, interviews intended to take the form of conversations with the purpose of leaving wide open the contours of the talking. A

conversational approach provided insightful knowledge of the participants' perspectives inasmuch as it set focus on what they "consider to be reportable as well as aspects of the aesthetics of story-telling and reporting" (Keating & Egbert, 2005, p. 176). Hence, I looked at how women that had voluntarily interrupted a pregnancy, relatives, friends, gynecologists, activists and NGO members construct an imagery towards abortion and how they reproduce it discursively. Thus, the choice of the approach lies in that it provides keen insight into identity building, processes of meaning-making and the organization of class and gendered relationships (Keating & Egbert, 2005).

As for fieldwork, this method proved to be of great value in this research in order to grasp the everyday lives of people and the material worlds surrounding abortion. Field research was a means of "contextualizing the actions and understandings of specific actors" towards abortion, to use ethnographer Vered Amit's words (1999, p. 16). My purpose was to explore how the intersubjective human experience of some women was configured around abortion. This kind of involvement is intended to unravel how social tropes (e.g. sexuality, sex, family planning, motherhood, etc.) permeate the process of meaning-making of abortion, the consequences such apprehension has on women's bodies, and the negotiations of such categories. For abortion to take meaning throughout the research, the boundaries of the research field ground were left open to be shaped by the contingent, fluid, episodic, and altering associations and commitments as well as my alliances with social actors that would emerge.

4. Procedure for data collection and analysis.

The research project was presented in a brief announcement on social media platforms. Simultaneously, I communicated my intention to carry out an investigation on sexuality and reproduction in private groups on Facebook and WhatsApp and asked for participants. When I was contacted, I specified on the private chat that the research was also aimed at investigating abortion. Likewise, participants were recruited through word-of-mouth: participants and personal friends presented to me other people that were potential future participants. All participants were asked permission to participate in the research project and were ensured utmost confidentiality upon requirement. This translates in the writing into a slight alteration of participants' information to avoid identification (e.g. replacing name, age, career path, hometown, etc.).

Delving into existing literature, the research also builds on fieldwork: ethnographic research and interviews. Fieldwork was documented through field notes as a way of producing daily written accounts of my personal experiences and observations. Field notes allow reflection and revision of the meaning-making process, which ultimately helped me get a picture of how perceptions and understandings have progressively evolved in an ongoing and fluid process (Emerson et al., 2011).

Interpretations from and throughout fieldwork were debated along with participants. I endeavored to engage all sides – researcher and participants– in the knowledge making process, so as to produce meaningful theories beyond the academic realm (Nagar, 2015). My purpose was to draw upon an interpretative reflexivity approach from which to account for people's struggles, representations, and meanings as well as for my own situatedness (Lichterman, 2017).

Chapters' Summary

Chapter two explores the construction of the female urban citizen body in the Cairene society considering class as a determining factor in constructing gendered female subjectivities. It presents sex as a practice beyond its happening, as being engrained in the politics of social reproductivity. The chapter focuses on how middle-upper-class young women and men understand their bodies and sexuality in this milieu, as well as which politics of subversion they mobilize from it.

Chapter three explains the family as a historically gendered socio-economic unit. It accounts for how the reproduction of female labor is ultimately the means through which this institution is operationalized. Whilst parenting and marriage ideals haunt the construction of gendered subjectivities, with heavier mandates for female subjects, young people navigate the existing possibilities to break through undesired prescriptions. Pushing for crafting an identity that goes beyond their familial and conceiving status, they redefined gender identity tropes.

Chapter four explains how abortion breaks up the normative sexual and reproductive logic of gendered subjects. The current understanding of abortion is underpinned by the societal fabric, however, it is ultimately played over women's bodies. This chapter focuses on women's experiencing of abortion: it moves from the strategies deployed and difficulties encountered to their emotional and bodily approach to finally land on how they envisage other social landscapes where alternative sexual, reproductive, and abortive practices fit in. Likewise, it approaches the strategies of other actors to enable women's abortion access and the support networks that from there unfold.

Chapter 2

Sexuality

Zahra, a twenty-nine years-old sociologist, was introduced to me by a common friend at a party where we talked at length. That first time, in the backyard of a house in the fancy neighborhood of Maadi, she spoke to me about her personal experience with interrupting pregnancy. I asked her to meet a second time to discuss more quietly and the following week she came to my place. Smoking on the balcony of my house and distractedly playing with a pen, she told me:

I started having sex at the age of sixteen. It happened with my boyfriend of that time. He was the first one and blah blah blah, you know all of that romantic stuff. Nowadays in my circle of friends, it is not normal to be a virgin, but I also have friends who are. Sometimes I think my group is a bubble. There are lots of social groups and each one has a different mindset. There are girls who want to remain virgins until they marry. I don't know how they do it! [Zahra laughs] Maybe they get married before.

As this extract of our talk shows, the conversations with participants about sexuality usually swing between a general perspective, where social prescriptions are addressed, and a more individual viewpoint, where personal convictions and experiences come into play. This chapter explores, through the participants' voices, the interrelatedness in the gender-experiencing continuum between sexual apprehensions and identity configurations.

2.1 Embodying sex: accounting for the desiring body.

Analyzing sexuality, reproduction, and abortion demands screening at bodies, for it is through them that social meanings are organically accumulated, created, and operationalized (Ali, 2002). That is to say, practices performed through the body are bonded to the social milieu from which they arise and which they shape. Since the production of the body happens in a continuous, active and contested process (Butler, 1990), looking at and from the body enables an in-depth examination of the infinite nets that emerge from it. For studying the bodies through everyday experiences remains quite disregarded in the scholarly literature on reproduction and sexuality (Capelli, 2019), this research relocates the production of knowledge into bodies and the stories that from them emanate. Anthropologist Maria Frederika Malmström (2016) contends that speaking of the body involves a discussion on agency, for the body, is always acted upon by a conscious self and, at the same time, acted upon by others. In her research on sexuality in Cairo, Malmström (2016) argued that notions of body and person are defined in collective and relational terms; the person, she argues, is a socio-centric self who is always thought of in relation to social collectivities (such as the family, the neighbors, the state, etc.). Engaging with the body brings also gender into the center for its relationship with the social is determined by it. Whilst gender and other collective forms of relationality accumulate in bodies through their steady apprehension, the way in which they take up form upon bodies is constantly recreated, which enables certain openness for re-creating and transforming such identities through practice (Butler, 1990). Likewise, sexuality is in a continuous process of shaping, creation and preservation. Desires, perceptions, fears, and performances change with time and through experiences. Zahra does

not perceive her sexuality now as she did thirteen years ago when she started having sex; the accumulation of lived experiences over time has led her to relate to her sexuality differently.

A year after I started having sex, I had my first check-up and, at the age of seventeen, I started taking contraceptives. I was taking them for four months. Then I stopped, and I was feeling very anxious regarding my sexual life. I did not want to get myself pregnant and have to tell my parents! I was scared when I was seventeen... at that time I was still very young. With seventeen everything was unspoken and I wouldn't have been able to talk to my mum... But when I was twenty-five and I got an abortion, I did not care about people knowing I had an active sexual life. With twenty-five at least I was an adult.

Social prescriptions do not condemn sex and sexual desire as such; sexual activities are, in fact, expected and celebrated in certain situations (Malmström, 2016). However, the frame in which these encounters are duly enabled is extremely tight. Time enables getting to this phase. A common picture that emerged during the conversations is that sexual intercourse is socially accepted when it happens within a married heterosexual couple in private and related, though not limited, to reproduction. For further clarification, sex is not necessarily attached to reproduction, however, a married couple is certainly expected to conceive. Therefore, the bond between reproduction and sex is that their mandate and possibility of existence are restricted to a single setting: wedlock.

The middle-upper-class urban youth is definitely challenging existing assumptions about sexuality upon performance. Even when all interlocutors recognized the existence of such arrangements around the heterosexual family unit,

most expressed disagreement with them. Sex before, after, and outside marriage happens. All interlocutors acknowledged it. Besides, the majority of them were sexually active in spite of their civil status and, except for one participant, none of them expressed opposition against premarital sex. Participants navigated normative prescriptions in different ways looking to accommodate their bodies away from regulated assemblages perceived as not desirable. The narration of these everyday navigations stressed three main intersecting aspects of the experiencing of out of wedlock sexualities.

First, there is a clear breach between how religious and non-religious people encounter sex. All non-religious participants had engaged in sexual intercourse with penetration, which was referred sometimes as ‘full intercourse’. Though I myself find this term problematic, for it points to that the completeness of sexual interaction is to be found in penetration and presupposes a division line between those who reach the fullness and those who stay halfway, I find it contextually suitable as well. ‘Full intercourse’ defines the woman’s engagement with sex, for the line of female virginity, whose ultimate marker is the hymen, has to be trespassed to be considered ‘full’. Among religious interlocutors, most had not experienced sex owing to their choice of abstinence until marriage. Although none of them commented whether they had engaged in sex to any extent, plenty of interlocutors said it was common among religious women to be sexually active but not practice penetration. The stories they shared from their friends were somewhat similar to the one that Nawal told me. She was a divorced independent woman in her early thirties who went through three abortions. We hold the conversation while drinking black tea on the sun-drenched terrace of the flat she shared with other flatmates in Garden City. If there were any

difference in the narrations was the main character's load of guilt.

A *hijabi* [veiled] friend is now married... Before marriage, she had a boyfriend and they used to make lots of sexual activities but not penetration. It was fine by her, she didn't find this contradictory. She told me "this is bad, but at least I'm not doing something *haram* [forbidden in Islam]".

Second, there was an ambiance of confusion regarding the legality of sex outside wedlock. The status of sex was rather unknown, considered legal, or considered illegal. There is no law criminalizing consented sex before marriage, however, there are two articles in the Penal Code that may be employed against it – Article 278, which punishes committing "in public a scandalous act against pudency", and Article 279 which punishes perpetrating "with a woman an immoral act, even not publicly". The legal status was not the main worry nor hindrance, for people's concerns were mostly guided by social and familial pressure, cultural values and religious obligations. On this subject, Naylah, a twenty-five years old postgraduate student, expressed a popular thought among many of my interlocutors. In our online conversation, she looked into my eyes through the camera and said, in a confident and strong tone that she kept throughout the whole conversation, "law doesn't prevent sexual activities, tradition prevents them!". Additionally, a company director and advocate of gender and human rights in his mid-thirties, Youssef, remarked that: "It is a false conception, sex outside marriage is not illegal. Anyhow, people do not care about the law, they guide themselves by societal values". There is a noticeable disharmony between legal dispositions and people's performances. The profound lack of confidence in the government and its institutions, which are perceived as unable to

manage socio-economic problems and satisfy the population's necessities, makes people turn their allegiances towards community structures, strengthening their dependence and reliance on them (Malmström, 2016). Sex may not be legally penalized but socially is and it is this social grasp of sex that predominantly influences the experiencing of sexuality.

Third, sexual prescriptions for unmarried men and women were perceived as plainly unequal. Even when premarital sex is not desirable in general terms, different standards are applied to each sex. Men are not supposed to engage in sexual activities before marriage and yet it is admitted they do driven by their sexual urges. This is not the case at all for women, whose bodies are sexually admitted only for productive and reproductive purposes. Consequently, there was a noticeable difference in treatment within families between female and male members. Looking back to her adolescence, Nawal stopped talking and took a deep breath before recounting how sex behaviors were differently encouraged for her and her brother as well as how engaging in sexual activities dissimilarly affected them as gendered subjects.

Sex out of wedlock is something forbidden. It is ok for boys. I have a brother and my dad encouraged him to do it. They could even brag about it. Though when I was young, for sure I did it. I had really bad experiences though... [...] There were horrifying experiences... traumatizing...

Women struggle with restrictive conceptions of female sexual conduct. They are expected to perform honor which they individually and collectively embody (Malmström, 2016). The kinship's honorability lies in its female members, which are expected to respect female bodily purity and chastity patterns (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008; Malmström, 2016). Purity and chastity are associated with the woman's virginity and,

consequently, with the preservation of their *ghisha al-bakara*, of their hymen (Malmström, 2016). The hymen, whose existence is a social requirement for women to marry, has been historically considered the marker of a woman's purity (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008). Heba, an executive assistant that came from Alexandria five years ago, is now twenty-five years old. She has faced many difficulties throughout her life due to her sexual orientation (bisexual), an active sex life deployment, and an abortion procedure. Like most participants, she acknowledged that society places great importance on women's virginity, ultimately linked to their hymen preservation, and the frustration that generates in women.

Most people only conceive sex within marriage, besides they don't talk about sex, just behind closed doors. I would say no woman is happy... Virginity is a big issue, but most of us do have sex. Most people want a conventional marriage and, for that, the hymen has great importance. Lots of women struggle with their sexuality to avoid the hymen being removed.

The preservation of virginity and family honor is behind the social control of women, according to gynecologist Fahmy Fathalla (2008). Digging deeper into the analysis, women's chastity, honorability, and control are at heart related to social reproduction purposes. Honor and shame (the negative affection resulting from the absence of honor) work as regulatory moral notions to preserve the continuity of the family unit (Eldamaty, 2020). The honorable activities' outreach, participants confirmed, does not merely apply to virginity but also to other activities that may point to the existence of sexual activities. Some of the given examples were holding hands with a man, late-night going outs, living in mixed housings, or visiting an unmarried pal's apartment. This imaginary built-up around honor works to frame the

available time and space resources for women (Ahmed, 2020), that is, as a dispositive of control over their bodies.

Regardless of their sexual experiences, the women I interviewed had similar approaches on this subject, which could be clustered in three common opinions: first, that virginity and hymen preservation were a myth, second, that the myth was still alive, and third, that the myth was more wide-spread in poor areas – an analysis of upper classes imaginaries on lower ones is deployed below in this chapter. Critical geographic scholar Melissa Wright (2006) examines the paradox by which the myth, taken as an imaginary notion, functions as an organizational structure. For, the myth explains, despite its factual inexistence, virginity possesses certain traits that make it particularly valuable to the social structuring that requires honorable-productive women.

Notwithstanding, the once-upon-a-time steadfast hymen preservation belief seems to be diluting for the Cairene middle-upper youngsters. Many participants identified themselves as well as their group of friends as not following this mandate. Let's remember Zahra saying that, in her group of friends, "it is not normal to be a virgin" and Heba's "but most of us do have sex". Disaffection towards the rules over sexual life could take various roads, for there is not a single manner of navigating between prescriptive and dissenting drives, but rather many. Feminist scholar Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) forewarned that responses fluctuate according to socio-cultural settings and identities. Strategies of resistance move along different grounds, always oscillating between challenging the perceived suffocating social norms and maximizing personal welfare by activating normative prescriptions.

Among the ones that dissent, some act in accordance with the rules still

wishing their overcoming, either fully or partially. Dalia who has lived independently in Cairo since her eighteens, when she moved from Southern Egypt, is now a book editor in her thirties. Having decided not to have sex until marriage due to familial pressure, she expressed her complete disapproval of these dictates and yet explained why she behaves in compliance. Additionally, she explained with a hint of frustration in her eyes the contrasting burden of shame between siblings that sex entailed due to gender structures and privileges. At a stylish coffee shop in the heart of a residential neighborhood, where she suggested meeting, Dalia confessed:

My brother is now married to an Egyptian-Swedish woman. They had sex before marriage, but for him is different. It doesn't mind because he is a man. It is not equal, we are not equal. I'm not like him, I would bring shame if I have sex. It is disgusting! But this is the way it is in Egypt. Men have privileges and women have to struggle. For my family, virginity plays an important role, it should be kept before marriage. But I hate it! I hate the idea! But sometimes you should sacrifice your ideas for your family. For me, I kept my virginity not because I'm afraid of losing it, but because if I lost it, I would lose my family. And I don't want that, I love my family. I have to find a balance, a shared stage... As for myself, I don't mind. Practically, I don't want to. Sex before marriage is part of the love experience. I cannot imagine myself with someone I have never been with before. I would never do full intercourse, but if I start a relationship, I would be open to do other things.

Other people decide to bypass certain social impositions, thus, practicing their overcoming. Opposing heterosexual prescriptions was Heba who presented herself as bisexual. Like many other women I met, she neither stood by sex confinement to

wedlock. As a matter of a fact, sitting in a noisy art café in *Wasat El Balad*, Cairo's downtown, she told me in a low voice that, despite social norms, "everyone has sex".

And yet, not everyone disposes of their body and sexuality similarly. Although biological explanations note that sexual desire originates in the brain, not in sexual organs and that sexual response cycles are remarkably similar in female and male sexed bodies (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008), a socio-ecological approach enables understanding the disparity between men's and women's sexual lived experiences. Whilst no men raised the issue of bodily autonomy, presumably because they took it for granted, women actively did. Distress and anger sprung from women against the feelings of dispossession and lack of bodily self-determination. A clear example of such uneasiness was the strong criticism deployed by Reem, a 20-year-old undergraduate student who was going through a termination process when I met her. I was introduced to Reem at the same party where I met Zahra, and I similarly suggested her to see each other another time. The second time we gathered at the meeting room of a cultural center in the Fifth Settlement, one of the wealthiest sectors in Cairo, wherein this confession was uttered with rage:

Egypt is a patriarchal society without any freedom for women [...], it takes power away from women and their bodies. Women have no right to do anything. There is no space for women to be free or sexually active [...], no freedom over their bodies and sexuality.

Female interlocutors perceive that decisions and performances concerning their sexuality and reproduction are constrained by social, material, economic, spatial, and temporal arrangements. Against a paradigm of constriction, women endeavor to find a way to accommodate their needs and aspirations. Anthropologist Sherine Hafez

stated that through the constant negotiation of power, “especially nationalist and patriarchal power”, women in Egypt “construct a sanctioned space of empowerment for themselves” (2014, p. 25). Despite this clampdown, or maybe more accurately through it, women express their will to actively enjoy their sexuality in the present moment or the future. Women regard themselves as active agents who individually take decisions over their current and future sexual performances within a convoluted context with which they have to constantly negotiate.

All showed determination to engage in sexual activities and to enjoy them; some women actually shared the course of some past interactions or their expectancies for future encounters. Notably, desires were not always expressed in terms of a traditional encounter with the other, but also in alternative practices and imaginaries. Heba spoke about masturbation and acknowledged she herself practiced it. Nawal mentioned she was active on dating apps and was having numerous casual flings. Furthermore, they showed extreme respect towards other practices and preferences even if they did not share them (e.g. sex in/out of marriage, sexual preferences, etc.), especially those of their female counterparts.

