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Poverty, Job Quality and Labor Market Dynamics

When there is “No Respect” at Work:  
Job Quality Issues for Women in  
Egypt’s Private Sector

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## Abstract

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Egypt has one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world. Based on ethnographic research, this paper argues that women in Egypt, particularly young women, face job quality issues that discourage them from continuing to work or even entering the labor market. The paper highlights women's, particularly young women's, valorization of jobs in the public sector and with the government, even if untenable. We discuss the advantages presented by the public sector in Egypt, why those jobs are valorized by women, and the strategies young women adopt in clinging to the hope of getting a public sector/government job. We also examine the reasons young women present for their limited labor market participation. The paper argues that these reasons are primarily related to job quality issues and the lack of decent work in the predominantly informal private sector in Egypt.

## Introduction

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Despite the increasing prevalence of female education, Egypt continues to have one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world. A recent report by the World Economic Forum (WEF) ranks Egypt 120th out of 128 countries in terms of gender gap, with Egypt achieving one of its worst rankings in women's economic participation (WEF, 2008:18). The story of women's wage employment in modern Egypt is one of supportive policies in the middle of the twentieth century, in the form of a guaranteed employment scheme, followed by economic restructuring in the mid-1990s, and other globalization trends. The stagnation of public sector hiring as part of structural adjustment policies has had a negative impact on women's labor market participation (Assaad, 2006a). In the absence of jobs in this relatively women-friendly sector, they face a number of job-quality issues in the private sector that are central to women's limited labor market participation.

Job quality issues have recently attracted the attention of researchers on employment. Central to the analysis in this paper is the notion of decent work, introduced by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1999. In contrast to the traditional focus on employment status, wages, and hours worked, more recent research attempts to critically examine the quality of the work experience in light of this notion. These new developments brought to the fore the different forms of job security, as well as less

tangible issues of “freedom, equity, security and human dignity” (ILO, 1999). Furthermore, the ILO identifies decent work as involvement in productive work in which rights are protected, an adequate income is generated, and with adequate social protection. It also means sufficient work, in the sense that all should have full access to income-earning opportunities.

This study seeks to provide an ethnographic account of the job quality of poor young females in the private sector in Egypt. We argue in this paper that women in Egypt, particularly young women, face job quality issues that discourage them from continuing to work or even entering the labor market. The paper highlights women’s, particularly young women’s, valorization of jobs in the public sector and the government, even if untenable. We discuss the advantages presented by the public sector in Egypt, why those jobs are valorized by women, and the strategies young women adopt in clinging to the hope of getting a public sector/government job. We also examine the reasons young women present for their limited labor market participation. The paper argues that these reasons are primarily related to job quality issues and the lack of decent work in the predominantly informal private sector in Egypt.

## 1. Research Methodology

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This study is based on ethnographic field methods of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Focusing on job quality issues, the study sought to highlight women’s perceptions and views about job quality and subjectivities. This approach helps elucidate the less tangible aspects of job quality particularly relating to the decent work aspects of “freedom, equity, security and human dignity.” Qualitative research typically seeks in-depth and intimate information about a smaller group of people with the objective of learning about how and why they behave, think, and make meaning as they do. Qualitative research spans the micro-macro spectrum and taps on both structural and processual issues (Amert et al, 1995:880).

Interviews took the approach of following the career path of the informant, taking the life history approach. Interviews sought to combine what happens at home with what happens at school and work. The life histories approach does not just involve the individual being interviewed but explores the overarching social and economic structures that define the life trajectory of the informant (Bertaux, 1982). Life histories also allow us to understand evolutionary processes instead of leaning on a snapshot of

the present. In life histories, it is not isolated lives of the individuals that are the focus of analysis but the individual embedded in social relationships and structures. In this way, the analysis would eschew a view of culture as a monolithic phenomenon, but as process of continuity, change, and conflict that is played in the lives of these women. By listening to people's meanings and the interpretations, we follow a longstanding ethnographic tradition that is best described by Perin (1977:23) as "giving beliefs the status of data."

The focus group discussions were conducted in April 2008 in the governorate of Minya, and included 15 young women working in small enterprises (clothing stores, an eye-glass shop, an auto spare parts shop, grocery and confectionary stores, hairdressers, tailor, lawyer's office, book-store, etc.). Data collection also involved in-depth interviews with eight women working in the private sector in Egypt, and one woman working with a contract in the government. Interviews with a non-governmental organization advocating for the rights of shop workers have also been very useful in providing some background information for this study. They also provided our team with the data they collected from shop clerks and shop owners, which helped us gain the perspective of this group.

Survey data on women's labor market participation has been embedded in the analysis to provide the overarching social and economic structures in which these informants make choices. Labor market participation data is based on the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS), which was fielded in 2006 covering a nationally representative sample of 8,360 households. The first round of this panel survey took place in 1998 covering a nationally representative sample of 4,816 households. The second round was conducted in 2006 including follow-up on the panel sample, split households formed by individuals who were part of the earlier sample, and a refresher sample of 2,500 households.<sup>1</sup>

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## 2. Women's Work in Egypt: an Overview

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It has been widely asserted that the socialist policies of the 1952 coup d'état have been a major driving force for the expansion of education in Egypt and women's participation in the waged labor market. The

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1 For a detailed description of the dataset and the data collection methodology, please refer to Ba - soum (2007). Survey data is housed at the Population Council's West Asia and North Africa Office in Cairo.

promulgation of higher education as a free right to all Egyptians in 1962 followed by the guaranteed public sector/government employment scheme in the same year significantly increased secondary education enrollment for both males and females (McDonald, 1986). Between 1961 and 1974, the percentage of females in the student body of universities leaped from 16.3% to 30.4% (Supreme Council of Universities, 1998). Dore (1976:2–3) notes that the expansion of education in the 1960s was the ticket to escaping poverty by joining the modern sector, white collar jobs which steadily paid more than additional jobs. Education was, and still is, perceived as the only visa to the tiny bridgehead of the modern sector. Assaad (1997) notes that the guaranteed employment scheme initiated a generation-held culture of seeking minimum education (vocational secondary) to secure public sector and government hiring.