Men also expressed their will to engage in sex, yet their concerns were headed in another direction. They bluntly expressed or insinuated having sexual desire –“I’m a person with high libido!” confessed 28-year-old Gamal during our conversation at a fancy restaurant in *Wasat El Balad*. However, these men also expressed difficulties to find sexual partners. Men seeking to enjoy sex encounter the alleged problem of meeting a woman with the same will. These difficulties were credited to marriage prescriptions, tradition, and women's attitudes towards sex.

Accordingly, there is an enormous gap in outer perceptions towards female

sexuality and the middle-upper class Cairene women's sexual self-image. Most scholarly analyses notice that women's bodies are socially perceived as holders of uncontrollable sexual lust in Egypt (see for instance Ali, 2002, Fahmy Fathalla, 2008 or Malmström, 2016). However, any of my interlocutors, neither male nor female, regarded women as sexually uncontrollable beings. I venture to guess this mismatch results from the intersection of at least four factors: lack of current research, the age of the participants, their origin and economic status. Put differently, most research dates back around ten or twenty years, and focuses on adult and elder people in either poor urban areas or countryside villages.

Meanwhile, even when all men I interviewed acknowledged having sexual needs, some did not articulate a similar view towards their female counterparts. They saw themselves as the primary actors in the sexual interaction and disregarded the female contribution. Essam is a 28-year-old single man who makes a living out of various self-owned start-ups since he finished a business management degree at a private university in Cairo. He assured me that "girls don't need sex, they need to feel secure, safe, and understood". He conceived the role of men and women as complementary and understood this interaction in terms of trade: women, who have low libido and long for a stable partner, and men, who have high libido and do not care about safety in a couple, meet in a tacit agreement. Sexuality is here taken away from women in a discursive expropriation of their bodies, which is constructed as defenseless, sexless, and hetero-prescribed. Sex is not contemplated as a pleasurable possibility but rather as a means to achieve material and emotional stability.

Alternatively, other men spoke naturally about women's sexuality portraying it as biologically organic, though socially sanctioned. They gave a broader picture of

desire not confining it to maleness: Gamal brought in the topic of sexual desire to picture it as an overarching human necessity and Youssef acknowledged that women are sexually active regardless of their marital status, in addition to showing keen awareness towards the general disavowal of female sexuality.

The differential experiencing of sexuality is not merely a sexual matter, but rather engrains in a structural framework of female alienation from their sexual, productive and reproductive bodies. This historical alienation entails the defamation of women's sexual experiences when not framed in a matrimonial-hetero-reproductive context (Ahmed et al., 2021). Therefore, women do not access sexual encounters in a situation of equality. In studying bodily politics in Egypt, anthropologist Hafez (2014) argued that the gendered social expectations and regulations to which bodies are subjected lead to psychosocial consequences. The looming negativity over female sexual drives coupled with the lack of acknowledgment place women in a situation of conflict. Their abiding bargaining between the social self and the individual will translates into a fragmented experiencing of feelings and desires.

In the conversation we held, Layla, a 26-year-old graduate student and active fighter in sexual and reproductive health, charted an emotional map of women's feelings towards sex. From the conversations she had with multiple women, coming from her militant experience on social media and her close friendships, she mapped out the common sentiments sex arose. According to Layla, shame is the yardstick shaping women's practices and regards towards sex. Likewise, Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty argued that shame results from the feeling of having failed to follow social norms (2020). Other negative feelings were attached to sex due to its potential legal,

social, familial, and religious consequences, most commonly fear, anxiety, inner conflict, and guilt. Practicing sex also means realizing their personal will and overcoming these challenges, which brought positive emotions such as empowerment, strength and a positive self-conception.

Neither feelings nor sexual activity were experienced in binaries, being present or absent, but rather came into being in more nuanced and complex ways. Sexual activeness comprises a broad spectrum of possibilities (e.g. masturbation, oral practices, penetration) and the choice of engagement may be due to numerous reasons (e.g. contextual, social, cultural, religious). Emotions were contradictory and fragmentary, resulting in a contingent, non-exclusionary and conflicting cohabitation of positive and negative feelings. Whatever their attitudes towards sex were, women would only share them with close friends and, sometimes, close sisters. Talking with other family members was shameful and generally outside of the realm of possibility, with even some women joking about the disastrous situation such conversation would provoke. This conversation was not imaginable because, in the words of Ahmed Eldamaty, “when subjects do not conform to social ideals, they are labelled as bringing shame to the family, by failing to imitate what is seen as the norm” (2020, p. 109). Among the women I interviewed, only two admitted there was a chance their parents suspected they were sexually active. However, if this were the case, the progenitors either were avoiding the topic or had accepted it.

2.2 Non-reproductive sexualities: birth control and social control.

Most young people who have an active sexual life do not seek to reproduce. Yet, accomplishing sex that is safe from the public gaze and from pregnancy is very often cumbersome. Throughout the conversations with the interlocutors, an entity,

which appeared under the name of 'they', hovered over their words. This indefinite mass is perceived as a surveillance and regulation body that places under careful examination people's sexual practices or whatever the mass understood as such, which did not always match with what my interlocutors understood as sexual. At times, it was difficult to distinguish who conducted this task of monitoring, whether it was the government or people themselves. According to interlocutors, surveillance took place in different spatial, temporal, material, and relational settings, conferring it an overarching trait. Therefore, this 'they' could take form through familial structures, social media platforms, neighborhoods, romantic relationships, house tenants, police forces, etc. Such an extensive net regulating female bodies and mobilities, Ahmed Eldamaty explains, works to control women "as gendered and familial subjects" (2020, p. 33).

Ideals of honor are spatially and relationally deployed, for it is possible to behave in morally reprehensible ways as long as it does not take place within the public sphere and others do not find out (Malmström, 2016). Even when this apprehension may be true in general terms, the division between the public and private realms, the scope of people's gaze, and the possibilities to avoid scrutiny entail further complexities. Put another way, the possibilities to bypass ideals of honor are gendered, economically, relationally, and spatially mediated and interwoven. Women navigate the margins of these categories to reappropriate their sexual subjectivities. Some normative prescriptions were occasionally activated to nurture an honorable socio-centric self, meanwhile proscribed activities and attitudes were cautiously deployed in certain settings perceived as safe.

Safeness regarding contraception has been barely researched. Studies on the

use of contraceptives in Egypt have restrictively focused on married people, more specifically on married women, see for instance the Demographic Health Survey report on the changes in contraceptive use in Egypt (Khalifa, Hussein Soliman & Sakr, 2017) or the Ministry of Health and Population's health issues survey (2015). Besides, most were aimed at changing female usage as a means to reduce the average of family members and, consequently, displayed a patronizing tone showing no concern towards the Egyptian population's needs. Among the people I interviewed, marriage may be one of the reasons to start using contraceptives, however many others entered into consideration when making a choice over contraceptive methods and usage.

The English word 'contraception' was not always familiar to all interlocutors, which usually felt more comfortable employing the term 'birth control'. The nets established from these notions were variegated: uses, categories, accessibility, motivations, and concerns. Still, a common convergence was the claim that most people usually lack awareness and education on sexual health topics. This knowledge deficiency was identified as acuter in older generations and lower classes – the world imaginaries developed by the interlocutors, which touch on class and age, are developed below.

Researching sexuality in Cairo, Malmström (2016) found out that while young women usually discard birth control as they fear a negative impact on their bodies and fertility, adult women welcome it after the birth of their first child. Similar conclusions can be drawn from my research. Overall, women showed strong awareness of their bodily well-being leading the majority of them to reject what they perceived as intrusive methods. Young female participants did not want to put their

bodies under hormones, suffer period alterations, or insert alien devices. For this reason, methods such as hormonal contraception (pills, patches, rings or injections) and long-acting reversible contraception (intrauterine devices) were highly disregarded on behalf of barrier methods (condoms) and natural methods (pull-out and the calendar method). The first time she started having sexual relationships, Zahra decided to take the contraceptive pill, yet she stopped the intake after fourth months.

Now I'm not in a relationship, so I'd use condoms. But if I were in a relationship, I'd use the pullout method. I'm not someone who likes using medicines or putting chemicals in my body. I don't want anything altering my cycle, my hormones, my discharge... I find it very intrusive and I distrust the effects pills can have on my body. I also don't usually take painkillers when I'm sick, I let my body feel pain and heal from it by itself. There are other methods, such as the ring but I don't trust that either, having something inside me permanently... Sometimes I have a hard experience using tampons because they are inside me.

Regarding the use of birth control in women that had undergone abortion or in divorced women, there were no identifiable similarities. After having interrupted pregnancy, some continued using the pull-out method and some shifted to condoms. Reem told me she was being more careful now –she did not specify how– , though she felt disaffection for sex at that moment. For sporadic sexual encounters Zahra uses condoms, but when she is in a stable relationship she still prefers the pull-out method. Two of the three divorced women I interviewed, Mona and Nawal, had undergone an abortion. During their marriage, one did not employ any kind of birth control and the other one altered between no-method and the safe period method. Both of them were sexually active after marriage and had no kids. The third woman,

Salma, used barrier methods to space the birth of her children, and claimed not to be sexually active out of wedlock for religious reasons.

Sexually active single female participants either chose condoms, no-method or pull-out method. A clear distinction between the two latter was not always made. No-method and pull-out method was commonly used when having a stable partner and condoms when having casual sex. The three single non-sexually active women I interviewed all planned to use birth control after marriage. Women considering marital contraception do it on the grounds of their understanding of individual and familial well-being: pregnancy spacing, choice of reproduction timing, personal health, emotional wellness, economic stability, and professional career. Youmana, a human rights undergrad student in her early twenties, was the only one who had a preferred method, the intrauterine device (IUD), though she felt she had to be better informed about the options. Dalia and Naylah did not mention any preferable method, but confirmed their will to use them after marriage. Additionally, Naylah brought in gender disparity regarding the awareness of contraceptive methods and added: “I’d like men to use them as well, as much as women. There is the idea that it is women’s responsibility, but it is both! Men have to get sure their partner is safe!”

The employment of birth control by single men in Egypt is scarcely investigated, if not inexistent for I have found no publications on it. Drawing from the testimonies of the men I interviewed, the use of contraceptives is likewise extended among men. Yet, women were generally aware of more contraceptive options, among which mentioned condoms, the emergency pill, IUD, hormonal pills, and the ring, against men who usually named only condoms, sometimes, hormonal pills, and, rarely, IUDs. All sexually active men told me they had protected intercourse with

condoms, except for Essam, who was fond of being “careful enough to avoid this situation”. Among the non-sexually active, there were Amr and Nourallah. On the one side, Amr, a single man in his late twenties, was convinced he wanted to space births by the use of condoms. On the other side, Nourallah, a single devotee man in his thirties, only considered using birth control if a doctor recommended it to his wife due to health reasons.

A few participants assumed lower-class people were more reluctant to use contraceptives due to affordability or educational reasons. Youmana, who cited me in one of her university class breaks, decided to hold our conversation just a few feet away from her classmates. This fact did not refrain her to talk openly and keep a normal voice tone during our conversation. When speaking about contraception, she said:

There is maybe more awareness in upper classes [...] Maybe they [lower-class people] also find it expensive. I don't know... Or maybe they feel it is unnecessary to pay money for that when they don't have enough money for other things. But they don't know that having a child costs much more!

Whether people of low-economic backgrounds are buying contraceptives is beyond the reach of this research. What the investigation enabled clarification of was some upper-class imaginaries. Lower classes were depicted as not having contraceptives among their spending choices, refusing them in order to achieve larger offspring able to provide economic support, or being sexually under-educated. Even when the birth control picture is more nuanced in terms of converging motivations, economic strategies of survival were taken into consideration to assess people on their performance as well as other forms of sexual knowledge were dismissed. Sexual

awareness, class-mediated under the upper classes' eyes, was perceived as deficient in general but now it shows as typically aggravated among lower classes, the reason being their inaccessibility to some spaces and devices.

Domains of cultural intelligibility determine how sex is livable, performable, and desirable within particular bodies (Butler, 1993). Participants, Cairene youngsters pertaining to middle-upper class environments, presuppose the existence of certain sex normativity that needs to be achieved upon the training of the self. The internalization of these norms functions as a self-regulatory process whereby individuals acquire a common identity as modern subjects. Critical philosopher Michael Foucault argued that the production of the modern subject happens through the assumption by the conscious being of a particular identity, of thinking "of itself as directed by a given set of ethical norms, which give its existence a specific meaning and purpose" (Gutting, 2005). Likewise, other individuals are expected to eventually shape their lives on the basis of this knowledge in order to meet the standards of sexual realization.

Setting a different focus to approach the diversity of lifeworlds and economic management possibilities would grasp in a more thorough and sentient manner the plethora of sexual understandings and apprehensions that exist within Cairo. Since capitalist and consumerist contexts chart concrete material possibilities of existence, the way people inhabit and understand the social is differently shaped. Instead of underestimating or lamenting the contraceptive practices of others, research on people's sexual and contraceptive practices within a context of economic shortage would have the potential to articulate historically overlooked livelihoods and understandings of sexuality.

2.3 Alternative sexual futures: practices and imaginaries.

The reworking of gendered subjectivities passes through bodies that move their performance between normative and alternative life choices (Butler, 1990). Through this movement they are practicing a sexual otherwise that is constantly opening up new possibilities. Yet, potential futures do not only come into being upon performance but are also articulated in discursive forms. Put differently, women and men manage their possibilities in order to live according to their ideal present to the utmost, and at the same time imagine desired future scenarios as well as paths to get there. This pushing against the system is opening up new imaginaries and making them enter into a shared realm of common knowledge. Such a sprawling drive is popularizing demands, absences and needs as well as the opportunity to creatively think of ways to overcome them. As discussed above, people walking this pathway encounter numerous difficulties related to material, emotional, relational, economic, political, and legal hindrances. Women are more vulnerable to suffering such negative consequences because they endure the moral burden of numerous social institutions, a burden at heart bonded to their productive and reproductive role in society. Albeit do they expose to greater risks, women incessantly strive to reappropriate their bodies by means of taking steps outside sexual institutions.

The perceived lack of sexual awareness was suggested to be addressed with sexual education. Interlocutors acknowledged the scarce possibilities they encountered throughout their life in social institutions (such as familiar, educational, or religious) to receive positive sex education. Notwithstanding, the lack of positive sex education was not that much linked to silence or taboo but to the discursive

saturation of sexuality, whose meanings and practices concentrate around the heterosexual reproductive unit. The strategic narrowing of sex possibilities defines a concrete mandate of existence and throws other options out of the realm of possibility or nature. Foucault (1978) argued that the existence of places of maximum saturation serves to produce and fix sexual disparity. Sexual dissidence becomes objectified with a view to bestow it an unmovable negative trait and expulse it from the realm of nature. Alternative experiencings of sexuality are extracted from people's bodies to regulate the only type of sexuality capable of reproducing the workforce and the form of the family (Foucault, 1978). Mai, a young media activist who lives abroad, is the director of an Egyptian grassroots online platform aimed at publicly addressing sexual and health education from a feminist perspective. Little after I started conducting the thesis fieldwork research, I had the opportunity to have an online talk with her about the scope of online platforms and grassroots organizations in generating alternative discourses on reproduction and sexuality. On the topic of sexuality, she denounced the obvious repression of alternative practices headed at the construction of the single discourse.

People tend to think that sex and sexuality have started to be recently discussed in Arab countries. That is not true. The problem is that sexual education is on the table, but it is monopolized by the religious and conservative sectors. We need other sex education. [...] Yet, grassroots initiatives are not able either, they would be endangered. [...] An activist, who runs a start-up on reproduction and sexual health, explained in a workshop we conducted together that her scope of action is very limited. She can just address normative sexuality in the framework of

heterosexuality. She would be afraid to educate and publicly talk about other sexual and gender identities.

On the bright side, alternative viewpoints are breaking through the hetero-collapsed saturation of dominant discourses. For these movements cannot currently encroach on the public surface, they find other ways to extend their network and accessibility. For sexual education needs are not met in public institutions, people turn to look for information otherwise always ensuring self-protection and privacy. Sources of knowledge are communitarian, informal, open, and trust-based, being the most cited trust relationships and the internet. The Internet has facilitated connecting people from different backgrounds as well as has reduced class differences among the youth in accessing resources, possibilities, and imaginaries about sex, due to its trait as an affordable, accessible, and anonymous tool. When asked about intergenerational change, everyone agreed that the youngest generations are more eager and open to learning about sexual and gender possibilities. This progressive change of mindset is generally welcomed by participants. Big hopes are placed on the youth as potential actors in changing the current scenario. Social media is regarded as the main stage enabling transformation for it facilitates intercultural and intraregional communication and, thus, pushes for discussion, learning, and questioning. Regarding the novel possibilities the internet offers to establish far-reaching networks of political action and social resignification, Mai commented:

In recent years there has been a young movement in the Middle East and North Africa led by women who are launching media platforms to talk and inform on sex education. They are pushing to demolish the concept of women as upholders of family values and denouncing that women are

going to jail for breaking them.

Apart from online resources, interlocutors mentioned the importance of close friendships as a source of knowledge and caring. These safety portals function in various ways; people can access them to obtain information, pose their doubts, get asked, contribute with their own experiences, share educational content or express their feelings. Informal networks usually meet people's needs to a greater extent, they are perceived as providing more trustworthy information and as being more inclusive, in addition, to protecting oneself either with anonymity or with amicable care. Consequently, they are ceaselessly expanding, scrolling through social communication devices such as mouth-to-mouth and social media networking.

The Cairene urban youth is definitely challenging normative assumptions and elaborating novel ways of embodying gender and collectivity upon its performance. Similar to the meanings of femaleness and maleness are tottering, thus acquiring different contents to people, notions of collective personhood are also being contested through the redefinition of collectivity. This refashioning consists of re-evaluating existing social networks and tracing new ones based on support. These networks of support embrace an understanding of the collective subject in terms of equality, autonomy, and freedom, which are expected to be the tropes upon which their choices and daily lives are deployed. These two forms of understanding collectivity are embodied conjointly by the youth, for they move between presenting a respectable public image according to societal norms and covertly acting out according to their will and desires. Ambivalence and secrecy open a breach for these networks to exist, enabling women finding a common ground wherein feeling understood and supported. Layla highlighted the informal trait of this solidarity web among women;

were it otherwise it would surely not be possible: “it is an informal network and it is mostly women that decide to support each other. There are millions of women all around Egypt that could be considered part of it, yet their connections are very informal”.

Yet, even when the youth is aware of the gradual change, they still bemoan its slowness, insufficiency, unevenness, and fragmentation. Consequently, people think there are many improvements yet to achieve, and the pathway is regarded as still long. Contradictory feelings emerged when addressing these issues, because sexist and repressive attitudes coexist, which even strengthen in some contexts, along with positive advancements. Like many others, Rana, a journalist in her thirties, embraces a conflicting stance. First, she displays positivism but, as the discourse progresses, conflicting emotions emerge. In the online meeting we held, she said to me:

I have hope! People younger than 25, most of them, no matter their social background are more curious and not as homophobic as before. People are more open to other gender and sexual expressions and to different sexualities. They have a more fluent understanding of sexual identities. Well... I don't know... I am not that optimistic. There is still a patriarchal mindset, gender-based and sexual violence... The situation for women and vulnerable groups is bad...

Traditional structures are being eroded due to converging factors. Young people are seizing the conjuncture and creating opportunities to widen the breach for possible sexualities and gender identities. The current performance of an otherwise opens up new future possibilities of being which are maybe closer to challenging traditional structures of dispossession. This erosion however meets resistance from

reactionary sectors that do not want alterations in the existing order and, therefore, reply to this disruption by reassuring their sexist and patriarchal stances. Although the general perception towards the upcoming generation was of optimism, some people expressed disavowal of the youth's attitudes. Two men discredited the possibilities of positive change for they perceived new ideals of sex and marriage either as youth's idealism or debauchery. Essam, a representative of the former, stated:

The younger generation says they don't want marriage or kids, but I don't believe that. They will get married to do the same as the community and then they will get bored of marital life and will wonder "what about having kids?"

Nourallah, a representative of the latter, expressed discontent towards the youth's new ideals:

The younger generation is mindless. They rush, they don't compromise, they are wilder... They are growing more in the Western lifestyle, talking about relationships, having boyfriends and girlfriends... Nowadays there are more divorces, and men are not happy in their lives with their wives. Young men are looking for Western ideals of marriage, which is less everything: less involvement, less responsibility, less money, less stability... Then, they don't work to achieve a stable marriage and, after five years, they is a divorce. This doesn't happen in Eastern and Islamic countries.

Refashioned in different discourses, the underlying idea is alike: the unmovable or desirable continuity of the marital patrilineal system underpinned by the family unit. In order to ensure the reproduction of the workforce and the confinement of sex within the family institution, change is rejected as a current

possibility and as a future aspiration.

Chapter 3

Reproduction and motherhood

Heba is twenty-five and, coming from Alexandria, works now in Cairo as an executive assistant. She seemed younger to me, perhaps due to her brimming with vitality, constant smile, and sporting two-tone hair. After she answered my Facebook post, we agreed at meeting at a coffee place in the hip neighborhood of Zamalek. There, Heba talked vigorously about her personal change: from holding normative ideas of virginity and motherhood during her adolescence to her disenchantment with this imaginary and her current experiencing of sexuality. When we got onto the subject of birth control, Heba told me she had an abortion at the age of nineteen, an unanticipated event for her given her prior convictions.

I had never imagined it would happen to me [to get an abortion]. When I was younger, I was a conservative girl: I wanted to marry, dreamed of having kids, becoming a mother... Then, as a teen, I discovered I didn't have a hymen. If a woman marries and doesn't have a hymen, it is a *fadiha*, a scandal, if anyone knows. I found out when I was eighteen. When I was nineteen I fell in love and I thought I would have sex because it wouldn't matter anyway. But before that, I was a conservative kid... I would have never imagined having to get an abortion... I was a bit young when it happened, I had not formulated strong opinions about the topic at that moment... Now I'm not certain I'll have kids...

Whilst the previous chapter analyzed how the imaginary around sex is being refashioned upon performance over time, this third chapter explores this

transformation regarding marriage and parenting. Reshaping does not come disengaged from the socio-cultural context, but rather emerges from it and comes back to it in dispersed movements of disaffection, reproduction, challenge, and acceptance. For this analysis, the focus is again placed on the gender-based continuum, a line which, in its socio-cultural historicity, is continuously being redrawn through bodies. Local apprehensions and performances of sex embed in that line and engrain with the social world cognizance. Likewise, further continents are filled up with content through their embeddedness to and inextricably connection within the continuum. After exploring sexuality, this third chapter plunges into family networks, reproduction, and motherhood to see how bodily experiences, summative in time, shape the malleable content of these terms.

3.1 The triple axis: womanhood, wifehood and motherhood.

As advanced before, there is a shared imaginary of marriage when it comes to the legitimacy of sex, especially for women. The first sexual encounter for women is expected to happen during the wedding night, a milestone in their lives that marks the beginning of their sexual and reproductive development (Malmström, 2016).

However, plenty of women have experienced sex before marriage, which may place doubt over their marriageability. Some interlocutors informed me that the collective paranoia about women's chastity and sex-related activities, may impact women's and men's marriage decisions in at least two points. First, a woman may lie to her fiancé regarding her virginity. In order to reproduce a regular defloration, women may turn to bodily modifications (hymen replacements and repair operations) and simulations (display of pain and inexperience). This strategic performance of a normative bride

enables women to experience their early sexuality while not being expelled from the social realm. Second, a man may turn down a potential fiancé after finding out she had sexual intercourse with other men before marriage. Yet, according to interlocutors, it can be trickier. A man may break up with his girlfriend or abandon his fiancé after having sex with her under the accusation of her shamefulness.

Marriage needs to be understood as a spatial and temporal institution that opens up new life choices that were not socially available before (Malmstrom, 2016). The wedding is a rite of passage that signals the stepping into a new stage wherein men and women reach an adult identity. Entering adulthood marks the initiation into sex life. This statement particularly applies to women, for the marital stage acknowledges and enables their bodies to be sexual and reproductive (Malmström, 2016). These novel possibilities relate also to housing, economic stability, relationship endurance, and family reproduction, among others. Such marital prescriptions cannot be conducted prior to the wedding, for they are solely envisaged within the framework of wedlock.

Gender roles are likewise redefined through marriage given the familiar status change, which is generally perceived as a social upgrade. Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty explains that women are conferred a greater degree of freedom in this new stage, for the 'full respectfulness' of a woman is solely attained within marriage, but must be preserved until then (2020). As it can be seen, the woman's social status is bonded to the family and, according to her progressively acquired roles, she is given new responsibilities. In addition to conferring the woman the status of wife, marriage opens up the only imaginable possibility of motherhood. That is, becoming a wife triggers expectancy over the woman's maternity. The third axis for female maturity is

acquired from the moment of conception.

Whilst parenthood is a social prescription for men and women, men are naturally considered complete human beings, and their humanhood is acknowledged prior to having offspring. However, women have to comply with some rites of passage according to their life stage in order to achieve full humanity and be progressively recognized as full society members (Malmström, 2016). If full respectfulness for women is acquired through marriage, a new stage is entered with maternity; the birth of the first child is a pivotal event in the making of female gender identity (Malmström, 2016). In her discussion of gender performativity in Egypt, Malmström explains that marriage and motherhood are indissolubly connected, being childbirth that produces a woman's fully grown body and ensures fulfilled femininity (2016). Notably, gender is biologically fixed through sexed bodies but is also a socio-culturally mediated aspiration that needs to be achieved throughout life (Malmström, 2015). When talking about motherhood, Nawal got worked up and stopped drinking tea. She sat on the edge of the couch to say in an angry tone:

A woman's duty is to be a mother. You are a woman, you must become a mum. If you don't bring children, you're not a woman. Once you are a mum, people consider you a human being. If you are just a woman, people don't consider you a human being [...]. Becoming a mum guarantees the woman some safety and authority, it is a way to transcend, to be something more than just a woman.

This “more than just a woman”, uttered with despair by Nawal, reveals the struggle women have for full recognition. Female sexed bodies aspire to transcend social immaturity after childbirth and, consequently, increase their social power

(Malmström, 2016). Notwithstanding, the promised path toward full humanhood conceals that such fullness is inextricably related to the production and reproduction of/in the family. For women, social membership is progressively achieved through the proper completion of life steps which ensure the production and reproduction of the household. That is, the continuity of the heterosexual family as the basic unit of society, only more reducible to its male members. For even when women meet social prescriptions, social recognition must be continuously attained being subject to the correct performance of female labor towards her family.

Motherhood implies a new stage in a woman's life and, thus, novel responsibilities. Note that these duties are summative, being the woman's physical corps the locus where they accumulate. Feminist writer Adrienne Rich (1976) notes the differential roles between conceiving and not conceiving bodies, upon which the systemic exploitation of women is largely built. In her discussion on maternity, Rich argues that this unequal division is underpinned by the physical: the evident presence of the mother, and the more diluted one of the father.

Because the fact of physical motherhood is so visible and dramatic, men recognized only after some time that they, too, had a part in generation. The meaning of "fatherhood" remains tangential, elusive. To "father" a child suggest above all to beget, to provide the sperm which fertilizes the ovum. To "mother a child implies a continuing presence, lasting at least nine months, more often for years. Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage – pregnancy and childbirth – then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct (Rich, 1976, p. 12).

The domestication of women's bodies enters a new stage after marriage, for

their status as a family member moves from daughter to wife/mother (Ahmed, 2020). Their bodies are now accepted as sexed and reproductive, owing to their new orientation towards building a family (Ahmed, 2020). This takes us to the concept of the “home factory”, which pinpoints “the home as a site of social reproduction and reproductive labor” (Taha, 2017, p. 337). Home here loses its referential dimension of space to become a social project based on a series of temporal, spatial, economic social, and gender divisions. Women’s reproduction and production in the "house factory", which greatly entails the employment of body, mind and emotions, gets overshadowed by the consideration of these labors as a social mission, biological nature and an individual will (Mies & Federici, 2014; Taha, 2017). For women's workforce is performed through their bodies, they are strategically dispossessed to ensure the fulfillment of these duties (Mies & Federici, 2014). The expropriation of women's bodies is built upon the non-acknowledgment of labor when generated through their bodies (Mies & Federici, 2014). The fact that women are considered natural workers succeeds in maintaining and replicating women’s production line within the family. Naylah described marriage as “a factory of kids”, a definition that accounts for marriage as the spatial-temporal location of reproduction while emphasizing its trait of labor.

In her discussion of marriage in modern Egypt, historian Hanan Kholoussy (2010) explains the historical bond between womanhood, marriage, and motherhood. Egyptian nationalist imaginaries of the twentieth century pinpointed the married woman as “the site of educational and moral reform so that she could properly prepare the nation’s next generation” (Kholoussy, 2010, p. 120). Whilst the role of wife-mother elevated women’s position in society, it also entrenched the woman's

married status in the production and reproduction of society. It is implied, therefore, that women's production within marriage does not only refer to the physical endeavor of domestic labor and childbirth but also to the social making of citizens. The new nationalist ideology enhanced a new position for women as moral guides and nationalist models in charge of rearing the next generation (Kholoussy, 2010). Women became the responsible person in educating the kids, acquiring a role that was previously male (Kholoussy, 2010). Whilst fatherhood did not receive much attention, the short literature on the topic delineated the father as the legal and economic figure of the family, with the only paternal responsibility of controlling the wife's educational skills towards the children (Kholoussy, 2010). It is indeed informative to look at the Egyptian Constitution, where women are de facto ensnared in this consideration through the naturalization of their productive and reproductive labor – Article 11 commits to providing the conditions so that “the duties of a woman toward her family” can be fulfilled. Ahmed Eldamaty accounts for how the Egyptian state has played an important role since the twentieth century in the framing of “the heterosexual family as the basic unit of society”, whose irrefutable baseline is marriage (Ahmed et al., 2021).

These family ideals color the current understanding of a binary gender-shaped household. However, the breach between the older generation – the participants' parents and grandparents – and the younger was noticeable, which generated tension between family members. Salma is a thirty-four-year-old political analyst that I had met in a lecture series one year before. After finding out I was conducting this research, she contacted me through Facebook to join in. In my conversation with her, which was quite enriching, she expressed the mismatch between the general

expectancies over the mother's role and her parenting desires.

In Egypt, the woman takes a lot of loads. Mothers generally look after their families and children. Men consider that everything that concerns the household is responsibility of the mother: the household, the cleaning, the food... I don't agree with this, I believe motherhood takes a great portion of responsibility [...] But I believe it is not exclusive to the mother, it can be participative. It is the same with regard to the house chores, it shouldn't be the responsibility of the mother, it should be participative.

The online meeting with Salma was very revealing, she drew clearly the gender limits of parenting and blurred the limits of woman-wife-mother. Whilst men were only described by their sex (their sexed bodies), the significant 'women' was interchangeable with other terms that referred to their roles towards others. That is, sex seemed to be the most significant marker of identity with which a man can be identified, but a woman is similarly signified through her labor as a wife and mother. I found that this symbolic display of language somehow mirrored the apprehension of the familiar structure around female domestic work.

In a recent publication on current masculinity models in Egypt, Nefissa Naguib (2015) argues that the imaginary of men as authority figures for their wives and children draws from the ability to control the economic resources in the household. While this may be occasionally true, other studies withdraw different conclusions. Kholoussi (2010) and Dhenin's (2021) investigations indicate that the nationalist transformation had a cultural backdrop, but did not alter the situation of female bodies' dispossession and consequently neither the exploitative structure of the family unit. Furthermore, my own research revealed that women are also in many

instances economic providers (in both mono-parental and biparental households), which would have toppled down inequality in working couples households.

Therefore, whilst power may be settled down over male economic resources, the fact that women are never-ending laborers (waged in the social factory and non-waged in the home factory) points to that male power builds on an exploitative superstructure that leaks into every social institution. Parenthood is deeply ingrained in this machinery. Ghada a 26-year-old marketing businesswoman from northern Egypt, contacted me through Facebook and preferred holding the conversation via chat. Through our messages exchange, she explained how waged labor sums up to the chores that the woman has to fulfill at home as a wife and as a mother.

Well... Being a mother here kind of has to be your primary role and purpose in life as a woman. So, even though most mothers are employed now, they still hold a hundred percent of house chores and rearing responsibilities. All of this lies in the stereotypical mother acts, like for example, feeding the children, cooking, cleaning the house... etc.

This idea of parenthood was recognized as predominant among the Egyptian population by participants; however, most of them do not concur with it – the ideas and practices that confront it are discussed later below. Although a minority in my research, some people described this system of reproduction and upbringing based on sex division as the normal and natural way of exercising parenthood. Nourallah showed interest in participating in the research through Facebook. Drinking coffee with him was quite enlightening and, personally, disrupting. He had a different viewpoint from other participants insofar as he pursued a devout lifestyle. We were discussing the differences between men and women when he told me:

Here in Egypt, you know the rules, you know the differences [between being a man and being a woman]. It is like a different job title: husband and wife. The husband has to pay for everything, and the woman never pays anything. The woman has to obey her husband... Also, she has to take good care of her kids and husband. The man takes some responsibilities and the woman takes others. This is the basis for a stable marriage.

The fact that women underpin the familiar structure through their own labor mirrors in the mean ideal number of children. The 2015 Health Issues Survey conducted at the national level revealed that women are more likely than men to prefer two or fewer children and men are more likely than women to prefer four or more children. This survey was corroborated by Heba's testimony of her own findings talking with couples, relatives, and acquaintances.

All Middle Eastern men love kids. All the boyfriends I had wanted kids.

Most of the men I met wanted to have kids. Of all men I met, the only ones that don't aim to have kids are the polyamorous. However, most of the girls I met don't want.

Further research should be conducted on how polyamorous people reformulate living standards in terms of familial, reproductive and economic structures. Yet, we can advance that their romantic form of relationality breaks through the prescribed norms. The only person that revealed himself as polyamorous was Youssef who, additionally, confessed that did not envisage having offspring.

Given that the concepts of woman, wife and mother are so intimately bonded, it is worth asking what happens to women that after marriage do not have children, be it upon personal decision or inability. Youssef and I were talking in such a noisy cafe that sometimes the conversation was hard to follow. Regardless of the background

noise, it was easy to tell when something had moved him, for he looked straight into my eyes, and started speaking fast and clearly. Being asked about sexual arrangements, my interlocutor digressed into gender, marriage, and family, until finally, he landed in childless women. There he stared at me and said: “If a woman doesn’t have kids right after marriage, people will ask ‘What’s wrong with her?’ It is a reason to get married a second time [...]. It is very shameful for a woman not to have kids”.

As the meaning of woman is entangled with that of her marriage and parenting status, people would generally assume childlessness is not a choice. Women with no children fall under a pathologizing logic by which a force majeure – always beyond the woman’s control – has prevented them from childbearing. The only concession to not having kids right after marriage is postponing childrearing with a view to eventually improving the unit's living conditions, that is, of parents and children - e.g. finding economic stability, completing their studies, moving to another place, etc. In following this conversation, Youssef informed me that the non-accomplishment of childbearing was an accepted ground for men to marry a second time. Women are symbolically stripped of their agency around motherhood since the identity of ‘woman’ is presumed to parallel that of ‘mother’. For a woman’s duty is to produce and reproduce, being child-rearing among these tasks, society infantilizes, pathologizes, punishes, and marginalizes women who do not perform motherhood. Nawal, who divorced some time ago, had herself decided not to have children. She was living independently with two other female flatmates in Garden City and among her priorities in adulthood were not marrying nor child-rearing. Despite her life choices, or maybe because of them, it is worth stressing that she never put into

question her gender as a woman, but questioned the social meaning of 'woman'. As Nawal demonstrates, the customary threesome of women-wife-mother is currently being called into question upon performance.

3.2 Balancing the nuclei: family regulations.

The family is not a natural construction but rather a social and economic gendered structure (Ahmed, 2020). The family's foundation lies in women's production and reproduction at home, which is however overlooked as labor under the premise of being the women's natural tasks (Mies & Federici, 2014). The current configuration of gendered family structure in Egypt traces its roots to the twentieth century. The country's real independence from colonial powers brought major changes and the political leaders engaged in the construction of a nation based on cultural modernity and political postcoloniality; a project in which women played a crucial role (Taha, 2017). With a view to boosting the new planned economy and rearing the new generations, women were called on to represent the nation as modern working subjects and modern housewives (Taha, 2017). This novel partaking of women in the public sphere and waged market however served to deeper conceal the gender division of labor in the household and therefore entrench the expropriation of women's labor. The alleged inclusion, which entailed the refashioning of women's societal roles, held at its core the legitimization of women's dispossession from their productive and reproductive capacities (Taha, 2017). All Egyptian constitutions since the Nasserist era, including the one in force issued in 2014, have stressed the female reproductive roles within the familiar socioeconomic structure (Eldamaty, 2020). Thus, "the category 'woman' is subordinated to the category of the family itself", as stated by Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty (2020, p.29).