Women's employment in the public and private sectors has been directly affected by the implementation of economic reforms and structural adjustment in the past two decades. The following table illustrates data on women's labor market participation in Egypt for those aged 18–60. We chose to start with the age of 18 as a marker for those who finished secondary education and are ready to join the labor market especially in urban areas. We chose the age of 60 as this is the official retirement age in Egypt.

## Gender Disparity in Labor Market Participation for the Age Group 18–60

Sector/Employment Status	% within Population			% among the Employed		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Government Employment	18.5	9.0	13.7	22.8	37.3	26.2
Public Enterprise Employment	4.7	0.6	2.6	5.8	2.5	5.0
Formal Private Sector Wage Employment	9.5	1.4	5.4	11.7	5.7	10.3
Informal Private Sector Wage Employment	15.4	2.1	8.7	19.0	8.6	16.6
Irregular Wage Workers	7.5	0.5	3.9	9.2	1.9	7.5
Household Enterprise Worker	16.4	7.9	12.1	20.3	33.0	23.2
Self-employed	9.1	2.7	5.8	11.2	11.1	11.2
Total % of all those currently working	81.0	24.0	52.2	100.0	100.0	100.0
Unemployed	4.0	5.6	4.8			
Students (out of the labor force)	6.9	6.1	6.5			
Non-Students (out of the labor force)	8.1	64.2	36.5			
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0			

Source: ELMPS06 survey data 

The table clearly shows women's limited labor market participation. Only one quarter of females partake in some form of employment. The government is the largest sector employing women in Egypt, comprising of 13.7% of the total female population and more than half of the employed females. The public sector constitutes more than one third of women nationally employed (39.8%). Comparatively, the private sector (formal and informal) is the largest employer of men, with over 30% being employed there. This is a vast difference, as women who work in the private sector are on the minority side, constituting about 14% in the age group (18–60) in both the formal and informal sectors. Hence, this demonstrates that despite the shrinking of the public sector, it continues to be the most desirable sector for female employment. Conversely, the



expanding private sector is quickly absorbing a high percentage of men who are more willing to be employed in this sector. The second largest employment sector for women is in household enterprises (almost one quarter). A significant number of women are household enterprise workers (33%), which generally consists of unpaid labor in a family business. On the other hand, men are seven times more likely to engage in irregular wage work than women. The percentage of men and women are both equally self-employed (11%), although men who are self-employed represent over three times the population.

In terms of unemployment, according to Assaad (2006), 18.6% of women nationally are unemployed, compared to just 4.7% of males. Moreover, as the table indicates, there are very high out-of-the-labor-force rates for women, with the vast majority of women (64.2%) not studying nor looking for employment. This translates into a very clear message that most women are consciously choosing to remain out of the labor force all together.

Research has provided a number of explanations for women's limited labor market participation in Egypt. Religious and cultural factors have been highlighted by many as having a significant impact on participation. Abu Nasr et al. (1985:6, 31) give primary attention to the value system of *sharaf/ird* (honor) in explaining women's limited labor participation in the Arab world. They argue that family honor depends on the conformity of females to "modesty codes" of gender segregation, parental surveillance, early marriage, and rigid female gender roles. Such codes restrict the activities of females to the domestic domain. Taking a similarly culturalist approach, a number of researchers have related limited female labor participation to kin-ordered patriarchal and agrarian structures (for example, Kandiyoti, 1991; Moghadam, 1993). The patriarchal family is defined as a kinship-based unit in which members have clearly-defined roles arranged by age and gender. Within this setup, women are economically dependent upon the males who provide for them. Such a patriarchal contract can be urbanized and nuclearized, but remains epitomized in the division of labor between the male breadwinner and the female caregiver.

Hoodfar (1999:15) takes issues with this culturalist approach noting that the focus on gender ideology and the role of Islam reflects an unrealistic vision of the Middle East and Muslims as living in the realm of ideology and religion while the rest of the world lives within the economic structure. Instead, she calls for a household-based analysis that looks at individual economic behavior in the context of the household. Because of women's complex roles and responsibilities as mothers and

wives, the supply of female labor cannot be explained solely in terms of individual strategies.

Inversely, Moghadam (2001) argues that it was the economic conditions, specifically the oil boom of the 1970s, that made it unnecessary for women to work outside the home and thus restricted the supply of their labor. This situation enforced patriarchal notions of man as the only breadwinner and women as the domestic caregivers. Karshenas and Moghadam (2001) further argue that the oil boom came at a crucial time interrupting the transformation process of the Egyptian economy from a traditional agricultural economy to a large-scale urbanized economy. Assaad (2002) offers an alternative explanation to the impact of the 1970s oil boom on women's work. He notes that the oil boom did not affect the supply side of female labor as much as it affected the demand for their labor. Oil-related revenues distorted the structure of the economy by increasing jobs in sectors that are traditionally male-dominated non-tradable sectors such as construction work and services. These revenues also reduced the international competitiveness of tradable industries that are traditionally dominated by females. These are labor-intensive export-oriented manufacturing industries (Joekes, 1987). Moreover, opportunities outside the government are highly segmented across gender lines. Assaad and Arntz (2005:441) identify only nine job types capturing 95% of female nongovernmental paid work. Clerical work, teaching, and domestic service were the major three occupational fields for women. They further show that these limited fields for women are being further de-feminized, comparing survey data of 1988 and 1998, due to the surplus of male job seekers. The overcrowding of women into a limited number of job fields places a downward pressure on their wages.

In the context of economic development, it is becoming increasingly difficult to define traditional gender roles and balance women's place within the economic market. However, Karshenas (2001) asserts that it is undeniable that gender is an integral element in understanding the evolution and predicament of the labor market. For the purpose of this paper, the predominant factor highlighted are issues of job quality, however, we explore how this fits in with the underlying norms and cultural context that encompass Egyptian women in order to accurately examine the factors that constrain women's participation in the labor force.

### 3. Job Quality Issues for Young Women in Egypt

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We argue in this paper that women's limited labor force participation can be explained through focusing on job quality issues. Acker (1990) reminds us that relations within the workplace are primarily gendered and that organizations cannot be studied as gender-neutral sites. Acker further reminds us that symbols of gender, processes of gender identity, and material inequalities between men and women play a major role in defining workplace relations and even the structure of the labor market.


Women interviewed as part of this study have highlighted a number of issues that are primarily gender-specific. These primarily relate to working conditions that women seek in through a government job. Central to interviewed women are issues of respect and decent treatment by employers, who are predominately male. Also of paramount importance to interviewed women was their fear of sexual harassment and its associations with job place suitability, and notions of chastity, morality, and an honorable reputation. The problematic effects of long working hours for women, not only legally, but in the framework of the double burden undertaken by women in the region, are essential to women's workplace suitability. We also examine the conditions of women working for low pay, gender wage gaps in the workplace, and social security issues in the context of benefits, and the presence of contractual agreements between employees and employers.

While we discuss each of these issues separately for analytical purposes, they are all inter-related in the framework of analyzing job quality issues for women in the private sector. We find that the stagnation of public sector hiring, and the many barriers facing women in the private sector, create a situation in which women are left with the choice of either waiting for a public job to open up or to join the crowded private sector. Such crowding has led to deteriorating work conditions in the private sector. In either case, many young women continue to hold onto the dream of getting a public sector job.

#### 3.1 "No Respect" and "No Trust" in the Workplace

Young women employed in the private sector in Egypt highlight the fact that less tangible issues related to the way they are treated by employers are central to their assessment of their working conditions. While interviewing young women, the issue of "respect" came out very strongly

in the discourse of working females. Some of these employees had some level of education such as vocational secondary school diplomas and even higher education certificates.

 *important for one to feel respected at work. There is no trust and there is no respect [at work].* (Nadia, focus group discussion [FGD] in Minya, April '08)

The notion of “respect” needs to be deconstructed. It pertains to a number of intangible issues such as treatment of employees and of discussing work issues, particularly in front of strangers. Sherine, a shop assistant in a pharmacy in Cairo, notes:

*There are problems. Like when he [the employer] yells at me in front of customers. This upsets me very much. I once gave the keys back to him and said I wasn't coming again. He called me and apologized, but it keeps happening.*

*We were in a staff meeting; he [the employer] got angry during the meeting and said out loud, “If you don't like it here, the door is large enough to get a donkey through.” I didn't like being insulted like this. I quit.* (Sherine, January '09)

Decent treatment is expressed by women and girls in focus group discussions as the minimal rights they are hoping to claim at their job. Young women described situations where they were reprimanded or scolded for minor mistakes. According to one NGO staff member working in the field of workers' rights:

*Respect and decent treatment is the most important wish for working girls. If they get it, they would not consider quitting.* (Hala, Minya, April '08)

Informants connect a number of work-related problems to the notion of “respect.” One of the major concerns voiced in interviews is when the employer asks them to take care of menial tasks such as cleaning the workplace or preparing tea/coffee for a guest or for the employer. For many young women, particularly those who come from poor families, education is perceived as the ticket to escape menial work. Menial work is connected with low return on education and is considered demeaning for an educated woman, even if all the education she has is secondary school education. The following quote confirms the indignation that young women feel when asked to perform menial tasks on the job:

*The owner used to respect me; he saw my style, my dress, and that I had a degree... However, his relative who worked with him asked me to make tea. I refused. There has to be a janitor for this. I can't clean. The bathroom was dirty... what would make me accept all this? My father taught us to have dignity (karama); we would not humiliate ourselves for money (al-'irsh).* (Barsoum, 2004:67)

The above quote is by a woman with a university degree. Asking her to prepare tea for a male colleague is disrespectful in her view. The request diffuses lines of propriety in relation to the value of education as a divider between menial and intellectual work. Being asked to clean or prepare tea is seen as diffusing this rule and as a devaluation of her as an educated woman with a university degree. The above quote also shows the pressures caused by the type of the workplace and its cleanliness. Her mention of issues of *karama* (dignity) highlights the indignation she feels for being asked to clean the office.

Also related to *karama* and dignity is when a sales clerk is asked to pay for damaged merchandise, even if she is not responsible for this damage. For shop owners, this measure seeks to ensure that employees are diligent in dealing with merchandise. For sales clerks, this measure implicates them as dishonest. They mention this issue in the context of lack of trust and respect. Having them pay for lost or broken merchandise is seen by young women as a sign of distrust. Of course, the cost of the merchandise leads to deductions from their already meager salaries.

Another concern is when female employees are asked to not only clean the shop but to also clean the employer's house, his car, or buy him food to eat during the day or for his family. As odd as these requests might sound, female workers in focus group discussions and in interviews mention incidents of this nature as common. These are described by female shop workers as "silly" requests. These tasks show that employers extend the role of these sales clerks as personal helpers and even domestic workers.

Ill-treatment and the "silly" requests are an exercise of power. They are a manifestation of structural inequalities along class and gender lines. In all interviewed cases when there is a mention of disrespectful behavior, the employer is a male from a higher socio-economic background. The female employee is from a poorer family. The structure of many private firms can be of a predominately patriarchal nature. Elson and Pearson (1981) claim that many industries operate on a hierarchic managerial basis. Thus, relations of power are more complex in a private workplace, as one graduate describes it, noting that the employer behaves "as if he has bought me."

Furthermore, images of slavery and exploitation are recurring themes in graduates' discourse in describing jobs in the private sector. According to Philips and Taylor (1980), such a system of production may be a bearer of gender. Conventionally, part of the capitalist labor process involves the giving of orders (defined as the male prerogative), while the performance of orders is acknowledged as a woman's role (Elson and Pearson, 1981:98). Even more so, the hierarchy of organizations such as factories are structured so that there are higher levels of managers and supervisors controlling the lower level of workers. Numerous studies have revealed that the higher levels of the hierarchy are predominately male positions, while the lowest level is almost always comprised of young females. In Egypt, however, the socio-economic status of the families of graduates plays an important role in defining such relations of power. These social structural differences are at the heart of issues of respect and *karama*, and are also a manifestation of gender-based violence in the workplace.