If family, ultimately operationalized through marriage, is largely argued to play a decisive role in the reproduction of gender power structures, it does so in the reproduction of class. Sociologist Rosemary Crompton (2006) argues that family transmits class advantage via material and cultural means. If the material acquisition of class refers to the rearing of children in affluent circumstances and their future inheriting of the familial financial resources, the cultural refers to the 'habitus', that is, "the manner in which parents invest time and resources in their children's acquisition of social and educational skills" (Crompton, 2006, p. 661). Parents transmit their ideal construction of the subject, the 'habitus', to their offspring, which entails class performance ideals. These reproduction strategies of enactment do not emanate from a conscious will, but it is the apprehended 'habitus' which produces an inclination at reproducing the circumstances of its existence (Bourdieu, 1994). "The aim of reproduction is to preserve group identity constituted by various material and symbolic cultural variables" (2007, p. 721), asserts sociologist Layachi Anser in his study of matrimonial strategies among Algerian executives. Looking at power reproduction strategies, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1994) argues that an important mechanism in the preservation of the group identity is marital linkage because, without being socially codified in a rigorous manner, they help reproduce social, cultural, and economic capital. The socialization of subjects within the class social fabric entails the acquisition of similar affects over current practices and structures (Al-Mokadem, 2020). An study on the marital practices in the Cairene upper middle class scene carried out by sociologist Mariam Al-Mokadem shows that the existing marital patterns, which tend to class endogamy, enable the production and reproduction of the rich elite. Put it in her words:

The societal self-image of marriage partners is regarded as one of the most critical and acute signs of community or class sentiments. That is, the choice of marriage partners signifies a test of the standards of what each social class views as adequate, as well as a definitive index of lines of membership (Al-Mokadem, 2020, p. 29).

Likewise, participants shared some consumption, educational, health, religious, and employment ideals through which they are structuring their lives. For instance, they generally count on economically maintaining the family nucleus through the skilled paid labor of both adults, or count on their children to reach a university education level. Interlocutors never stated they looked for a couple based on their potential economic status nor their prospective family had to fit certain social standards. Rather they ascribed their partner choice to other criteria related to emotional and life view compatibility. My research shows that there were many similarities in their depiction of the desired family and future. The middle and upper-class Cairene youth configured their idea of family as a small nucleus that consisted of the couple and, had there be, the children. Over a steaming cup of coffee, the conversation with Dalia touched on her future regarding coupling and parenting, which recreated as well other participants' expectations.

I would like to start a family if I find the right person. I want to have a family, but I don't want to be a single mother. I want a relationship based on love and equality. I don't mind if I have to wait. It is ok for me to have children, but it is also ok not to have them.

It is worth remembering that the imaginary around the Cairene cosmopolitan upper-class individual is not static but is being refashioned upon the subjects' understanding and production of class. Taking Dalia's words as an example, the

possibility of having a couple, a family, and kids is open. That is, parenting and marrying are seen not as constitutive of the gendered subject but rather expressed as a possibility. Likewise, there is no overt social mandate over romantic bonds on the grounds of class belonging, as noted before. Yet, even when old understandings of family start to crumble and destabilize, class structures seem to hold steadfast within the socializing patterns.

The destabilization of the family institution comes in terms of sexual performance, as analyzed in the second chapter, as well as in the rearranging of social possibilities of existence beyond traditional patterns of familial organization. These possibilities of an otherwise come into being through diverse pretensions around parenting, conception, and alternative household structures. Most interlocutors expressed disaffection towards the dominant understanding of the familial structure, for they consider it entails conventional gender, reproduction, and sexuality ideas that do not want for themselves. Their disengagement was directed either towards the progenitors' already-built family, towards the offspring's yet-to-build one, or both.

The prescriptive narrative of adulthood, fostered by the state and cherished by the families, is univocal: a person's orientation towards the heterosexual couple, consisting of the wife and the husband, whose union culminates in the building of a family. This clashes with some of the interlocutors' future perspectives. Interlocutors identify a familiar mandate in their parents' generation that is passed onto their own generation. Offspring was cherished by most participants' family members who articulate this will through straightforward statements and overt affections. However, participants conveyed new ideals of relationship that entailed a greater space for cultivating the individual self and the romantic bond, thus delinking themselves from

the prescriptive idea of parenthood, which was not perceived as a mandate but rather as a choice, a life option among many others.

The majority of participants converged on feeling pressured to follow this given path although they did not necessarily perceive it as desirable. Hence, they strategized to find a fulfilling life path by means of combining diverse possibilities of existence. At a noisy restaurant in the city center, Essam, with some sarcasm and despair, tackled the familiar sentiments that arise from his voluntary childlessness and uncertainty over his offspring.

They are upset, very upset. Every time I talk with my mum she is like: “when you get married this, when you get married that...” or “I want to hold your kids in my arms”. I am a sensitive person, I left home some time ago and now I live alone. I don’t like family pressure. I don’t care if they are concerned about these issues. For my family, the most important thing is to get married and have kids.

Never-married participants were in general not certain whether they wanted to build a family; the decision was expected to be taken at a later stage in life.

Willingness to marry and conceive was not specifically concentrated around gender; disenchantment towards these ideals was widespread. Family and marriage were generally perceived as social constructions, as continents, whose content was undesirable at some points. If marrying, parenting, or starting a family (whose foundation seemed to lay on the combination of the two former) were to be considered as options, there had to be somehow refashioned. The adjustments proposed by women stress concepts of balance, equity, and will. Prior to deciding whether to involve in such compromises, young women consider it necessary to

harmonize some factors with their envisaged lifestyles – among the examples cited were: professional career, personal projects, economic status, personal independence, family roles, children's life possibilities, and partner like-mindedness. Over some juices on the terrace of a cultural café in Zamalek, Heba wandered around the socio-organic and personal difficulties she would meet to start a family in Egypt:

Perhaps... if I find a partner I will get married. It has to be a male if I get married in Egypt. With a girl, I wouldn't be able here... But I don't see myself getting married in the next ten years. I'm not sure about having kids... Maybe, but I want to do other things first, such as traveling the world. Besides, it's hard to raise kids here, to educate them in a different ideology [...]. It's hard to raise a family that is healthy, safe, mentally stable... It is harder in Egypt. It is not an option for me, at least for now.

The opinions of the male participants were divided. Half also contemplated some changes yet their answers were not that clearly defined, decisions were more likely to be figured out upon their future willingness. The other half were convinced they wanted to marry, have children and form a family. Ever-married women were all divorced and distant from performing stereotypical family roles. Nawal and Mona, both around their thirties, live co-sharing an apartment and with no present intention to start a family. Having experienced a separation and more than one voluntary interruption of pregnancy, Nawal and Mona expressed their will to focus on themselves and felt profoundly disengaged from normative family and relational models, preferring thus to establish other kinds of emotional networks. Salma, a divorced independent woman, is currently enrolled in her second master's degree and rearing her two children.

Even if the difference between men and women is slight, a breach opens regarding the family-building factors. While both strategize to pursue their life goals within the hetero-nuclear framework, women's concerns are more focused on self-autonomy and bodily reappropriation. The requirements women place work to assure them greater control over their reproductive and productive timing. For the social fabric already grants bodily autonomy to men, they do not trouble themselves with these considerations. Regardless of their sexual experience, female participants wanted to marry and to find a partner who regarded them as equal, autonomous and free. None expressed any particular concern over their own sexual life stories. In this regard, Ahmed Eldamaty (2020) showed marriage has sometimes proven to be a flexible and unstable institution to which women circumstantially resort in order to achieve freedom from other social institutions.

Despite gender differences regarding future plans, both men and women considered the nuclear family structure as a two-way unit of control. First, as a unit of self-control and self-regulation, for surveillance is executed by family members. Regulations and normative prescriptions chiefly revolve around sexuality and reproduction, some of which were discussed in the second chapter. Second, as an externally controlled unit, for they are simultaneously watched out by the government. Intensification of governmental surveillance, enables maintaining the traditional structures of class, gender, and race within the interdependent economic units, such as the labor market and the family nuclei (Roberts, 2016). Note however that imbalance does not only take place within the particular units but between them, thus, entrenching inequalities between those households that conform to class ideals and hold a heterosexual male-headed organization and those that do not (Roberts,

2016). Feminist political economist Adrienne Roberts notes the inherent bond between these two agents of control, the family and the government, for women are disciplined by the state and capital, which most of it materializes “through the patriarchal institution of the nuclear family itself” (2016, p. 26). Female participants generally shared this disaffection towards marriage for it is perceived as a potential locus of violence against women. In our chat conversation, Ghada tackled this issue. Whilst the fact that she chose to hold the conversation by chat upon her request made some nuances to lose, we both endeavored to open ourselves and state our standpoints clearly.

I actually grew up hating marriage. For a very long time, I was really against this because marriage here is controlled, socially and legally, by laws that mostly serve everyone except for the woman. I also still don't want to have kids. Well... now my opinion has shifted a bit when it comes to the idea of marriage... but I wouldn't do it here, as long as I still live in Egypt, I'm not getting married.

The increase in surveillance was at times identified as a politics of distraction. By setting focus on moral issues, the state is averting people's eyes from the economic and political situation. Moral virtuousness, its compliance and its surveillance are saturating the public discourse, attention and affects. Through the saturation of the public eye, some events are deliberately visibilized and invisibilized (Povellini, 2011), which steers the overall understanding of violence. Deploying a deflecting technology towards an outer object, i.e. beseeching respecting and guarding morality, enables generating a particular reality effect (Povellini, 2011). Despite the fact that we hold our conversation through an online videoconference,

Naylah outstood due to her vivid personality and for her expressivity. She resorted to all kinds of rhetorical figures, body movements, and facial expressions to communicate her ideas. Talking about surveillance, Naylah explained the focus deviation by resorting to a popular understanding of the metaphor "look at the bird" as a distraction technique.

There is this thing called *qiam al-usra*, 'family values'. People are being arrested and criticized because of this. It's insane! [...] I don't get the idea of controlling women for practicing their freedom as women. There is this thing we say to babies when they are crying and we want them to stop: "look at the bird", and so we distract them. People started using this expression for the political situation, "look at the bird", because they are distracting us.

Her arguments resonate with critical theorist Elizabeth Povinelli's line of reasoning, for she argues that deviation works as "a mechanism of coercion [...] likely to induce behaviors and discourses, affective attachments, and analytic tendencies" (2011, p. 15). That is, societal responses become depoliticized for they are mediated towards an outer object, morality. This encasement in the ethical realm functions to overshadow the restrictive political climate that drenches the everyday worlds. A distraction device is the abovementioned 'family values'. Anthropologist Hafez (2014) traced the advent of these values, placing their emergence in the early years of the twenty-first century. According to her research, the so-called 'Egyptian values' begin to be articulated around Islamist ideas in a period in which the greatest ideological divide revolved around the class axis (Hafez, 2014).

An ideological divide would characterize class difference in turn-of-the-

century Egypt. Having little to gain from Westernization and finding the new adoptive cultural codes difficult to access or digest, the lower classes chose to resist the new market changes by staunchly guarding their traditions and beliefs. In doing so, many of them rejected Westernization for a newly articulated Islamism which they equated with values and tradition (Hafez, 2014, p. 180).

Moral values are publicly reprehensible facts whose application has recently taken new operative means, for social media had emerged as a new channel for persecution (Atta, 2020). Some participants perceived that the persecution of individuals in the name of these values has become harsher after the 2011 revolution. Yet, there is a smoggy unclearness surrounding the definition of ‘Egyptian family values’. The only references are found in Article 10 of the 2014 Constitution and in Article 25 of Law 175 of 2018.

Anyone who assaults any of the family principles or values of the Egyptian society or violates the sanctity of private life, shall be punished. (Art. 25 of Law 175 of 2018).

The family is the basis of the society founded on religion, morality and patriotism. The State is keen to preserve the genuine character of the Egyptian family, its cohesion and stability, and to protect its moral values, all as regulated by law (Art.10 of the 2014 Constitution).

I contend that the trait of openness and vagueness is where its loose applicability lies. This huge moral bag seems to be readily available for use. Furthermore, professor Shereen Abouelnaga (2016) questions the controversial meaning of ‘the genuine character of the Egyptian family’ and its values, for she argues that the phrasing points to the existence of a homogeneous society. That is, the

absence of heterogeneity work as a homogenizing device. Availing itself of the preservation of national and familiar values, the Egyptian government leaks into public spaces and criminalizes critical views, alternative practices, and opposition movements (Atta, 2020). In addition to mediating public affections towards Egyptian values, this deterrent strategy also works in crystallizing the family as an identity marker and the woman as an appendix to it (Abouelnaga, 2016). The scale-up in the application of moral values was noted by participants, who brought into the conversation some mediatic cases. For instance, Naylah brought up some recent events that became mediatic due to the alleged non-compliance to these values.

A few years ago with my grandma, god rests her soul, we watched some shows together... and now people don't watch these kinds of things because they are not moral. Since 2020 the application of family values started to increase. For example, the Tik Tok girls, Mowada Al-Adham and Sherry Hanim. It was worse for Sherry Hanim, she was facing accusations related to human trafficking. I personally believe she's not doing that, maybe because I don't trust the government or the media. I don't think she's promoting that. There was also the case of some elder women... They were in Zamalek eating cupcakes and took some pictures of that. The cupcakes had some sexual stuff on the top, like bras, penises... They also went viral. People even asked the police to arrest them! They have already started people because of this thing called "family values". It's insane! People use their media platforms and get sued for that.

Among participants, the most cited one was the widely-known case of the TikTok girls, arrested after launching some videos on this social media platform "under the pretext of protecting morals, principles and societal values" (Atta, 2020, p.

4). From these conversations, it was inferred that ‘family values’ are erected around honorability which, as discussed before, embeds concepts of female sexuality, mobility, reproduction, visibility, and marriageability.

The political situation that underlies the rigid application and overwhelming saturation of moral values is the failed neo-liberalization of Egypt’s economy during Mubarak’s era led, which consequently has traduced in the deterioration of government public services and intensification of poverty levels among the lower classes (Hafez, 2014). These policies had a long-term impact on the everyday life of Egyptians, but more specifically on that of women and poorer inhabitants (Hafez, 2014). This stagnation has been assumed by families that balanced their economic unit to adapt to this situation. Against a background of political and economic instability, people turn their allegiances towards communitarian structures, as discussed in the second chapter. Even when the familiar entity might be perceived as self-limiting, it also stands for a solid network of support when facing social, economic, and political vulnerability. Despite the fact that these kinds of familial connections are contingently set up and acquire divergent meanings, the functioning of the family as a self-regulating unit lingers. To note, it is a political and economic mechanism of inner and outer regulation; namely, an institution that, on the one side, is structured around male-waged laborers and female non-waged laborers and, on the other side, conforms to the larger scenario – it enables social survival against failing political and economic institutions.

Even if participants belonged to middle and upper contexts, they considered starting a family difficult due to being cost-intensive. Parents must guarantee a good life quality for themselves and their children, which means affording high expenses to

cover all basic services the public system provides not or provides of dubious quality. This reasoning led participants to prefer small family nuclei, instead of larger which would jeopardize a good standard of living for the members. The second time I met Layla, we had a little walk and sat on the bench of a manicured garden out of the city bustle. With the privacy that this privileged spot granted us, she talked more in-depth about her personal experiences and opinions. She raised her concern with regard to having children:

I haven't made up my mind yet. Egypt is a difficult place to live in, financially. To raise a family here you need to have a good job and a high salary, but really, really high: for the children to go to a good school, and then to the university [...]. Raising kids is very expensive, and quite burdening.

Furthermore, the economic logic sometimes brought into question family households with many children. Participants identified poorer classes as holding stronger dependency bonds to familiar structures and a greater tendency to have large offspring. Albeit conceiving was understood as an economic strategy, some participants argued for its ineffectiveness. More education would translate into the realization that the more children the greater the economic burden. Sitting on the terrace of a coffee shop, Dalia gave me her opinion on this topic while smoking a vape-pen.

Lower classes are not educated and follow the Egyptian Code. They say: "every child comes with its own fortune". But that is not true. I have recently read about an accident. Twelve children sunk in a river. They crossed every day to work and earn 25 pounds per day... to help their families. They [lower-class people] don't believe in birth control and think

that numerous children will help them economically.

Once more, the lower classes were pinpointed as uneducated and rolled away from the possibility of exercising agency through their choices with regard to family structures. My research does not shed light on the reproductive needs and difficulties of the lower classes, for its target is the middle and upper classes, it shows the world imaginaries they deploy upon the poorer backgrounds.

3.3 A punishing health institution: abuses and misinformations.

In her study on women, bodies and dispossession, Silvia Federici (2004) analyzes the role of the state in the reproduction of life. The author argues that the politicization of reproduction, loaded with interests and power relations, is a historical terrain of exploitation and resistance. The state endeavors to take absolute control over reproduction, which leads to the imposition of reproductive practices through various means and, consequently, to the alienation of women from their productive bodies. To achieve this goal, Federici (2004) argues that the prohibition of non-productive and procreative forms of female sexuality is necessary not only in a symbolic way (in the collective imaginary) but also materially (through regulatory social institutions). Ali (2002) established the ninetieth century as the turning point wherein sexuality and reproduction became a matter of state with the attempt to control the alleged problem of overpopulation in Egypt perceived by the European colonial powers. The control of female reproductive and sexual habits has been underpinned by two key pillars: the medical practice and the lack of public information.

First, manufacturing a uniform medical institution functions as a means of disciplining the female body (Federici, 2004). The regularization of the medical

practice legitimizes certain procedures over others that are excluded from it and, therefore, moves to the unaffordable, unwanted, and unknown side. The transformation of the medical institution began in the nineteenth century, justified by the need for family planning programs aimed to progressively reduce the country's population (Ali, 2002). For this, the role of the local healthcare providers and midwives was progressively replaced by colonial medical authorities, who were additionally in charge of training the next generations of Egyptian doctors (Ali, 2002). Thus, the emerging medical institution started to progressively take over the possibilities of existence of sexual and reproductive practices, eliminating those procedures considered undesirable and criminalizing its local practitioners. As discussed above, the practices that remained admissible in the imaginary of possibility are those that promote an idea of the female body as a public domain and locus of social reproduction. The expulsion of local practices from the scientific world and their criminalization translated into the current power relationship between medical professionals and patients, since the former is the only one who possesses the information and the means to meet the needs of the latter (Federici, 2004). Thus, every query concerning reproduction and sexuality is necessarily mediated by an external agent.

The possibility of violence in medical environments is underpinned by the hierarchical relationship established between the provider and the patient. Female participants count on medical professionals to take care of their sexual and reproductive health by means of information, provision, and check-ups. However, health care providers are often reluctant to provide it. This unequal relationship was brought up on many occasions by interlocutors, who denounced suffering its

consequences or knowing of other people's cases. Most participants reported the use of systemic violence exercised by medical personnel, especially towards those people outside the normative prescriptions of gender, sexuality, and class. These bodies are apparently punished for not complying with the norms of social production, being non-obedience the reason for the sanction. The sanction strategies are multiple, some of those mentioned by the participants were: sexual abuse, denigration, reproval, questioning, misdiagnosis, and concealment of information, among others.