### 3.2 Fear of Sexual Harassment at Work

Sexual harassment is a stark manifestation of women's power disadvantage in a workplace (Gruber, 1998). In a society that sees women's chastity as integral to family honor, a workplace that allows a woman to be alone with a strange male, and hence potentially harassed, is not acceptable. Small-sized workplaces increase the probability of sexual harassment. Our analysis of the ELMPS06 data shows that over 90% of non-agricultural wage employment is in fixed establishments with less than ten workers. These conditions create a situation when a woman is usually the only female in a workplace. Barsoum (2004) shows that being "alone in the office" is one of the major concerns that young women have in opposition to working in the private sector:

*I was alone in the office. . . . A small salary in a place where there are people is better than being in a place where I have no colleagues, no people; I was alone in the office. (ibid.)*

Research on sexual harassment at work in Egypt is very sparse. The international experience shows that women are often more prone to sexual harassment when they work in male-dominated workplaces (Gruber, 1998). Working alone in the office or being the only female in a workplace creates an environment conducive for sexual harassment victimization.

Issues of sexual harassment are also mentioned by many female factory workers, even in female-dominated industries such as the textile and garment sector. One woman notes:

*Sometimes a customer would come close to you as if he is showing you something and sticks very close to you (yetlazzak fiki) like a dog. (Zeinab, January '09)*

The above illustrates that the definition of sexual harassment is context-bound. According to Zeinab, the mere closeness is sexual harassment. Barsoum (2004) shows that when an employer asked a female employee to go with him to fast food place for a snack, she considered this as an inappropriate request and decided to quit. In the next quote, trying to start a conversation with a young woman is also identified as a form of sexual harassment.

*I was new to the factory. Of course for any new girl, the boys would tease her to see what type of girl she is, like if they can go out with her, joke with her, touch her as they joke . . . so for instance a guy would see me working on a machine and come to me and say, "You honey" . . . "you're pretty, what's your name?" I used to go to the supervisor and complain to him. (Abeer)*

Abeer eventually quit her job. While she had reasons related to the long working hours and the long commute time, one of the chief reasons she listed was that even if she could get protection from her supervisor, there were still fears for her reputation as an unmarried young woman, noting:

If I am walking with some girls, then people assume I'm like them. . . . People would see a girl doing something (going out with boys) and would think that I am like her because I work with her in the same factory.

In a society that labels women as being immodest if sexually harassed, the lack of sexual harassment policies and procedures in Egypt places these women at a greater risk. Research in other countries has shown (e.g., Gruber and Smith, 1995) that women respond more assertively to unwanted sexual attention when the workplace addresses workplace effectively through policies, grievance procedures, and even training to deal with such problems. In the absence of such awareness in Egypt, women have little leverage vis-à-vis sexual harassment. Consequently, in order to avoid potential harassment many women decide to "respect themselves and stay at home" (Barsoum,



2004). With the lack of protection offered to women, the threat of sexual harassment, even if it may not take place, is enough hindrance for many young women to abstain from working in the private sector.

### 3.3 Gender Propriety Issues: Working Very Long Days

Gender appropriateness of the working conditions also relate to the hours of work. Jobs that force women to return home late at night are frowned upon culturally, as they could harm the woman's reputation, as illustrated in the following quote. Late hours for women are also prohibited in the Egyptian labor law, which stipulates that women should not work during the hours between 7:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m.<sup>2</sup> However, these regulations are not enforced. Sherine describes the problems she had at a previous job noting:

*I used to work at a clothing factory, but my brother didn't approve of the fact that I would finish work late, so problems would occur at home. I would work from 10 a.m. till 10 p.m. I had to leave this job and stay at home for a few months until my mother managed to get me a job in a nursery. This was a better place, the salary was not enough for me, but I was comfortable there and the working hours were suitable, from 7 a.m. till 3 p.m. (Sherine)*

Long working hours do not allow women, particularly married women, to balance their productive and reproductive roles.<sup>3</sup> However, our interviews and analysis of ELMPS06 data show that long working hours in the private sector are the norm. According to ELMPS data, half of the wage workers (male and female) in the private sector have to work more than 49 hours a week. Among women, more than 38% of those working in the private sector have to work more than 50 hours per week, as the following table shows. Unmarried women constitute more than 80% of this group.

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2 Some of these laws are not unique to Egypt. For instance, the legislations forbidding women from working night shifts is common to many countries and dates back to Victorian Britain (Joekes, 1985).

3 Nevertheless, according to the Egyptian constitution in Article 11, "The State shall guarantee the proper coordination between the duties of the woman towards the family and her work in society, considering her equal with man in the fields of political, social, cultural and economic life without violation of the rules of Islamic jurisprudence." This provision is perceived to recognize the extra burden endured by working women in the home. Such coordination between duties is considered to be ensured through the legal existence of working hours that standardize the legal work schedule to no more than eight hours per day or 48 hours per week, not including breaks. The law further stipulates that within a 24-hour period, no employee should work more than 10 hours (Article 82).