Youssef accounted that married women seeking contraceptives are sometimes judged negatively, which seems to relate to the non-compliance with the female status of continuous productivity. That is, they are criminalized for making conscious decisions over their re-production times. Even when birth control practices were admittedly similar among male and female interlocutors, gender differences sprung with regard to their counseling and acquisition. Moral judgment is passed on to women when they transgress the threshold to openly meet their sexual and reproductive health demands. Their understanding of bodily autonomy and sexual freedom clashes with the public agreement of concealment. This condemning attitude from healthcare providers is translated into women's exposure to violence in contraception-related contexts, such as purchasing or counseling. Similarly, Layla informed me that people with sexually transmitted diseases and homosexuals are also heavily penalized.

Men and women generally have traumatic experiences with sexually transmitted diseases. Sometimes they are prescribed torturous treatments. Doctors may lie to the patients and diagnose HPV [human papillomavirus]. They are tortured because doctors believe they have to

be punished. Same with LGTB people, homosexuals have to experience terrible things. I know some that were misdiagnosed. Lots of terrible things can happen.

Whilst the bodies most vulnerable to abuse are those that fall outside the norm, all are susceptible to the violence stemming from the power system of doctor-patient relations. Women find difficulties regardless of their civil status, either for being sexually active outside marriage or for having a marital sex life without reproductive purposes. Women overall are subject to abuse, mistreatment, and belittlement from doctors and pharmacists. Participants have shared many details from these dread encounters, among which included the refusal to sell contraception, offensive moves or comments of sexual nature, choice questioning, name-calling, misinforming, misdiagnosing, etc. A few men among the interviewees were also aware that women were demeaned in such contexts. I had an online conversation with Rana in which we talked extensively about this kind of violence. During the meeting, I was able to appreciate the impact the repetition of this abuse had had on her, undermining her trust and sense of security towards health professionals. Out of rage, she told me about various experiences she had in consultations.

I once went to my gynecologist when I had just turned twenty. He suggestively told me he was alone at his place, that his family was out.... Sometime after, I went to a different gynecologist... She made fun of my consultation and made disrespectful comments! There is no legal body where I can report this. The common ground is sexism, denigration, manipulation, blackmail... Doctors are in a situation of power and no one can hold them accountable.

Hence all female bodies are susceptible to being punished, even when they

have not trespassed the border of social 'crime'. The potential punishment and the consequent feeling of anxiety about its possible execution work as instruments of self-discipline (Mbembe, 2003), for women learn they will be vilified if they do not abide by the norm. Thus, the process of causality is inverted: the responsibility for the punishment falls on the woman, not on its executors. They are accountable for the punishment when the norm is transgressed since they are the ones who must exercise self-control and self-discipline (in order not to get pregnant, not to get a sexually transmitted disease, not to ask the wrong questions, etc.). Professor Elaine Scarry (1985) argues that for the pain to become tolerably inflicted into some bodies, the formal logic needs to be turned upside down – the “false motive syndrome”, as she calls it, needs to step onto the stage. The actions of the woman that terminates an unwanted pregnancy are taken as the trigger of the painful process she goes through, conferring to her all moral responsibility and diminishing sympathy towards her (Scarry, 1985). The woman is accountable for her body in pain; it is a consequence of her debauchery, her committing of sin, her morally reprobable actions, her engagement in illegal activities, etc. Yet, the alleged motives for inflicting pain are mere fiction (Scarry, 1985). The logic is fallacious since the potential deployment of punishment is not carried out because of the transgression (although it might aggravate the consequences), rather it is an omnipresent reminder of the non-free disposition of women of their bodies. Women are violated even before the transgression to prevent it from happening. The phantom of being sanctioned is symptomatic of women's alienation from their bodies, as it hangs over them to ensure they perform their reproductive social function.

Second, the discourses are saturated with a single possibility of sexual-

reproductive relationships. Official research on sexual and reproductive health focuses on studying and addressing the supposed sexual-reproductive needs of heterosexual married couples. Proof of this is the official documents such as the Constitution or the Penal Code, as well as the publications conducted on behalf of the Ministry of Health and Population such as the Egypt Demographic and Health Survey of 2014 or the Egypt Health Issues Survey of 2015. The baseline of the official argumentation is the social productivity of women, which is sought for, limited, framed, and enforced through various state mechanisms. There is barely any information outside the sanitary official framework that challenges this viewpoint. According to Federici (2004), the need to eradicate alternative modes of existence lies in their potential threat to the political and economic system, since the existence of different sexualities and modes of reproduction destabilizes the capitalist rationalization of work. Therefore, the war against women aims to break female control over their bodies and reproduce, turning their wombs into public territory controlled by men and the state (Federici, 2004). Following her argument, my contention is that disinformation is a control device that materializes in the corporality of women. Their loss of control over procreation turns their body into an alien device for women themselves, which can only be controlled by a male other, e.g., doctors, relatives, the state.

All sexual and reproductive health activists, either active on social media platforms or grassroots organizations, I talked with have denounced the state's persecution of alternative discourses, which is visible through the closure of non-governmental organizations and the imprisonment of activists that promote other discourses on sexuality, reproduction, and parenting. When I started doing the

interviews, one of my first meetings was with Mai, an sexual rights activist who lives abroad. I found our conversation illuminating; I was just starting fieldwork and she gave me a sharp overview of many topics. Talking about sexual liberation activism, she told me:

It is harmful and risky for activists to debate publicly about sexual education topics from a different standpoint because they can face reprisals by society or the government. [...] The box is very small to deal with different aspects of sex health and education. An activist who runs a startup on reproduction and sexual health explained in a workshop we did together that her scope of action is very limited. She can just address normative sexuality in the framework of heterosexuality. Not just because it is her job and lives out of it, but she said she'd be afraid to educate and publicly talk about other sexual and gender identities.

Similarly, most interlocutors complained about the absolute information regarding these topics as well as the impossibilities to access it. Most participants have taught themselves thanks to looking on web pages and social media platforms. As my conversation with Mai continued, she explained the kind of consultations the platform receives stemming from this information gap.

Some women didn't know that if they had unprotected sex out of wedlock they could get pregnant! Other women came to us after using the pullout method as a contraceptive because they were not aware of its high rate of failure.

Conception and contraception were similarly pinpointed by the other participants as major knowledge black holes. The process of fertilization, as well as its prevention, remain in many instances unclear. I argue disinformation is a

mechanism of control that seeks to maintain women in their productive roles.

Unawareness about sexual and reproductive possibilities (e.g. sexual and gender identities, parenting alternatives, contraceptive methods, etc.) leaves the path traced towards normativity, i.e., heterosexual productive family units. Additionally, missing information on contraception turns women into more vulnerable, since when they do not abide by the norm their bodies may rat them out: the free disposal of their bodies may blow back on them through undesired pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

3.4 The desired parenthood: parenting reimaged.

The reproductive health system regulates bodies towards the normative path as discussed above. It only allows its existence within it and potential deviations are punished with material and symbolic violence (Federici, 2004). However, this needs to be thought of in broader terms, for it is not only the health system that exercises this kind of violence, but it is an outcome of the sexual-reproductive overarching framework. Consequently, these regulation techniques emanate in different social institutions and systems, symbolically tracing a unique path. Possibilities of reproducing and rearing are enclosed in the framework of the heterosexual marriage in which the female subject takes over the productive and reproductive labors. Still, this roughly set life path does not always fit people's aspirations, wills, feelings, and possibilities. Reproductive and parenting needs were far from being met and, aware of the existing gaps, participants imagined other possible landscapes as well as paths to get to them. I contend these alternative modes of existing challenge the productive model of the family nuclei, readapting its significance to their needs and aspirations.

Whilst this task is opening up new imaginable paths of conceiving and parenting, it is important to keep in mind that people who perform this otherwise expose themselves to vulnerability and their bodies to being harmed.

Regardless of their sexual experience, female participants wanted to marry and to find a partner who regarded them as equal, autonomous and free. None expressed any particular concern over their own sexual life stories. In this regard, Ahmed Eldamaty (2020) showed marriage has sometimes proven to be a flexible and unstable institution to which women circumstantially resort in order to achieve freedom from other social institutions. Likewise, for most participants, the desired parenthood revolved around the idea of balance. Aware of the social inequalities, people largely wished to find stability in the subject of economics and gender divisions. Note that, as it has been thoroughly discussed, these two spheres are indissolubly connected in the current sexual-reproductive landscape. Therefore, its conjoint mention by participants points to the factual intertwinement of both in the realm of experience.

It should be noted that not all participants wanted to have children or had taken a decision about it. The ones who consider having offspring – both, those being sure and those being hesitant –, strive to break through some normative bonds that traverse the institution of parenthood. To achieve parity, participants set specific targets that ideally need to be accomplished prior to parenting. The most frequently mentioned were related to salary income, partner suitability and location. Its longing and potential accomplishment may not completely overturn power dynamics, but they show that moving towards an otherwise paternity is possible; an otherwise that progressively removes oppression from its core.

As it is showing up in this research, the meanings of women and men are being redefined. Many interlocutors do not attach their gender and adult identity to marriage. As a matter of a fact, women are redefining the signifier 'woman' through performance so that it is not inherently adhered to that of 'mother', which consequently maps out new significations for parenting. These redefinitions do not imply in any way that women do not take responsibility for their children, but that they are pushing for that their identity and social value are not that much defined by their decisions regarding motherhood, but by their individual self. That is, they seek to actively decide whether, from where, and how they want to take such responsibility. This process involves deromanticizing and denaturalizing the figure of the mother, as Naylah made me realize through the screen. In a passionate moment of our conversation, she explained to me how her perception of mothering changed.

In the past I thought that being a mother was such a great thing, now my concerns are bigger than this romantic idea of motherhood. Motherhood is hard. Motherhood is hard work indeed. It takes part of your soul, your energies... a great part of you... You need to have things set before deciding whether you want to get another person involved [the baby].

As Naylah, other participants stressed the importance of figuring out ways to harmonize personal conditions with the desire and possibility of having offspring. In addition to tackling the taking of conscious decisions over their willingness to conceive, women spoke about other factors that concern their decisions on reproduction and motherhood. Consciousness in the decision-making process, I argue, means a shift in the playing ground of dispossession and alienation, for women are not naturally meeting social expectations over their productive role. Aware of the

socio-political environment, women strategize to fulfill their aspirations and those of their inner circle. Female interlocutors' claims around parenting and reproduction mostly revolve around timing, environment, contraceptive methods, couple's responsibilities, professional careers, and personal well-being. For Naylah, her main concerns centered on the growing environment for the potential child, both at the micro level of the family and at the socio-political macro level.

Keeping a relationship is also hard work. So first, before adding more members to the familiar entity, you need to know that your relationship works. I'd only bring more members if I know they will have a better life. [...]. I'm not sure about the future... Having kids in this environment, is it the best thing to do?

Many participants expressed their concern about having children in their home country, as discussed before. Women I talked with tended to feel more disquiet at it, notably at having daughters. They did not want their daughters to suffer from the same kinds of abuses they had gone through. Apart from gender violence, women aspire to avoid the violence derived from the current political and economic system that, as examined earlier, drenches every household and helps entrench gender and class inequalities. Surrounded by the amazing stillness of the blossoming park, Layla detailed to me how she felt about having offspring in her home country.

If I have kids, I want it to be outside of Egypt, somewhere where there is a good public system for health and education ... Also, I don't want my daughters to undergo some things ... But I'm not sure, I don't see having kids as a necessity. I totally think I can have a fulfilling life without kids.

For it was assumed that staying in Egypt would mean handing over this violence to their potential children, some women considered that moving abroad was

the only solution to prevent such harm, especially to their female descendants. For some women, it is not fair or responsible to bring a new life to a place wherein female children will forcibly go through brutal damages their progenitors are aware of – for they have experienced it through their own bodies. To them, it means to pass trauma as inheritance, namely, to assist in the reproduction of violence through time.

Chapter 4

Abortion

Reem is a 20 years old undergraduate student who majors in fine arts at an international college. I met her at a gathering, surrounded by her friends, who turned out to be very important supporting pillars in her life as would tell me in our next meeting. I saw her again a few weeks after the party with the same feeling of sorrow snapping in her eyes. She had terminated a pregnancy a couple of weeks before we first met and that second time she was still pending some check-ups and medical appointments. In spite of her sadness and tiredness, her words and convictions showed a strong woman with forceful opinions.

It was a few weeks ago or a month. I had had sex with my partner while I was on my period, so we didn't take any precautions. This was in August, we were spending some days in the Red Sea. I became worried, so the next day my partner and I looked for the contraceptive pill in several pharmacies and couldn't find it, even when they are supposed to have it. We came back to Cairo, and I forgot about it. I have an app on my phone to track my period and I realized that in September I was having a delay. It was then that I remembered the incident, but I wasn't worried because I was having premenstrual symptoms. After some days, I decided to take two pregnancy tests. When I saw the two lines showing I was pregnant, it was very scary... I felt shocked. I have a British passport, so I thought that if necessary, I could go there to get an abortion. There it is an easy and confidential process, and it doesn't leave a record in your medical history.

I doubted if it could be that confidential in Egypt. Anyway, my partner knew where it could be done here because some friends of his had gone through it before. Also, a friend of mine had gotten one when she was very young, around eighteen. So, in the end, I decided to get an abortion here in Cairo.

The previous chapters enable understanding the sexual and reproductive imaginaries that are currently developing among the middle and upper-class youth in Cairo. Whilst these chapters navigate individual experience and speech to reach the broad context wherein they emerge, this fourth chapter focuses on a topic that engrains in both arenas, sexuality, and reproduction if they can ever be severed. In this extract, Reem touches on both in addition to revealing some class and gender intersections. These intermeshing factors shape Cairo inhabitants' everydayness, but become harmfully acute during the abortion procedure, for it informs its cadence. And what ultimately frames the woman's experience is the timing. Widely known and widely silenced, the topic addressed in this chapter is abortion.

4.1 Crafting the political: the violence of disappearing.

Timing abortion demands looking at the past. Research on the topic of abortion revealed that terminating pregnancy was socially permissible and available for Egyptian women until the nineteenth century (Hessini, 2007). According to feminist advocate Leila Hessini (2007), two major medical and legal changes occurred at the end of the century for this situation to be reverted. First, the professionalization of medicine, boosted by the colonial authorities, gradually replaced local midwives and practitioners with European-trained nurses and male medical doctors, which radically restructured women's healing, sexual and

reproductive practices (Ali, 2002; Hessini, 2007). Federici explains the advent of modern medical science as a process aimed at expropriating women “from a patrimony of empirical knowledge” towards their bodies, for it erects “a wall of unchallengeable scientific knowledge, unaffordable and alien” to them (2004, p. 201). Second, the degradation of women's situation was enhanced by the integration of European laws into the national legal system (EIPR, 2016). The first time that abortion became outlawed was in 1883, following the French jurisdiction's criminal law (EIPR & RESURJ, 2016). The 1883 Penal Code set up the legislation on aborting pregnant women and legal punishments for every person involved in the interruption of pregnancy; articles that have remained in force until the present day (Abdel-Hameed, 2016). Currently, Law 58/1937 from articles 260 to 263 withholds the exact same legislation on abortion, not permitted on any grounds; being the only modification that of 1904, in which article 264 was included to specify that attempted abortion is not legally punished (Abdel-Hameed, 2016). In this frame, there is a sole possibility for the woman to stop a pregnancy: the doctor can perform an abortion if it jeopardizes the mother's life. Yet, this possibility is contained in the Code of Ethics and does not pose any legal duty to the doctor, it is just a moral choice (Abdel-Hameed, 2016). However, performing an abortion is rarely the choice taken by professionals even when the fetus actually endangers the woman's health (Ahmed, 2019).

After its prohibition in 1883, there has been only one attempt to legalize the interruption of pregnancy (EIPR, 2009). A draft law was issued in 2008 to provide abortion facilities in case of rape or incest. As a matter of a fact, this amendment was de facto approved by the Parliament's Committee of Proposals and Complaints and

the Ministry of Religious Endowments Supreme Council for Islamic Affair. However, it never stepped into the Parliament and therefore never became legalized (EIPR, 2009).

Likewise, it has been largely discussed whether Islam supports or opposes the interruption of pregnancy (Hessini, 2007; Seif el Dawla, 2000). The Qur'an does not contain any explicit mention of the issue of interrupting pregnancy, hence Islamic jurisprudence has taken over interpreting the acceptance of the practice and in which terms (Shameem, 2013). Most scholars accept the termination of pregnancy if conducted prior to the ensoulment of the fetus, which occurs forty, ninety, or one hundred twenty days after conception according to different *madhhabs*, Islamic schools of jurisprudence (Hessini, 2007). Disagreement among *madhhabs* is set on whether there is a need for a reason to abort and, if needed, which reasons are valid (Hessini, 2007). Indeed, some religious authorities in Egypt have publicly advocated for women to have access to abortion in addition to having issued some fatwas in support of it (Shameem, 2013).

Even when hindrances and difficulties in providing access to abortion are not to be found in *madhhabs*, the religious argument is highly mobilized with a view to legally and morally criminalize induced miscarriages. The contradictory use of religious arguments does not respond to a religious motivation, but rather serves to steer gender-sensitive debates (EIPR, 2013). That is, the occasional hijacking of the Islamic discourse responds to the need "to approve or disapprove of women-related issues perceived as sensitive cultural issues" (EIPR, 2013, p. 38). Hence, despite the coexistence of diverse religious viewpoints in Islam with respect to the practicability of abortion, some local understandings of religion find abortion unacceptable. After

sharing with me her termination experience, Heba went on to talk about how society generally perceives it. She uttered the words with anger because, in addition to finding this view unfair, recalling her own process made her reawaken the pain.

People see abortion as *haram*, as killing a soul. There is this proverb “a kid comes with its own fortune” or “luck”, depending on the translation. This is the idea people generally have, that a kid is a gift from God. Hence, abortion is *haram* and should not be done. If pregnancy happens, religion says you should keep the baby.

Therefore, legal and social condemnation turns clandestinity into the sole possibility to interrupt a pregnancy. Nonetheless, even when the common ground for all women is illegality, the safeness of the procedure is mediated by other axes. Gynecologist Fahmy Fathalla (2008) argues that even if legality and safeness are presupposed to go hand-by-hand, they do not necessarily relate. Put differently, an unlawful abortion does not always entail an unsafe abortion. What defines an unsafe abortion is not the legal framework but how the procedure is conducted. Put it in Fahmy Fathalla’s words “unsafe abortion is defined as a procedure for terminating an unwanted pregnancy either by persons lacking the necessary skills or in an environment lacking the minimal medical standards or both” (2008, p. 174). Conversely, if the procedure is carried out by qualified professionals, in a sanitized environment and using appropriate techniques, then the abortion is highly likely to be medically safe (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008). Due to the dismissal of practitioners and midwives from medical knowledge legitimacy, the entitlement to practice medical safeness is only held by university-trained doctors. Therefore, albeit illegality, the odds for women in Egypt to access safe abortions rely on other factors. According to

Hessini (2007), nowadays the quality of services relies on women's payment capacity, access to painkillers, and the abortion method. Psychiatrist Aida Seif el Dawla (2000) ensured that it is actually easy to safely abort in Egypt if economic resources are high. The uneven access to quality health attention is evident: one of the last investigations on the prevalence of safety was carried out in 1998 and pointed out that just one-third of induced abortions were safe (Lane et al., 1998).

Yet, recent information and statistics on abortion in Egypt are lacking; it seems to be rendered unthinkable in the discursive realm. The most recent publications on the rates of induced abortion in Egypt date from 1995 in which the estimated pregnancy wastage rate was 18% in rural areas and 20% in urban areas (Fahmy Fathalla, 2008), and 1998, which estimated an induced abortion rate of 14.75 out of 100 pregnancies (Seif el Dawla, 2000). During the last two decades, academic engagement with the topic of abortion in Egypt has been scarce. Meanwhile, the government has clearly defined its public discourse towards sexuality and reproduction largely framed in family planning programs, which openly foster the nuclear heterosexual family and preclude any discussion on alternative life options (Ahmed et al., 2021). Abortion in Egypt seems to be out of almost all discussions, not considered a topic for academic research, nor envisaged by the government as a possible provision. The only breaches for imagining accessing abortion otherwise have been opened by local and international organizations (see for instance the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights or the Realizing Sexual and Reproductive Justice Alliance), peripheral discourses by activists (see for instance Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty or Nana Abuelsoud), women who terminate and networks of informal support.

For sexuality and reproduction are confined to heterosexual married couples in the official discourse, the existence of pregnancy is formally restricted to this frame. Bodies left outside this narrow frame are bestowed a negative existence. Therefore, the woman who aborts does not exist or, in the best of scenarios, only exists after damage or death – a discursive construction of the non-being. For they do not fully pertain to the official construction of the being, the lives of disobedient women are invisible, hence disposable. The government enables the disappearance of women in the immediacy of their bodies, yet also in the continuity of their experience. Namely, the extinction is conducted at a material and knowledgeable level. In her analysis of the witch hunt, Federici (2004) puts forward the argument that the erasure of women’s experiences of violence does not only trivialize their physical sufferings but is also complicit in it. The disappearance of women’s present and historical narratives on abortion in Egypt stands as clear evidence of physical violence but also points to the ontological and epistemic dimension of violence. Regarding the comprehensive dispossession of women's present and past, Federici claims that the “universe of [women's] practices, beliefs, and social subjects” (2004, p. 165) needs to be unceasingly destroyed due to its incompatibility with the reproduction of the gender-based capitalist system. As postcolonial historian Achille Mbembe (2017) builds in his writings, history is not a mere recount of facts. The way in which we trace genealogies and connect different subjects and historical moments is a political project and it is, thus, loaded with intentionality. Historical narratives do not only construct our past, but also define our understanding of the present and, ultimately, point to our future. Therefore, an intentional process of erasure constructs a telling of the historical past and the immediate present that at the same time reverberates in the

imagined future (Mbembe, 2017). The women inhabiting the past and present imaginations in Egypt are respectable and chaste, those socially apt to live in the collective memory, even if in a fictionalized way. A past populated by women who have embraced their social function echoes in a future wherein the social configuration around gender lingers without disturbance. The substantive and discursive elimination of women who abort builds on the expectation of women as socially productive and reproductive bodies. Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty has a clear standpoint on the government's role in framing abortion, for she has thoroughly investigated the subjective, material, and political configuration of the procedure in Egypt. During our meeting in a trendy coffee shop away from the city bustle, she explained why the political regime maintains the status quo concerning abortion.

The government does not want to legalize abortion because this situation benefits them. They do nothing about it but they know that women who enjoy their sexuality and have an unwanted pregnancy will change their practices once they had gone through the torturous experience of abortion.

This "torturous" contains infinite possibilities, that is, its meaning and contours enormously vary; torturous may crystallize through constant fear, physical pain, psychological suffering, legal and economic distress, etc. According to doctors Abolghasem Pourreza and Aziz Batebi, who investigated the psychological effects of abortion in Iran, the experiencing of abortion highly relies on the socio-economic, emotional, and mental aspects of individuals which impact the "physical, social, and psychological consequences which may last for a long period of time, and affect personal, family, and social life of individuals" (2011, p. 32). Namely, the woman's

approach to abortion emanates from the interrelated spheres of the individual and the social and replicates in those as well.

4.2 Summative experiences: causal decisions, consequential events.

The decision not to carry the pregnancy to term is fueled by many different factors and taken by many different women. Abortion results from unwanted and unexpected pregnancies, yet what makes these pregnancies unwanted and unexpected differs. In addition to the testimonies compiled for this research, some journalists and activists have published other experiences of women in Egypt, which broadens our understanding of abortion, its motivations, and its outcomes. The common core of all these experiences is women's claim to freely perform their sexual and reproductive timings, which are ultimately executed through their bodies. Anthropologist Sherin Hafez states that women's bodies "emerge as sites of resistance and transformation that both mediate and destabilize state violence and disciplinary power" (2014, p. 22). By breaking through female sexual and reproductive prescriptions, women escape the labor logic their body is expected to fulfill. Women struggle to decide the conditions of their sexual encounters and reproductive activities and thus deploy their available mechanisms to their accomplishment.

The only publication on the frequency and profile of induced abortions in Egypt was carried out by doctors Hany Harb and Ihab Habil in 2013. Their research was conducted in three hospitals: two in Cairo and one in Alexandria. The research in Cairo hospitals found that the average age was 27.6 (\pm 6.4), the employment rate 4.8%, and the percentage of women who had no children at the time of the research was 34.8%. My research holds similar results, even when the characteristics of fieldwork are notably different in time, location, target group, and research

methodology. My investigation was aimed at understanding upper-class youth's opinions and experiences on abortion. Female participants that had had an induced termination of pregnancy were between eighteen and twenty-five years old when they went through it. At that time, most were studying, starting their working careers, or both at the same time. Likewise, none of them had ever given birth. The reason they considered these pregnancies undesirable was time: they did not want to have a child at that point in their lives. Some women acknowledged they were unsure whether they would ever and some dismissed the idea of having children at all. When I asked Reem the reason why she decided to abort, her expression contracted in a gesture that informed me the answer was obvious: "because I don't want a baby now. There was no other reason, there was no other option. I absolutely don't want it".

Getting pregnant happened because of the type of birth control that was being used. Albeit most studies point out that there is an unmet need for contraception (see for instance the EIPR 2013 report or the Population Council 2020 report), none of the female interlocutors in my research blamed their unwanted pregnancy on the lack of availability of information or supplies, but rather on themselves for not having used an adequate method of birth control. Might the only complaint be the tremendous difficulty in finding the morning-after pill, which Zahra and Reem were not able to get despite a long quest. The contraceptive methods employed at the moment of conception were none, the pull-out method or the safe period method. The outcome of all these encounters was unexpected due to the reliance on the methods, on the inability to conceive, or on the unlikelihood this situation – that is, getting to go through an abortion – happened to them.

The most common scenario was women who had a stable relationship and

decided to use the pull-out method with their partners, which was perceived by many of them as a no-method or a risk method. A study conducted in 2020 on fertility preferences and behaviors of the Egyptian youth shows a progressive decrease in the use of contraceptive methods among young women in the last years, more specifically, among the ones in the wealthiest quintile (Abdel-Tawab, et al., 2020). Consequently, the fertility rate increased during that time period (Abdel-Tawab, et al., 2020). Though this study was conducted among married women, my research similarly found a low contraceptive prevalence among women with long-term relationships, irrespective of their marital status. Likewise, this non-use of birth control ended up in unwanted pregnancies in some instances. Female participants in my research resorted to abortion procedures in order to avoid the coming to term of the pregnancy. That was the case of Zahra who at the age of twenty-five, that is four years ago, went through the process of termination as a result of having unprotected encounters with her partner.

I was having sex and I used the pull-out method. I normally use it, but this time I felt something. When I found out I was pregnant, I decided to go to the gynecologist to abort. I wouldn't like it to happen again, but it was the right decision to take. I was with someone at that time... I still wanted to focus on my future, on my studies. Also, I didn't want to put my body through it [pregnancy and childbirth]. Besides, having a baby! Sometimes I don't even know how to take care of myself, as to bring a new soul to this world...

Reem's choice not to use contraception during that encounter was motivated for by intersection of three factors: having a stable partner, being with her period, and

believing she was infertile. However, in retrospect, she is wracked with guilt.

I was being very loose with my body, doing this doing that, not caring [...].

I wasn't being careful at all. I was not using condoms, not pills, no nothing

[...]. I thought I would never go through this, that it would never happen.

In fact, I always thought I was not fertile, that I would have to adopt.

The case of Mona is exceptional. She is a 28-year-old hotel manager who currently lives in France. She reached me some days after I posted on Facebook looking for participants and we agreed on having an online conversation. When we touched on the topic of abortion, she told me she had gone through two consecutive ones. The reason she got accidentally pregnant was the non-use of contraception, but that was not her initial decision. Conversely, her husband's lack of trust of in the method she was following back then and his active insistence on their sterility was the reason she had to face two consecutive pregnancies on her twenty-third. There was a tone of sorrow in her slow pace of speaking when she went on to share with me her experience.

I have had two abortions because I did not use any control method. I only use the safe period method. The first one was after my boyfriend and I got married, after one year or more. He didn't believe in my method. He thought we couldn't have kids. Then I got pregnant and I got some medicines because it is not allowed to go to the doctor or to do it in any legal way. I tried many methods. I even put some medicine for the stomach inside the vagina, I don't know how it is called... After a week I had a strong stomach ache and I thought it was because I had eaten something. I didn't know it was because I was pregnant. Then I went to the doctor and he told me there was a pregnancy but it was gone. The next

month I couldn't calculate my period because the abortion had interrupted the cycle. So that month I got pregnant again.

According to a study published by the Cairo Demographic Center, one-third of the women that participated in the study had tried to induce a voluntary abortion (Dabash & Roudi-Fahimi, 2008). To my surprise, almost all interlocutors knew at least one person, if not more, that had gone through a voluntary termination of pregnancy. The scope of my research was limited, but this fact allows us to account for the wide network that supports the current shaping of abortion processes. The fabric that nurtures the configuration of an otherwise sexual and reproductive experiencing is large, more than generally assumed. In fact, it is not just that some interlocutors were aware of the factual existence of this process, but that were active in its enablement. These supportive bodies carry out other labors for the sake of facilitating the process for their female colleagues. Among the mentioned actions are getting abortive pills in the black market, practicing clandestine abortions at one's place, emotional, financial, and physical accompaniment, and building online networks of support and activism.

Albeit underpinned by the societal fabric, the configuration of abortion is ultimately played over women's bodies. Women's bodies are sites of disciplinary power, negotiation, and resistance, which triggers conflicting feelings with regard to abortion (Hafez, 2014). People who are aware of or stand with someone that has gone through an abortion do have doubts, contradictions, or uneasiness. Amr, who was twenty-nine when we met, works as a civil engineer since he got his diploma at one of the private universities established at the wealthy Fifth Settlement. At a sophisticated coffee shop in Zamalek, Amr told me he was aware his mother had decided to

interrupt a pregnancy before he was born. He did not judge her decision at any time during the conversation, yet he expressed a conflicting opinion on this topic.

My mum had one abortion. And I am almost one... I think she was going to abort me, but I'm not sure. I'd be scared if someone had one... is it a problem...? I am not sure. Getting or not getting an abortion... it is a big decision, I couldn't give advice on this.

Women's emotional and bodily approach to their process of abortion depends on many factors. Among the variables that were identified as potentially determining their current understanding of their process were: elapsed time, perceived safeness throughout the termination process, treatment of health care professionals, chosen procedure, economic situation, and emotional support during and after the process, *inter alia*. The way they went through the procedure affects the meaning-making of it which, according to my research, is up to reconfiguration over time. Likewise, this remaking of the process informs their ever-evolving understanding of the body and the practices carried out with it. This re-elaboration process may materialize in changes in: the apprehension of the self (often towards a negative apprehension for putting the body through that, e.g., irresponsible, careless), in the physical and mental health (through somatizing their psychic state, e.g. nightmares, anxiety, depression, trauma, unpleasant psychedelic experiences), in the perception of contraceptive methods or practices (the understanding of unsafe sex usually becomes different), in the sexual desire (mostly towards low desire after the abortion), and in the quest for an otherwise experiencing of termination rather than theirs (this is enormously linked to their wish of turning over the sexual and reproductive panorama overall). Zahra rushed to go through the procedure of termination for she only want it to be over. At

that moment, she confessed she did not give time herself to process what was happening, yet she added that afterwards, she had to deal with some of the effects that the abortion had and still has for her.

In my first experience of ayahuasca after the abortion, I was able to feel a pulse inside me [she places the hand over her belly]. I took ayahuasca during my first period after the abortion and I felt that the tampon was hurting, so I ended up removing it. I was going to the toilet every five minutes because I felt that I was expelling a lot of blood. The shaman told me I shouldn't be moving that much during the session. But for me it was like... no matter how much I used the *shtafa* [bidet], I could not remove all the blood. [...] All of this happened in 2019, but I think it is still somewhere in the back of my head. After the abortion, I had dreams of guilt [...] I did continue using the pull-out method. I know I am very irresponsible, I considered taking some contraceptive methods, but in the end, I didn't. I feel paranoid sometimes.

The most recent the termination procedure is, the most likely the woman holds on negative emotions (e.g. anger, guilt, sorrow). Reem, whose abortion procedure was still open inasmuch some check-ups needed to be conducted, expressed feelings of sadness, self-disappointment, and lower libido.

I had sex after the abortion, but I didn't enjoy it. I can say I am much less sexually active than I was before. I don't know, I am not happy. There's the abortion, but there are lots of other things that bring me down... I just want to get over it, but it is so much stress: the money, the doctor, the abortion... It's really stressing [...] Since then, I have been more careful, before I wasn't being careful at all.

Over time these negative emotions tend to decrease and women integrate this experience, giving it a more comprehensive meaning in their lives. Regardless of the prevalence of negative feelings, women feel relief and no regret after the abortion for they were certain it was the correct choice. The second time we gathered at my place, Zahra explained:

I wouldn't like it to happen again, but it was the right decision to take [...]. At that time I wasn't comfortable telling it, I didn't want to make a big thing of it, I just wanted the experience to disappear. At that time I did not want to attach to the situation, I was dealing with it, acknowledging it or not. But in retrospect, it's not a big deal.

When thinking of reasons to get an abortion, some people imagine a narrow framework wherein only a few possibilities fit in. The imaginary on the aborting woman is sometimes that of debauchery and crime. During fieldwork, some interlocutors expressed their view on abortion as a wrongdoing that, in fact, could lead to other acts also perceived as felonious. Reasons to judge the woman negatively were singleness, infidelity, religion, legality, and accountability. Two male participants elaborated on their negative opinion on abortion and, more specifically, on the women who have one. On the one side, Nourallah said judgmentally: "Abortion is not common. Only if there is a relationship outside marriage, adultery. You cheat, you get pregnant, you get an abortion... Sin, after sin, after sin...". On the other side, Mahmoud, a thirty-year old communication manager who contacted me through Facebook, similarly thought that abortion engrained in a chain of offenses:

Many people engage in sexual relationships and then pregnancy happens. That is a problem for the woman because the guy always runs away. And

the woman will face society with shame. Then, she has to go to a doctor...

We see it in many movies, they go to bad doctors that do bad things... Who knows... They can even steal an organ, they already act outside the law.

Women spiral into criminality and get stuck in a downward cycle. The first offense is sex, which is often imagined to happen out of wedlock – otherwise getting an abortion would not be necessary following the marriage-reproduction logic. If it leads to pregnancy, then offenses start to succeed one another: resorting to clinics that offer unlawful services, getting an abortion, lying to their family and male counterparts... Such depiction enables the construction of these bodies as punishable as well as relocating the responsibility for such damage to the woman. Audio-visual media, as pinpointed by Amr and other interlocutors, helps underpin this idea: the woman's misconduct is what throws her into a vortex of suffering. That is, the non-compliance with their expected productive and reproductive role in society turns the woman's body into a deserver of some kind of penalty. The media portrayal of this idea was also reflected in Youmana's words with annoyance and disbelief.

The media always depicts abortion as sex outside marriage, going to shady practitioners... Maybe the woman is even engaged and doesn't want his future husband to discover she is not a virgin... And the woman always has to figure everything out by herself! [...] The media culture always puts the woman that needs an abortion as a stupid woman who made a horrible mistake and goes to unethical doctors...

It is to be noted that the interlocutors that expressed these opinions were solely male, though not all male interlocutors shared this viewpoint. Some men, along with female interlocutors did not utter negative opinions or prejudices towards women who get an abortion. Actually, some men are deeply involved in assisting women during

their termination process. All women expressed empathy and understanding, regardless of whether they had been close to facing pregnancy termination, their own or someone else's.

The women I interviewed generally saw the spiral the other way around. The performance of freedom concerning their sexual and reproductive choices is what actually throws them into this spiral of violence which is ultimately executed by their surrounding environment. Since women acknowledge and experience hindrances in performing bodily autonomy, they further empathize with their female counterparts who go through the stressful process of an abortion. Though some female participants were not certain whether they would terminate an unwanted pregnancy themselves should the case come, all agreed women must have access to safe abortion.

Interlocutors are aware of the multiple sanctions that could be potentially driven from the process altogether, especially the women that went through it. Apart from the possibility of jeopardizing their health, anxiety comes from the possibility of someone finding out and acting in consequence. As discussed in the second chapter, surveillance is generally perceived as far-reaching and able to leak into every disposition. There are three agents over which this fear is built up, for they stand as the potential executors of the penalties: family, acquaintances (neighbors, friends, peers, etc.), and state security forces. Women, especially the younger ones, are more afraid of being discovered by their relatives. As examined before, the state and the family correlate in the task of controlling and disciplining women's bodies. However, the family holds a scarier status due to their immediate relationship with the woman, both in emotional and sanctioning ways. Among Reem's worries was her parents learning she had an induced miscarriage. Reem feared the aftermath of their finding

out because, in addition to opposing termination, her parents may be not even aware of the fact that she is sexually active.