Number of Working Hours per Week	% of Working Women in the Private Sector with These Hours
Women working less than 40 hours	29%
Women working between 41–49 hours	32%
Women working for 50 hours and above	39%
Total	100%

The long hours endured by young women in the private sector are confirmed in interviews with them. Asmaa describes the hardship of working long hours in a factory and the impact this has on her health and on her family life, she says:

*I'm on my feet 12 hours a day. We are not allowed to sit down. I only get half an hour break during the day. I'm too tired to do housework when I get home.* (Asmaa, Cairo, January, '09)

Zeinab, a married woman with older children, reflects the pressures of working long hours for a woman with a family. Moving from a job with short hours to another with longer hours, she weighs the benefit of being better paid in her current job to her time deprivation. Her nostalgic feelings for her earlier job, which allowed her a shorter day for less pay, shows the burdens she has to cope with in working long hours. As a married woman, even though her children are adults, she has to be responsible for their meals. She notes:

*Now I work from 9 a.m. until 9 p.m., six days a week. I have to. It's difficult if I need to stay at home, or if my children need me. . . . I used to work from 9 a.m. until 3 p.m., so that I would not leave my husband and children all day long. My boss would be flexible with me because I was the only madame [married woman] at work, the rest were all girls [unmarried young women]. I could come in at 9:30 a.m., or 10 a.m., he was flexible. This was good because I could prepare breakfast for my children and then see them off to college, and see my husband off to work, then I would leave and be finished by 3:30 p.m.* (Zeinab)

Commute time and the difficulties women face in public transportation are relevant to the number of hours spent at the workplace. Many of the interviewed women noted that their commute time ranged from one to two hours. Public transportation issues emerge as women discuss their hours of work, as commute time adds to the burden of their long working days. Harassment and inconvenience of public transportation have been

also highlighted. Asmaa refers to her commuting trip as *“babdalet el moua-salt”* (the humiliation of public transportation). Assaad and Arntz (2005) attribute the limited female labor participation and gender earnings gaps to women’s limited geographical mobility. Analyzing the 1998 Egypt Labor Survey (ELS) data, they note that working women’s commuting rates were significantly lower than men at times when private sector employment required men to commute significantly more.

### 3.4 Working for Less Pay

One of the widely held misconceptions about women’s work is that their wages are not essential to a household’s income. Joekes (1985) documents this in Morocco, where men referred to women’s work as for “buying lipsticks,” but this also reflects that these misconceptions are part of a gender ideology to justify women’s lower wages compared to men. In this section, we make two arguments: that women, particularly young women, are underpaid in the private sector; and that they are paid less than men, for similar jobs. Some ideological reasons are postulated in support of this wage inequality. We discuss these reasons separately as part of this section.

Women, particularly young women, are underpaid in the private sector in Egypt. Interviews with women working as shop clerks in Minya, for instance, show that the going rate for a clerk is LE 120 per month. In Cairo, the rates mentioned in interviews were higher. For interviewed young women working in factories in Cairo, the starting salary was LE 250.

Many major misconceptions are used to justify these low wages for female workers. A young female describes how her neighbor invited her to come work with her, noting:

*... my Mom’s neighbor came and said that her husband was starting a daycare center. She said to my Mom, “Why can’t Sherine come work with him to pass her time?”* (Sherine, January ‘09)

The work Sherine did was not a mere pastime activity. She worked from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. for three years. As a daycare center assistant, she was accountable to her employer and to children’s parents. When one parent did not like the way his child was treated, and when she disagreed with her employer, she had to leave the job. In 1997, her salary was LE 70 per month. She notes that the salary was totally spent every month. As a single woman living with her family, the salary covered her expenses.

According to Assaad and Roushdy (2006), the median real monthly income of wage-workers in urban Egypt is LE 491 per month and LE 366 in rural Egypt. This means that the above-mentioned salaries are less than what half the wage-working population makes. It also shows that these salaries are at the bottom end.

However, these low wages are primarily gender-specific. Women consistently receive lower wages than men for similar jobs. One of the major forms of discrimination in the private sector is wage differentials. Said (2002) indicates that between 1988 and 1998, wage inequalities have increased for women, particularly in the private sector. Men are paid a substantially greater salary in comparison to women, which has become more problematic for women who are forced to continually reassess their reservation wage. Furthermore, Assaad and Arntz (2005) argue that during the 1990s numerous factors contributed toward the increasing gender gap within the Egyptian employment market, including the escalation of domestic duties for women, coupled with the decrease of available employment in the public sector, and an overcrowding of the limited jobs within the private sector.

Our qualitative data confirms these findings. Asmaa, a textile factory worker notes:

*The men at my work get paid 1000 LE and they perform the exact same job as we do, yet we only get 350 LE a month. Even the new men who come, my boss pays them 600 LE per month. But even with the women who have worked for him for a long time, he still will not give us what he gives the new men, and when we complain he says it is fair because men have greater responsibilities. (Asmaa)*

That “men have greater responsibility” is a seemingly ~~the~~ universal justification for gender wage discrimination. While having no basis in laws and regulation, gender wage discrimination is perpetuated by the male breadwinner ideology.<sup>4</sup> Qualitative research has often debunked these myths,


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4 According to the Egyptian labor law (2003) Article 88 does not tolerate gender discrimination. The law stipulates that, “all employment regulations and policies should apply to female employees equalizing their status to that of their male counterparts without discrimination as long as their work conditions are analogous.” Furthermore, law also prohibits favoritism in salaries because of the sex, origin, language, or religious beliefs of employees. Salaries are either determined according to labor contracts or the statute of the corporation. Otherwise, an employee will be entitled to a salary equivalent to that of a colleague of the same rank.

showing that women's work is essential to the household and is not for "lip-stick" (Joeke, 1985). Zeinab, after describing her long day at work, notes:

But I have to work to earn money. My family knows, they understand that I have to work. My son goes to a private college and it is very expensive. His brother does not work, life is very expensive.

Zeinab's financial responsibility to support a son in a private collage and an unemployed graduate take the priority and push her to work long hours.

Said (2007) asserts that although those with university level education enjoy the highest rewards in the private sector, they also experience the greatest gender-wage differences. The average gender wage differences for those with university-level and above attainment are 81.66 LE in the government sector, while 296.66 LE for private sector in favor of men (Said, 2007:31). 

Gendered wage disparity in Egypt has been well documented. Women, on average, are paid less than men for the same jobs performed. This undoubtedly constitutes another barrier to women's work since their income does not cover the cost of their labor, specifically for married women with children who need to be provided with care.