They would see it as a disaster. If my mum found out, it'd break her heart. I'm not even sure she knows I'm sexually active. Maybe she does... We don't talk about it. My dad and my sister... I am different from all in my family... My sister is very different from me in all of this, she's the opposite, she didn't have sex until marriage. We are very different. My aunt once made a joke. When I go see my grandma, she always says: "I hope you get a good guy you marry and have kids with". And once my aunt replied: "I hope she doesn't get pregnant before she finds the one". Everyone laughed. My family would never think I had an abortion. My mother would see it as a shameful disaster. If she found out, at the end she would be like: "how could you not tell me?" She would be a lot more cautious with me. In the end my parents would tell me: "why wouldn't you let us help?" But that's the last thing I would have wanted them to do. My dad would sacrifice me. They finding out is my worst nightmare.

Heba, who decided to interrupt an unwanted pregnancy six years ago, learned her family's opinion through the case of one relative. Consequently, when she realized she was pregnant, the only person she trusted was her boyfriend.

In my family, there is my aunt Gamila. She wanted to abort when she was forty because she already had six children and, if this pregnancy had arrived to term, it would have been her seventh. She consulted my family and they strongly opposed, but she did it anyway.

The transgression of societal prescriptions and sometimes of personal limits when an abortion happens is such that women who induce it face implications that

replicate in multi-layer levels. Even when none of the female interlocutors had to face any of the imagined penalties, fear hang about them throughout this period, aggravating the distress they already suffered. For female bodies hold regulations of sexual and reproduction purity, women are the subjects in which this potential of transgression lies. Therefore, fear is clearly gendered. Likewise, Ahmed Eldamaty's research on women 's independency in Egypt underpins the fact that uneasiness invariably rests upon female bodies: “the fear of being reported to police as disappeared, kidnapped, or even as a thief, has continued to haunt *mustaqillat*'s [independent women's] imaginaries while seeking *istiqlal* [independency], leaving them in constant status of anxiety” (2020, p. 52).

4.3 Arranging possibilities: procedures, temporalities, and topographies.

Every process of abortion is different, for there are multiple variables that enter into play: women's framework (marital status, reasons, economic situation, age, working status, etc.), chosen procedure, duration, medical assistance, or location, among others. Since my target group was young people in the middle and high wealthiest quintile, their access to abortion was positively mediated by the economic axis. Therefore, the cases collected hither do not represent the overall experiencing of abortion in Cairo. This research depicts a class group with the ultimate aim of investigating the class latitudes at which abortion is conducted and at the same time questioning the grounds that enable differential access to and experiencing of abortion. Lane et al.'s research (1998) on abortion safeness in Cairo, carried out between 1990 and 1991, showed that safeness and wealth were directly related. Their research concluded that

Wealthy women [...] can buy safety. Women with some means [...] can buy partial safety [...]. Poor women, with severely limited financial resources, cannot afford even minimum safety (1998, p. 1098).

Albeit my research was conducted three decades later, the results illustrate the validity of Lane et al.'s findings (1998): class configures the topographies, temporalities, and procedures that surround the termination process. In fact, the research foregrounds the intersection of the class and gender axes and unveils that the poorest bodies are most vulnerable to harm. Women with medium and high economic resources reduce their exposition to bodily injuries for they are able to afford the safest procedures. Wealth gives a margin of action that women can punctually use to reduce, escape or overcome some societal gender prescriptions and their consequential harm.

The surgical procedure and the abortive pills were perceived by women as the safest methods. Therefore, when the decision to terminate a pregnancy is made, female participants considered these two options. Surgical abortions are performed in private clinics by gynecologists, and usually, entail counselling and post-abortion care. It is the most expensive, but it is also considered the safest. Layla assured me that an acquaintance of hers had to pay around 30K EGP (1565 USD). Zahra, who had gone through one herself, told me that the procedure is normally around 10K (520 USD), but that in her case, for the gynecologist was a friend of her family, it cost only 5K (260 USD) because, in her words, that "is what it takes to book the room and the hospital equipment". Some independent online media have published women's abortion stories: the Egyptian Streets (2021) published a woman's testimony wherein she stated that the overall procedure had a cost of 20K EGP (1041 USD), and

Ghadeer Ahmed transcribed for Mada Masr (2020) the tale of a woman whose procedure totaled 10K EGP (520 USD). Female interlocutors that had gone through a surgical abortion generally had a better experience of the process itself. Zahra compared her experience with that of Mariam, her sister:

My sister had had two abortions, one with the pill and the other one with surgery. When she took the pill, she was eight days bleeding. I decided to have the surgery, and thank god! With the anesthesia, I didn't feel anything.

The other option among my interlocutors was the medical abortion, which is performed through pills – the intake consists of two pills, mifepristone and misoprostol. During fieldwork, I interviewed Kareem Saad, an obstetrician-gynecologist, in the clinic's office where he attends to women looking to interrupt their pregnancies. He had performed surgical abortions on two of my interlocutors, and many other participants knew him for his reputation as being one of the best abortion practitioners in Cairo. During our conversation, he explained the difficulties in getting these abortive medicaments.

The first one [mifepristone] is illegal in Egypt and the second one [misoprostol] is legal because it is used for other treatments. If ingested just the second, there is a 40% chance of miscarrying. Taking both, the probability increases up to 92%. Before I did have access to them thanks to an organization that sent them to me, but it was extremely complicated to make them reach here and I don't get them anymore.

Some gynecologists offer this abortive treatment in their clinics upon supervision and some of them are still able to provide both pills. According to Reem, when she consulted her gynecologist, the pill treatment rises 7 to 10K EGP (364 to

520 USD). However, most women do not get these pills through a specialist, rather they try to buy them by themselves. The fact that the pill is illegal makes it only available in the black market, which highly complicates its acquisition. The most mentioned problems were the inflation of the pill price and the selling of scam pills. Essam, who knows someone that can smuggle abortion pills, told me that the normal cost of these pills would be 30 EGP (1,56 USD), but the selling price can ascend up to 1020 EGP (53 USD). Namely, the price can be multiplied up to thirty times in the black market. Six years ago, Heba paid 200 EGP (10,30 USD) for them, but she believed they are now sold for 500 EGP (25,70 USD). The internet throws results of misoprostol whose prices vary from 300 EGP (16 USD), in an article of Egypt Independent (El Behary, 2016), to 1600 EGP (83 USD), in a site that delivers them at home (Pharmacia1, 2022). Women who chose pills generally had more painful memories of their abortion process. Mona, that had had two consecutive abortions, used pills in both cases.

When I first got pregnant, I got some medicines, because it is not allowed to go to the doctor or do it in any legal way. I tried many methods I even put a pill for the stomach inside the vagina [misoprostol]. I don't know how it is called... After that, after a week, I had a strong stomach ache. I thought it was because I had eaten something. I didn't know it was because of the abortion. Then I went to the doctor and he told me that there was a pregnancy, but it was gone. When I got pregnant the second time, the month after, I followed the same procedure. Well, the first time I also took some pills in my mouth [mifepristone] and I had diarrhea, a really bad one. The side effects were really bad. The second time I just took the one you put inside the vagina. It was very effective, painful but

effective. At least it was not like the first one, it was one of the worst experiences.

Even for women who pertain to wealthy families, collecting the necessary amount of money by themselves was not easy. Since asking their relatives for it was never an option, the only funding sources were: themselves, couples and friends. Examples of this net of support are the full payment by Zahra's couple of the fees for the surgical procedure and the payment by a friend of Reem of the first check to book the clinic's room.

Safeness driven by economic means comes in terms of physical health, but further permeates the body. My research reveals that Cairene women with higher economic resources can shorten the time of the procedure in addition to resorting to safer procedures, which greatly determines their experiencing of termination altogether and the subsequent impact on the person. Money does not only buy safety, but it also buys time. Once women find out they carry an unwanted pregnancy, the countdown begins. They must arrange their economic, emotional, and information resources to a single end: take a conscious decision over their pregnancy. If choosing to terminate, women's desire to complete this process as soon as possible will clash with reality. The speed by which they can accomplish inducing an abortion is economically mediated. Zahra succeeded in contracting time as much as possible thanks to her immediate availability of funds. However, that was not the case for Reem. Even when she achieved getting the termination procedure done rapidly, two months after, the medical process was still not closed. The last medical check-up was pending but Reem was postponing it due to her facing difficulties to assume the payment. Just shortly after we greeted each other the second time we met, she told me

happily: “I got my first period!” and then she continued talking meanwhile a tone of sadness gradually invaded her words.

I didn't go to the doctor yet, I need to go see that everything is ok, I had an appointment but I missed it... I just want to get over it, but it is so much stress... the money, the doctor... It is really stressful. Now I need to go see the doctor, but it is very expensive and the test is very invasive. He has to check inside me, he has to introduce [she makes the form of a stick with her hands], I don't remember the name. He has to check that everything is fine that everything went ok and that there is not any infection. But it is so expensive every time I need to go to the gynecologist. This test is 800 EGP [41,15 USD], if I need to ask something in the consult is 500 EGP [25,70 USD] and a normal check-up is 600 EGP [30,85 USD]. It is a huge financial issue, there are lots of payments. I still have to do the test and later the check-up. I got my period, but I still need to recover... It's been two months already.

The high costs of the termination procedures undesirably extend pregnancy, resulting in more pain, complications, and stress throughout an unnecessarily extended process. 'Waiting' has been identified as a power mechanism by which the state, as the guarantor of capitalist forms of reproduction, prints on the subjects of oppression (Auyero, 2012; Szwarc, & Fernández Vázquez, 2018). When I started fieldwork, I had the chance to interview Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty. To my surprise, to the question "What do women need currently during their abortion processes?", she responded "time".

They need time. They need to reduce the time in which they can get an abortion. When they face an unwanted pregnancy, they hope to finish it in

the course of a few days to a couple of weeks. But it is never like that, the process takes a lot longer. At this time, due to the social construction of the maternal bond towards the fetus, feelings of guilt and distress increase. It is a long process due to taboos, lack of information, the doctors' prejudices...

To a certain extent, money also relates to privacy. There are certain 'hotspots' where abortion-related activities are concentrated to a greater extent due to the margin of privacy they bestow. It should be noted that, since access to many of these spaces is private (own homes, hotel rooms, gynecological consultations, abortion clinics, etc.), the possibility of concealing the breaking through some rules is mediated by economic resources. Yet, the situation can be reverted, for the alleged privacy and security these places concede may turn isolation into being exposed to greater risk. Whilst the second chapter discussed how women face violence even if they meet social expectations over their sexuality, now it becomes clear women who do not are even more vulnerable to being exposed to these abuses. On the one side, women who go through clinic abortions are exposed to the professionals' abuse and therefore may face being judged, incorrectly treated, misinformed, and despised. Reem's visit to her gynecologist after she found out she was pregnant was awful, for she felt that she was being judged and misinformed. Consequently, she decided to consult another professional afterward.

I decided to go to my gynecologist, he is really open, respectful and gentle. I went there and told him I had taken a pregnancy test and that it was positive. He then made an ultrasound to check and he froze the screen to show the image to me. The doctor asked me: "what do you want to do? There are two options: the pill and the procedure. The pill is better". My

friend asked him because she had heard that the complications were worse with the pill. She also wanted to know if he would supervise the process. He answered with hostility saying that it was not true, that the pill was easier because you take it at home and forget about the rest. “Why would you want to go through surgery?”, he asked. Both treatments cost more or less the same. My friend and I realized that the clinic was full of pro-life propaganda... The doctor even had a cup saying “I deliver babies, what is your superpower?” He wasn’t making me feel comfortable. Since I told him I was pregnant, he changed his attitude completely and became hostile towards me. He told me he could help me this time as an exception, but that he wouldn’t help me if there was a second time. He told me to take a few days to think about it. Anyhow, he gave me the prescription in case I decided to do it, but there would be no supervision and I would have to take the pill by myself. With the second gynecologist was a completely different experience. My friend knew him already. He gave me all the information and informed me about the two options: medical and surgical. Besides, he told me that the other doctor had prescribed me the pill manufactured in Egypt, that only has a 30% of effectivity if it was not taken with another one.

On the other side, women who take abortion pills may face immense and prolonged pain with perhaps no medical supervision – they only resort to obstetric medical care when suffering severe complications. Heba’s termination experience exposes the harm that privacy and time inflicted on her body.

I was 20 years old, I was with my first boyfriend. I was his first, he was my first... We were having a lot of sex. Once my period was coming super late.

I took one, two, three pregnancy tests and they were all positive. I started to freak out. My boyfriend knew a doctor and we get a pill that had to be inserted inside the vagina. We went to my boyfriend's place to do it. It was early in the morning. The doctor had told him that I should hold the pill until I started bleeding. Then, I started bleeding and I was bleeding for ten days... until something little came out of me.

When women decide to induce a termination, they are at least breaking through two limits established by law and society: being sexually active for pleasure (being many women active out of the framework of wedlock, which is a major injunction) and proceeding with an abortion. Both prohibitions correspond with the productive logic women are expected to fulfill, through which their body is required to attend to the productive and reproductive necessities in the household and in the state. These prescriptions do not only materialize at the moment of their rupture, as analyzed above. Conversely, they leak every breach and collapse women's understanding of themselves, as well as their understanding of time and space. The possibilities to deploy sexual and reproductive freedom are confined to certain temporalities and spatialities and yet carried through their everyday lives. Or, in other words, women produce their daily lives aware of these physical and temporal borders, which leads them to make decisions that relate sexuality and reproduction with time and space. Thus, transgressions usually happen in concrete frameworks, which enables a pseudo-reproduction of the norms towards society.

Thus, the conceptual location of abortion in a given time and space set serves as a diluting screen that turns it into an event itself. Terminating an unwanted pregnancy is the epitome of the configuration of abortion, but it is underpinned by a

larger societal configuration. Abortion cannot be understood as a removable piece of the puzzle for its examination, that is, it cannot be understood out of its ecosystem by which it is nourished and nourishes simultaneously – the gender-based continuum, as it has been referred to before. Just like different dimensions reveal the present framework of abortion, abortion plunges its roots into all dimensions of everydayness. The construction of abortion as a detached event, set in a concrete place and time, implies understanding it as an exception, rather than a piece engrained in the whole societal machinery. Its social arrangement and access need to be understood as embedded in a continuum of experience throughout the woman's life. It responds to the gender configuration of female productivity which mediates every access of women towards their bodies for a greater purpose: the reproduction of society.

4.4 The ever under construction network: envisaging abortion otherwise.

According to their understanding of the body, interlocutors thought it was on them to take decisions upon their sex-reproductive forces and times. Women considered inducing a pregnancy right despite the social impediments and had an array of proposals aimed at shaping a better abortion landscape. Their own experiencing of abortion largely influenced the articulation of their needs. There was a general recognition that tackling abortion involved multi-layer changes that concern legal, familial, social, political, religious, sexual, and emotional arenas. For abortion to be widely accessible, participants thought that the legal and economic panorama needed to change. Illegality and exclusionary prices were seen as highly limiting safeness during the procedure. Safeness, legality, and affordability were thought of in relation, hence regarded as an enormously difficult achievement.

On the one hand, participants thought that a legal provision would have the potential to provide abortion facilities in the national health system. However, legalizing abortion was seen as an unreachable claim. According to most of them, other socio-political gains have to come before. Sex autonomy, which concerns the free exercise of sex regardless of marital status, was perhaps the most pointed out claim along with raising awareness and availability of sex education and contraceptives. As discussed before, many women face abortion as a multi-layered transgression for engaging in extramarital sex and terminating the pregnancy. The training of the collective self through sexual education was seen as an advantageous means to gain further acceptance of abortion. When she was very young, Zahra faced an abortion that could have been avoided if she had found the morning-after pill. Through her experience, she has learned the judgment it takes for a single woman to look for contraceptives. Therefore, she believes that legalizing abortion should be the main focus of our struggle, but is also aware that to get there, other achievements need to be conquered.

Abortion needs to be legal, but before that, there are lots of layers. First, sex is not allowed before marriage. So abortion is now perceived as a double infraction. Second, contraceptives should be available and varied. Currently, there is just one variety of pills and condoms. But as a girl, going to get them exposes you to judgment. Third, awareness of safe sex... But well, for now, that's a utopian future [she laughed].

On the other hand, economic access emerged also as an important matter, for everyone was aware of the exclusive price of safety, which meant sanitized equipment, well-trained professionals, confidentiality, and no unnecessary delays.

Some interlocutors had to struggle to find the financial means with which to face the procedure's payments. Others had heard stories of women that had a rough time gathering the money, resorting to more economical and hence more precarious means, or with long-lasting pains.

However, the safe-legal-affordable threesome that relies on the modern sexually trained subject needs to be thought of critically. It is worth questioning which bodies are foreseen to hold these demands as well as which bodies will fit into and benefit from such legality. Research in countries where abortion is legally permitted has shown that the possibilities for women to access abortion safely may be laden by many other factors – see for instance Arocena and Aguiar's research in Uruguay (2017), Yogi, K.C. and Neupane in Nepal (2018) or López Tomás in Spain (2020). These investigations problematize the rationale for abortion which does not solely depend on its legal legitimacy, but also on other socio-political factors, such as exclusionary constructions of legal-citizen subjects, margin center geographical relations, or physical and social environments. Considering such hindrances, legalization advocates argued that this path would open a critical breach to start providing abortion facilities nationwide.

Participants generally thought that universal safety throughout the procedure could only be guaranteed by a system that shelters health-quality assistance to every woman who wants to induce an abortion. The government was considered the sole institution with the potential means to offer access to safety nationwide. Nonetheless, the state, as a regulatory institution of the gendered productive and reproductive forces, does not gather any trust from the women who strive to achieve a change in the sexual and reproduction landscape, let alone in guaranteeing safe access to

abortion.

The abandonment of the women who abort reveals the state's disciplinary function, for the bodies that do not belong to the state construction of the being are exposed to an indoctrinating vulnerability. This aggressive abandonment, Povellini argues, takes away from women "a temporal horizon of a future perspective" (2011, p. 61), a future wherein their current sufferings as well as the social fabric that holds them remain unaltered. She continues to argue that paradigms of abandonment create an intersection of two converging realities – for this research, women's reappropriation of their bodies and the state's surveillance of the functioning of the social forces of reproduction –, where "the harms done within these brackets narratively disappear, and social worlds are abandoned to their own means of making their way— their own means of making the world work" (2011, p. 96). Women seek a complete rearranging of the structures that hold their present, thus they do not trust the government, which erases their experiences by silencing the injuries it has itself inflicted, to perform the change.