### 3.5 Social Security Issues: Working Without a Contract

A major job quality concern for those working in the private sector is the lack of contractual agreement between young workers and employers. According to ELMPS06 data, only 10.51% of working females in the private sector have contracts. The Egyptian labor law of 2003 stipulates that every employee is required to have an employment contract upon commencement of his or her employment. The labor law stipulates that both the employer and employee must agree on essential matters concerning wages, job description, and contract period. In addition to standard identification information, the contract must explicitly include a comprehensive job description, the wage agreed upon, the method of payment, and the probation period, which should not exceed three months. This is must all be concurred with the employee, and include his or her signature in agreement with the contract. The simplicity of providing a job contract makes certain and obvious the benefits and specific salary rewarded to employees. Absence of a written employment agreement translates to unclear working terms and conditions with regards to hours, the nature of the job and benefits, and even payment conditions. One major repercussion of the lack of contractual agreement is lack of job security and social insurance benefits.

Wahba (ibid) summarizes the debate on the value of labor market regulations and their impact on the labor market in general. While labor market regulations seek to protect workers from injustices and inequalities, strict regulations have been connected with labor market distortions and the dislocation of labor. Egypt's new labor law, introduced in 2003, granted employers more flexibility in the hiring/firing process, which is perceived as a major step in encouraging the formalization of informal hiring, which takes place with no work contracts. Analyzing the ELMPSo6 data, Wahba (ibid) argues that it did not have a significant impact on regulating the jobs of young people and new entrants to the labor market. These findings are confirmed by interviews conducted as part of this study in 2008 and 2009.

The lack of contractual agreement translates as unclear working terms and conditions. We discuss each one of these separately in this section.

One concern often raised by young female workers is the lack of defined working hours. According to Egyptian labor laws (2003), no employee should work more than 10 hours in any 24-hour period, with overtime included. If an employee has worked in excess of an eight-hour day, he or she is entitled to a minimum 35% premium for daytime hours, and an additional 70% for working during the night. Moreover, an employee should receive 100% on rest days and 200% on official holidays. This is not the case among interviewed women. The day for shop clerks starts by 10:30 a.m. and ends by 10:30 p.m. in winter and 11:00 p.m. during the summer. Some of these women are entitled for a lunch hour, others can only eat while at the job. This is in discrepancy with the labor law, which specifies that work hours (including overtime), should not exceed 10 hours in any 24-hour period.<sup>5</sup>

Lack of contractual agreement means that employers can change the hours of work, without notice or consent from the employee:

*The employers can change the working hours, can increase the hours, and I have to abide.*

*You are not sure you can get your rest hours. (FGD, Minya, April '08)*

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5 This is Article 82: "The law stipulates that no employee should work more than 10 hours (work hours plus overtime) in any 24-hour period."

Informants readily describe the health hazards connected to the long working hours, particularly in physically demanding jobs. Abeer, who works in a small textile factory, notes:

*There are health hazards when we are on our feet for twelve hours. I had pain in my feet (and legs), when I went to the doctor, he said don't stand for long. Of course, because of the machine, you can't just leave it working by itself and sit. You just can't do that; the machine is big and you need to see what it is doing or else your work (output) will be defective. (Abeer)*

Lack of contractual agreements means weak payment regulations and the possibilities of casual salary deductions and even salary reduction, without prior approval

*The most important thing for my boss is to deduct from my salary. He is always deducting from me every time I come to work late, even if it is just 15 minutes. We never get paid overtime if we stay behind. He used to say we would, but he has never paid. (Abeer)*

More importantly, the absence of work contracts has more serious repercussions related to job security, ~~social insurance~~, and many other benefits. Lack of contractual agreement translates into lack of social insurance. The Egyptian labor law (2003) states that social security is a public program designed to protect individuals and their families from income losses due to unemployment, old age, sickness, or death, and to improve their welfare through public services. Under the social security system the employer should pay contributions equivalent to approximately one-fourth of the salary earned. Private sector companies are additionally required to allot a contribution to the Pension Insurance Fund of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Insurance. Contributions in the private sector under social security regulations are provided for those who are in full-time employment. According to the amended labor law (2003), a basic monthly salary of up to 650 LE, social security should be at 26% from the employer and 14% for the employee. The fundamental benefits that must be provided under the social security scheme include a pension, disability payments, sickness payments, maternity and death allowances, and unemployment insurance. In addition, the law states that all private sector companies in Egypt are required to provide free health care for national employees either privately or through the government's Medical Insurance Plan.

According to ELMPSo6, only 8.2% of females (at working age 15–64) working in the private sector have social insurance. Discussions with informants reflect this wide-spread phenomenon:

If I tell my employer to insure me, he'd tell me, "The shop does not bring enough money to pay your insurance. I am not making enough money to cover your insurance."

*They want to deduct more from the salary, not pay for my insurance.* (FGD, Minya, April '08)

*I don't know if I have insurance or not. I hear that we do, and my boss took a copy of my diploma certificate, my birth certificate, and my national ID, and sometimes I see the insurance people with him at work. But of course I do not speak to him about these things. Nothing is deducted from my salary for insurance, and I have never had a work contract, so I do not know.* (Zeinab)

Employers resort to a number of strategies to evade the regulations of having to provide social insurance for their employees. For instance, they ask the shop clerk to pretend that she is a customer. Another ruse is to ask her to pretend to be his daughter, and if asked for an identification card, she is asked to say that she does not have one. A third strategy is to have an insurance file in the name of one woman, his wife for instance, and ask the girl to say to the inspector that she is the wife, also hiding her true identification papers. Needless to say, these young women are threatened with losing their jobs if they do not abide by their employers' requests.

The lack of contractual agreement also translates into a lack of women-specific rights such as paid and unpaid maternity leave, childcare service, and nursing breaks. All these rights are either denied to women working without contractual agreement or allowed as a personal favor by the employer. This is enough reason to account for women's limited labor force participation particularly upon having children. Assaad (1997) shows that there is a pattern for women in the public sector, who take long maternity leaves and return to their jobs. For women in the private sector, this is not the case, with most women not returning to work after childbirth.

Without social insurance, these workers have no access to medical insurance. In Egypt, private sector companies are obliged to provide their Egyptian employees with free health care. This can be offered through private medical insurance or through the Medical Insurance Plan of the



Ministry of Insurance and Social Solidarity. The law also stipulates that if the sickness or injury is work-related, the employee is entitled to as much as six months paid annual sick leave at between 75% and 100% of the employee's usual wage. The following quote shows that these regulations are not followed. Lack of a contractual agreement eliminates many of the rights stipulated by the law.<sup>6</sup> According to one woman:

*Medical insurance is an illusion. It just doesn't exist.* (FGD, Minya, April '08)

*I cut my finger when I was working on the machine. I accidentally put my hand inside and it cut half my finger. This has happened to me three times. I went to the central hospital and stayed home because I couldn't work. My boss sent me 100 LE, and I managed to stitch my finger back on. I didn't go to work for a week afterward, and my boss split my weekly wage with me—he gave me three days worth of my salary, and deducted the other three days.* (Asmaa)

Having a social insurance and a work contract gives the employee a sense of stability and security. Asmaa, a factory worker, recounts a story of her firing from one workplace, noting:

*There was this man (a foreman) who was telling the factory owner what to do about staff. He hated women and believed that they were all liars and bad. He told him (the factory owner) that I should be fired, so the owner fired me immediately, without even listening to me. I cried a lot that day. I felt that there is so much injustice in the world. I kept crying because I did nothing to be fired.* (Asmaa, January '09)

The above quote shows the emotional toll of unjust practices in a workplace. Informal hiring—without contractual agreement—eliminates the employee's right to file for grievance or to seek compensation. The above quote shows the gender dimension to the practice, with foremen treating

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Egyptian Constitution, Article 217 states that, "The establishment shall not charge any costs to the worker or deduct any amounts from his wage against providing the means of protection necessary for him." The labor law also maintains that if an employee whose sickness is established at the workplace is subsequently entitled to as much as six months paid annual sick leave at between 75% and 100% of the employee's usual wage. Moreover, Article 220 claims "If the worker . . . is treated at a governmental or charity hospital, the establishment shall pay to the hospital management the costs of the patient's medical treatment, medicines, and stay at the hospital."



females as inferior, untrustworthy individuals. Without protective regulations, feelings of injustice are inevitable. When finally landing a job that provides her with social insurance, Sherine describes her job saying:

*I have had insurance for the past five years. I now feel secure with my employer and my colleagues.*

But not all young women who work in the private sector *want* social insurance or work contracts. Interviews with young graduates revealed a serious misconception relating to social insurance policies. This misconception relates to the possibility of losing prospects of finding a job in the government if the person has social insurance with the private sector. There are no laws stipulating the exclusion of private sector employees from the possibility of attaining a position in the government. These misconceptions, whether they have their roots in the laws or not, constitute a major hindering mechanism preventing private sector employees from seeking their right to joining a social insurance scheme.

*If social insurance will eliminate the options of working in the government, we don't want social insurance. My friend's brother worked in restaurant for four months and they covered him with social insurance. All graduates in his cohort got jobs in the government. He didn't because he had social insurance. For the insurance of four months, he lost the government job. (FGD, Minya, April '08)*

Some of those interviewed did not see the value of having social security. These women reflect a common perception among the poor who seek immediate solutions to their financial needs at the expense of the future, as noted in the following quotes.

*I don't have any benefits, not social insurance or medical insurance. But I don't want them anyway, because it gets deducted from my salary. (Abeer)*

*The salary is already not enough, what else will they deduct from it? (FGD, Minya, April '08)*

Many of the young women interviewed refer to the lack of transparency in the insurance system, where they are not sure if the money that will be deducted will accumulate toward their pension. She notes:

*I know nothing about this insurance thing. In the factory they tell me to have social insurance, I tell them I am not sure I'll stay (in the factory), that's why I don't like to have insurance. It gives me freedom. What do I know? They will take money from my salary, and if I stay at home, who will continue to pay?* (Hoda, January '09)

It is worrisome to see a generation of young workers who are not willing to invest in their social insurance and secure their future. El-Dessouki (2008) voices concerns about the sustainability of the social security system in Egypt. He argues that the system is burdened with a higher proportion of old subscribers, who are at demographic stage of retirement, hence receiving pensions. At the same time, the contributions of the younger subscribers are diminishing, with a large proportion of new entrants and young people working without contracts and unable, or unwilling, to participate in the social insurance system.

#### 4. A Government Job: the Panacea and the Illusion?

[A government job gives] a retirement pension. You are respected when you work in the government. You have your status (hiba) as a government employee. A government job is permanent, whereas in the private sector they let you go any time. [In a government job] there is a sense of security and you are not worried about tomorrow. The salary is better in the public sector than the private sector. You can continue to work after marriage.

For decades, government/public sector hiring had a chief function in determining the prospects of employment for fresh graduates. With the shrinkage of this hiring modality and the job quality issues in the private sector, government/public sector hiring is becoming an untenable dream. While listing the ills of working in small-scale companies in the private sector, there is an almost inevitable reference to the legacy of a government job and a sense of loss for its unavailability. The appreciation of a government job is explained by comparing it to available jobs in the private sector. According to female graduates, the government sector continues to be more appealing for employment in comparison to the private sector due to the many benefits it provides.

The leading characteristic attributed by women in the interviews that attracts them to a government job is the presence of a retirement pension. A government employee is entitled to a retirement scheme that

guarantees a monthly pension. For employees at small firms in the private sector, where social insurance regulations are not followed, this pension scheme is jeopardized. The law stipulates that the employer, along with the employee, pay a certain amount to the Social Insurance Agency. The final amount of the pension is determined based on the amount and continuity of these monthly payments. Some employers in small firms do not participate in this service, others would participate in social insurance, but report a smaller salary than they actually pay the employee. Since the due payment is a percentage of the salary, by doing so, they minimize the amount they have to pay.

Job security is another major benefit to working in the government/public sector. Women describe government jobs as providing *aman* (sense of security) and *daman* (guaranteed). Such a sense of security and guarantee is ensured through the provision of open-ended job contracts and other basic benefits such as social insurance and maternity leave benefits. This is in contrast to the private sector, when the employers “can fire you any-time they want.” In a government job, the supervisor is another employee within a large hierarchy. Therefore, relations of power are relatively relaxed compared to those in a small privately owned firm. As a result, a supervisor cannot ask an assistant to bring him/her tea or coffee. He or she cannot ask her to clean the workplace, thereby undermining the value she attributes to her education. These “silly” requests as described in earlier sections are not present in a government/public sector job. As one girl in a focus group discussion, in there is no one in the government to manipulate or exploit you (*yithakim fiki*.)