In order to overcome systemic abandonment, women work in constructing more solid emotional support networks. Since most women face this process alone or, perhaps, accompanied by a friend or their couple, a common claim was the necessity of knitting emotional networks of support and accompaniment. The decision-making process, the abortion procedure, and the aftermath are exhausting; they produce physical pain, psychological distress, and negative emotions (culpability, embarrassment, irresponsibility, confusion, low self-esteem, etc.). Given that women usually face these hardships alone, they aim at having more solid networks of information, support, and trust which would ease the process. Reem devised

accompaniment as a change that would potentially ameliorate the experience of going through a termination. She perceived it not only in terms of physical presence but also considered crucial social and academic engagement to achieve a real turnaround.

More research needs to be done on the process of abortion: before, during and after. We need to investigate how the woman would feel more comfortable and safe. It would be good to have some steps to follow.

Research needs to prove what is good for them. There should definitely be more advice and more counseling during the whole process to make the experience of abortion less difficult and less traumatic. I don't want to say more pleasant, but more helpful for them.

Ghadeer Ahmed Eldamaty, who has compiled many stories of women that have undergone abortions in Egypt, spoke in our meeting about the loneliness that permeates the abortion process due to its trait of lawlessness. Her research, writing, and disseminating project envisages women no longer feeling such isolation by means of knowing about other women who have had similar experiences, similar doubts, and similar fears. The second time I met up with Reem, she spoke about the importance of the relationships that held her throughout the abortion process.

I don't know what I would have done without my friends. Everyone was with me, they were all very helpful. They came with me to the appointments, wrote down everything, marked the calendar... They were all very helpful. I would not have been to do it without them. They were willing to help [...].

Yet, Reem's will to share this moment with her close friends and the wide support she received was not usual. The other female interlocutors preferred little or no people to know about it, and just some of them started sharing it with other people

after a long while. Therefore, a very expressed desire is a better experience of accompaniment, which involves health practitioners and inner circles. The most common was Zahra's experience, who decided to go through the process silently fearing being judged and hoping it to end as soon as possible.

When I found out I was pregnant, I didn't tell anyone, just my boyfriend and my best friend. We are a big group of friends, the ones you met the other day at the party: Reem, Omar, Huda... In general, being sexually active is accepted in our circles, if you are careful and protect yourself, if you have safe sex. But if you get pregnant, that could bring more prejudice... for being irresponsible, for having such a glitch...

Personal initiatives develop to cover women's unmet need for information, accompaniment, and safeness. As Szwarc and Fernández Vázquez (2018) pointed out, women do not wait patiently for the state to attend to their claims, they become active agents in the current configuration of the abortion experiences, breaking with the naturalized reproductive logic. Through fieldwork, I became aware of an already operating network that runs through the existence of abortion. Access to this network is quite slippery since its end is providing information about and support in the abortion process without compromising the people involved. This network is knitted across close contacts (immediate acquaintances who support women by giving them any kind of help, e.g., a contact, the pills, a website name, emotional care, etc.) and emerging contacts (people relevant in and for the process who appear throughout the process itself). Some participants were directly involved and carried out different ways to provide assistance to women in termination processes for they resolutely believed women are entitled to take such a decision over their reproduction. My

conversation with Essam moved along the struggle for the Egyptian youth to reach bodily autonomy in the sexual and reproductive realms from social institutions, and the socio-biological differences between men and women to face this struggle.

Having heard terrible stories of female friends that have resorted to abortion clinics, he has managed to be able to get abortion pills from a doctor that smuggles them and provides them to his friends when needed. Aware of the high rate of success of these pills, Essam acknowledged that one of the greatest difficulties is the psychological outcome, for many women face this process alone.

Some doctors make abortion operations secretly, but the experiences there are really bad: a low quality, a lot of side effects... these places are known for being dirty... A friend had a bad experience in this situation, a very bad experience. I have a doctor that offers me abortion pills, I did that two or three times. The pills work well, but the psychological effects can be terrible, especially because sometimes the guy doesn't take the responsibility they should. Besides, none of my friends has shared their experiences, it is a shame.

Youssef, who graduated in medicine from a private university ten years ago, does not currently practice his profession, instead, he runs his own marketing company. If necessary, he performs abortions himself, though he thinks women should resort to gynecological clinics of exercising doctors in the first place. Whereas Youssef admitted that clinics are safer, he was also aware that women cannot always access to them due to financial and pregnancy time requirements.

I have myself unofficially performed abortions. Lots of people need them... and I am a medicine graduate, so I practice them myself. I know doctors who do it on a full scale, no matter the time of the pregnancy.

Other religious doctors only do it until the sixth week, otherwise, they wouldn't perform it. There are others who do it until the third month. Of course, all of this happens off the record, in private clinics, and it is very expensive. [...] I did not intentionally decide to start performing abortions. Someone comes and asks and, what are you going to do? I can help. Besides, I think ending a pregnancy is not wrong. The right thing to do is to help someone. I already knew some doctors that work with prostitutes and help them get abortions. Also, they work with other women. This is how I realized I could do it myself. There is a friend, who asks a friend and then another friend... and this is how they reach me. I always refer the women that reach me to doctors, it is safer in a clinic. I offer myself as a last resort. I'm not licensed anymore. Besides, it's a crime and it's dangerous.

Kareem Saad is an obstetrician-gynecologist trained in Great Britain who currently exercises in a private clinic in an outer top-notch neighborhood of Cairo. The conversation took place in his office, where Kareem presented a confident tone and discourse, that of someone that has been many times interviewed. Shortly after we finished the presentations, he got right into talking about abortion.

Three scenarios can happen: failure in the contraceptive method, non-use of a method, or a pregnancy resulting from rape. Whichever the scenario is, women must be able to access abortion. I always ask them if their decision to terminate is due to social or biological reasons, in order to better counsel them. I perform surgical abortions because medical abortion requires the intake of two pills, and one of them is not available in Egypt. It does not matter to me if they have one partner or several, if

they are married or not, or if they tell me the truth about their situation.

They are women free to enjoy their sexuality and decide over their bodies.

I do not judge them.

This networking system which develops in the online and offline realms has an informal and indefinite nature. The network's trait of vagueness and regeneration allows its existence beyond the reach of normative power forces. Concreteness would attract unwanted attention towards the people involved in maintaining the availability of abortion procedures. It should be noted that social media stands as an important actor enabling women to reach information and support. Anonymity for women who seek an abortion is secured through resorting to their inner circle and to the internet, mostly to Facebook groups. Social media activists work to maintain this network at the same time they ensure their safety. They do so by hiding their real names, not exposing their opinions completely, and pushing from abroad. As an online sexual rights activist, Layla was familiar with the nature of the abortion network and the people that work in sustaining it.

There is an informal network, and it is mostly women that decide to support each other. But there is not a sense of community such as the LGTB community. The LGTB community has access to resources, support... Concerning abortion, there are millions of women all around Egypt, but their connections are very informal. Female activists, especially those on social media, are sometimes approached by others. Women that support abortion don't do so publicly. Of course, there are risks associated, it is a high-risk environment. You need to take maximum security precautions. Many women who use platforms don't say such things explicitly. Yet people would rightly assume they can turn to these

women for information. I was present on social media and if someone asked me, I would give her vague indications, you don't want to put other people at risk. Some women have decided to do activism publicly, but still is something really informal. If a woman is lucky enough to know a friend that can ask, that's the best. There are some Facebook groups for independent women who have decided to live on their own. It is very informal... There are lots of ways to access this informal. But there are not any organized groups accessible to women yet.

Guided by personal experiences, possibilities, and beliefs, all these interlocutors set the grounds for enabling the existence of an otherwise abortion, beyond societal and legal regulations. Personal initiatives weave the available networks and end up establishing grassroots systems of assistance and accompaniment. The configuration of an imaginary otherwise takes root in these particular actions. Participants perceived themselves as individuals whose body is autonomous, free, and independent, which translates into their will to embody these notions at the personal and collective levels. This collective representation of bodily sovereignty aims at displacing normative power from sexual and reproductive decisions in order to perform individual decisions.

Women envisage a comprehensive transfiguration of the current panorama where their desires, performances, and subjectivities fit in. Interlocutors are aware that the current sociopolitical fabric is not elastic to comprise alternative sexual and reproduction choices, therefore they place their hopes in certain agents to perform these changes along with them whilst discarding the participation of others. In their research on clandestine abortion in Argentina, Szwarc, and Fernández Vázquez

(2018) argued that the existence of these networks proves the simultaneity of records and existing realities around abortion. On the one hand, there are spaces in which the clandestine nature of abortion is reproduced, and on the other, practices and discourses that enable the word, break the stigma and contribute to building new imaginaries (Szwarc & Fernández Vázquez, 2018). The interconnection of these two spheres happens in the social realm, for both spheres take meaning from it to articulate their practices at the same they give meaning to it through the practices, rearranging the gender-based continue from where they emerge.

Alternative ways of inhabiting the body and experiencing the self are enabled by converging social agents: activists on media platforms, women enjoying their sexuality whatsoever, women choosing their reproductive timing, and people sustaining these otherwise possibilities. Trust networks happen on a small scale, with every person having a very limited number of close people whom to trust. However, the thread that connects all these people is extensive, creating a vast network that quietly extends throughout the social fabric. Hence, all of them inform an emerging, consolidating, and rearranging web that crisscrosses Cairo. People that are involved in this research are a meaningful part of it. Participants strive to embody their understanding of bodily autonomy which takes shape in a certain class context and from which they seize in order to accomplish it. Performing their ideal of freedom, they are paving the way for other people to do it. Alternative practices present new possibilities of living.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Nawal is the last person I met with for this research. She sent me a message on Facebook replying to my call for participants and suggested meeting at her place. She prepared us tea and we installed ourselves on the apartment's rooftop where we spoke for more than two hours. It was a bright day in February and the weather was mild. We had left the bustle of Cairo far away from us, at least 20 meters below our feet, to hold a calm and in-depth conversation. Nawal is a thirty-four-year-old independent woman living with two other flatmates in Garden City, a wealthy residential neighborhood close to the city center. She lived between Lebanon and Egypt all her life until she decided to definitely move to Cairo eight years ago where she works now as a screenwriter. She was once married, and remembers that period fondly, as figuring things out with his husband who was also her best friend. The divorce came when they realize they were looking for different things in life. After talking about marriage, we got onto the topic of abortion. Her personal experience in the topic is broad: in addition to her own interruptions of pregnancy, she has been confronted with abortion on many other occasions. She spoke reflectively, very calmly, pausing to meditate on her sentences.

My mum used to be a gynecologist and she found abortion ethically bad. She would say about others: "He makes abortions, can you believe it?" For her, it was the worst a gynecologist could do. Everyone is against abortion. I had a friend who was struggling economically and she got pregnant with

her fourth child. I told her “why don’t you have an abortion?” She said: “No!” She wouldn’t even think of it. I know another woman who was having a really hard time in her marriage and she got pregnant with her third kid. Even her doctor offered her an abortion and she refused! People consider it a big sin and think god would not help them anymore if they do it. Most people think it is killing a person. Everyone is against it, especially men, because they don’t bear the burden, the stigma... I don’t think it’s a bad thing, especially if it is early. It is fine for both, the mother and the child: fine for her to abort a child she cannot raise and fine him, since his life is not still a life. Why is she supposed to give birth to a life she is not able to take care of? So, I’m not against it... Indeed, I had three abortions... The first two were in 2004 and 2007, I was still very young then. The last one was in 2016, just before I got married. I could have tried to move up the wedding so it would have seemed that I got pregnant through marriage. But I didn’t want kids at that moment, I wanted to focus on my marriage and see if things worked out or not. I didn’t want to enter into marriage pregnant. Until now I am not really sure if all these times I was pregnant or if I was just confused. All these times, my period was one week late, not even one or two months. Maybe I was just anxious, I don’t know... One of them, it was obvious that I was pregnant because there was a change in my hormones. The other two times, maybe I was just panicking. Maybe if I waited, I would have known it. I took the test, I remember I took the test, but I can’t remember if it was positive. The two first times, I went to a private clinic during a workday, early in the morning so no one could see it. It’s really illegal. The third time it was in a

hospital and I was admitted as a married woman. Still, it was illegal, but we managed to do it. Right now I'm not disturbed talking about it, but back at that time, I would have been uneasy sharing it.

Nawal's testimony comprises the embodiment of time for a female-gendered body, both time as an accumulation of bodily experiences and time as different stages throughout the abortion procedure. Her first idea of abortion being forged during her childhood through her mother. Her father encouraging her brother to have sex before marriage but forbidding it for Nawal. She suffering harassment after having started her sex life. Her friends adding to her understanding of abortion by means of rejection. She redefining herself as more than a woman. Nawal facing three abortions in the time span of twelve years. Truth to tell, her period being delayed three times and she rushing to avoid it being a pregnancy. She not having time to confirm it. She entering into marriage prioritizing the couple's well-being. She ending up the marriage after four years. She being able to talk about her abortion experiences long after they happened.

The body.

Pursuing to understand the gendered embodiment of time, I became aware that sexuality, reproduction, parenthood, and abortion were inextricably related in their apprehension. The apprehension of these four matters which is fragmentary, altering, and fluid is ultimately framed in the larger sociopolitical landscape. Fieldwork illuminated the fact that this landscape abides by principles of social (re)productivity which leak through regulative prescriptions of societal order. These prescriptions, strongly ingrained in the sex, marriage, and conceiving arenas, are molded by

standards of collectivity, morality, and purity. In the same way that regulatory understandings of the self are embodied, so are the claims and oppositions to these regulations. In the course of fieldwork, I realized that the Cairene youth is continuously carrying out a political statement through their bodies when performing their sexual, reproductive, parenting, and abortion needs. They try to delink themselves from social institutions they consider somehow not desirable and navigate the possibilities of an otherwise putting their body and emotions into it. In this regard, one of the thesis inputs is the emotional and bodily approach to the everyday worlds of the Cairene middle-upper classes through a gender perspective. That is, the thesis illuminates how class and gender prescriptions differently leak into male and female bodies and hence stir differences in the emotional everydayness. Female participants brought in how fear, anxiety, tiredness, trauma, and pain have a steady presence in their navigation of daily life.

There is a feeling of encircling observance that reaches every sphere and movement. Participants feel their moves are ceaselessly surveilled and called into question, especially women. Surveillance does not only happen in people's inner circles (acquittances and personal networks) but everywhere. Not being caught then becomes a thoughtful navigation of available resources. Transgressing the norms of social respectability is generally perceived as activating punishment. However, fieldwork revealed this is not the case. People are punished before the transgression in order to remind them they do not freely dispose of their bodies. This disciplinary mechanism is clearly gendered given that women's bodies allocate social reproduction and reproductive labor. Consequently, punishment especially applies to women. Social institutions (family, state forces, health care professionals, etc.) deploy

all their means to hamper the process of subjective delinking from gender-productive roles. The thesis discloses that, by breaking through sexual, marital, reproductive, and parental prescriptions women do not merely elude the norm but more importantly redefine the significance of 'woman' itself.

The network.

The youth endeavors to redefine their position in society by giving a new significance to the self. The struggle heads towards detaching the person from the normative collective self and redefining the sense of collectivity. Participants do not want their identities to be attached to their social productivity roles but rather to their personal characteristics. A remarkable finding of this thesis is that the youth identity-redefining movement is back and forth. The individual subject detaches from the large social community and, from its individuality, establishes new ties with other members. In other words, the community is no longer perceived as to be conformed by the given set of social actors, but rather by a chosen network of solidarity, collaboration and support that enables the production of a self who freely performs its sexual desires and reproductive needs. This new form of collectivity is performed in everyday practices of solidarity, understanding and companionship.

As a matter of a fact, it is this network that underpins the current existence of abortion. Emotional networks of support and accompaniment sustain the process: friends, sexual and reproductive health online activists, unofficial pill providers, abortion practitioners, and all people involved somehow in the process. Women that had gone through a termination procedure stressed the logistical and emotional importance of such supporting figures. These figures are crucial in shaping the

meaning of abortion as it is also through them that it is realizable.

Sustained over the societal fabric, the configuration of sexuality, reproduction, and parenting is ultimately played over women's bodies. So does abortion, even more meaningfully. Consciously deciding to terminate a pregnancy is a clear rupture. Aborting shatters the societal construction of the woman for it breaks through all societal prescriptions attached to it. Since it enables women to reappropriate their reproductive and productive times (sexuality and conception), abortion collapses the female line of production and the never-ending cycle of reproduction.

Last goal being romanticizing abortion, this thesis pushes for understanding that the gendered social frame allocating steady productivity on female bodies becomes radically disrupted when an abortion happens. The fact that putting a conscious end to a pregnancy means such a break-through shapes a whole imaginary around it based on absence and pain. Absence of such records, absence of such existence, absence of such women. Thus, abortion becomes inconceivable, pushed into the realm of the unthinkable. One-third of Cairene women have tried to interrupt a pregnancy (Dabash & Roudi-Fahimi, 2008) and there is barely any record of that – except a few accounts that are emerging over recent years. Due to the hierarchical ordering of bodies in the political realm, there are some knowledges, experiences, harms, words, and ways of inhabiting the world that become systematically erased or invisibilized. Neglecting women's experiences forces them to disappear from the intelligible realm and enables the perpetuation of the current system of oppression and exploitation. Abortion was the main issue that this thesis initially pretended to unravel and the reason that brought me to this topic was the lack of current investigation. Since the beginning of the research, the goal was not merely to

reanimate the debate over abortion nor even to understand its social meaning. More importantly, what motivated the topic choice was fighting against women's oblivion.

Abortion in Cairo exists. Women who abort in Cairo exist. They redefine the logic of time. They redefine the hetero-reproductive rationality. They redefine the meaning of woman. They had one abortion, as Mona, or more, as Mariam. They do not want children now, as Heba; they do not want more children, as Gamila, or they don't want children at all, as Nawal. They defray abortion costs with their own economic resources, as Mona, or with financial help, as Zahra. They go through the procedure in a clinic's room, as Nawal, or they do it in a house, as the women Youssef assists. They abort with pills, as Essam's friends, or with surgery, as Kareem Saad's clients. They squeeze time, as Zahra, or decompress it, as Reem.

Abortion exists in every woman that decides not to carry the pregnancy to term. Women are the ones that ultimately enable abortion with and through their bodies and emotions. There is no single way to have an abortion. Some axes intersect and many others do not. Women in Cairo make it exist in multiple forms.

They counter the narrative.

They perform an alternative.

They envisage an otherwise.

They are other ways of aborting.

They are other ways of women.

They are an otherwise.

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