Workplace suitability is a major benefit to working in the government/public sector. These workplaces are usually overstaffed. This limits the potentials of sexual harassment where the female is “alone in the office” as we note earlier. The list of benefits also includes short working hours. Official working hours in governmental institutions do not exceed the stipulated 48 hours per week. Among unmarried young women, a government job is ideal for one who is “thinking for the future.” The short working day will allow her to take care of her future kids and of her house. The possibility of taking maternity leave and other leaves of absence are also very attractive.

According to females interviewed as part of this study, all of them work or had worked in the private sector, and to them the government is a panacea. It is recognized as an untenable dream for many young women. However, discussions with young people who were fortunate enough to get

a job in the government/public sector show that it is not the cure-all they thought it was. A government job is not what they thought it promised and is very different from conventional beliefs. Although women are still queuing for government jobs, the realities of working in the public sector are now increasingly different from what has been conventionally contemplated. With hiring at an almost stagnant rate, government organizations are increasingly hiring young people on a temporary basis. However, some of these temporary contracts are repeatedly renewed. One of our interviewed cases had a contract that was renewed for seven years. For many women, working in a government job has become very similar to working in the private sector.

The case of 24-year-old Aisha is a typical example. Aisha is a university graduate who managed to secure her temporary working position in the government sector through her aunt, eight months prior to her interview. Aisha met her fiancé through her job by working alongside his mother. He works in a higher segment private-sector firm as a salesperson, so she has no need to continue working after marriage. Although Aisha intends to cease employment after marriage, she said she would welcome a permanent contract at the government if it was attainable.

According to the ELMPS06, temporary workers constitute 5.27% of those working in the government, compared to 0.71% in 1998, and 8.5% of those working in public enterprises compared to just 0.28% in 1998. Furthermore, working conditions and salary ranges in government and public enterprise differ significantly from one place to the other depending on the internal policy of the hiring agency. Contrary to popular belief, not all government jobs even provide secure and permanent contracts to their employees. Currently many types of temporary contracts can exist in one place of employment. Employers are increasingly determining such contracts and benefits based on the education level and experience of the employee, or simply as they see fit. This is increasingly the situation of young women who are able to attain positions in the government sector. It is a position that can occupy their time prior to marriage, and provide a small income that can contribute to marriage savings. Nevertheless, for those serious about securing a permanent position, or have responsibilities to realize such as families and financial obligations, a government job is decreasingly the reliable option that it was in the past.

## 5. Women's Options and Strategies

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Despite the low salaries and the difficult working conditions, many young women, particularly unmarried women, are accepting work in the private sector. To many, the meager income can help in saving for their marriage costs. El-Kogali and Al-Bassusi (2001) argue that because marriage is identified as an important aspect in a young woman's life, saving for marriage is a major preoccupation for unmarried women. For this reason, work is regarded as a vital means to the achievement of marriage (El-Kogali and Al-Bassusi, 2001:49). Moreover, wage employment has the ability to expose young women to potential marriage suitors, and allow women to prepare for marriage quicker through their earned income.

Another reason for work, despite the low salary, is for young women to get out of the house. When we asked Amal, a teacher who had many issues with the school where she worked, particularly in relation to compensation, why she continued there for two years before she got married:

*Because work is better than staying at home. (Amal, January '09)*

Abeer was more articulate in describing why she continues to work, despite her dissatisfaction with the working conditions, and particularly the salary and the long hours. She reflects on discussions she has with her parents, who ask her to quit her work, given the unsatisfactory working conditions:

*They tell me "stay at home," and ask me, "What are you getting out of this job?" I don't agree. Because when I go to work, I feel that I am a useful person doing something of worth. At home, all I have to do is watch television. Even if I do some chores, I finish them and sit in front of the television. (Abeer, January '09)*

The majority of women, particularly married women, do not even have the luxury of watching television if they are not working. Household and childcare responsibilities force women to make strategic decisions. One of these decisions is to stay at home and to stop searching for a suitable job, knowing that such job does not exist. A large proportion of young women never enter the labor force at all. The incongruity of this predicament is that these women opt to remain out of the labor force and are thus not represented among the unemployed. Barsoum's (2004) research reveals that

women do aspire to work, should the appropriate provisions arise. The suitable requirements usually entail a job that offers the same incentives a government/public sector job would offer including a populated workplace, relatively equitable treatment, benefits, and job security. For educated women, it is evident that reservation wages have increased with the shrinking of public sector employment opportunities. The reservation wage is thus presumed to be below that of the public sector wage, but above private sector wages (Assaad, 2003:130). As a result, women are content queuing for public sector work, without considering the private sector as an option for employment.

## 6. Recommendations

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In the absence of social security for young people working in the private sector, there is need for social risk management policies and programs that would compensate for limited job security. These policies need to involve government, non-government, and private sector entities in innovative pension schemes, insurance contracts, bank deposits, or shares. As it stands, the social security system lacks transparency and subscribers are unaware of their contribution levels and ways to access such contributions. This lack of transparency results in the working poor being unwilling to contribute to the pensions system.

Efforts need to involve the media and civil society organizations to advocate for social protection for workers in the informal economy, for those who are working with no contracts or social security. The media can also play an important role in endorsing an image of respect for working women and discouraging the disrespectful behavior of some employers toward their employees. The media and the civil society are well placed to encourage an environment supportive of changing the image of the working woman and addressing the issue of respectful behavior in the workplace. The media needs to address the contradiction of preferring a stay-at-home wife while needing a second income for the household.

There is also a need to identify accessible channels for grievances by workers experiencing job quality problems such as pay inconsistency, lack of contractual agreements, or disrespectful treatment in the workplace.

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