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Gender and Career; Exploring Transitions for Women from Higher Education to Employment in Egypt

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Abstract*— Egypt's workforce mostly comprises women, even though there are more female students than male students at higher education institutions, and they usually perform better than males. This exploratory study is part of a funded project investigating female students' barriers to transitioning from higher education to employment in Egypt. Several barriers were identified and categorized into family, workplace, and cultural barriers. The study is comprehensive yet limited in scope, as different regions in the country have varying dynamics and socioeconomic conditions. Hence, women face various barriers and drivers. More exploration is needed to obtain a holistic view of the country and devise a more comprehensive framework to address these issues and make the transition easier for all genders in Egypt.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Egyptian Higher Education, Gender Equality in Egypt.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of gender dynamics and career trajectories, the journey from higher education to employment is critical, particularly for women (Ceci et al, 2014). Across the globe, pursuing gender equality in the professional realm remains a complex challenge, and Egypt is no exception. As the call for gender equity reverberates globally, it is essential to understand the unique challenges that women encounter during this pivotal phase of their professional lives. Egypt's sociocultural fabric, rich with historical influences and contemporary dynamics, adds layers of complexity to this exploration. By focusing on women's experiences navigating this transition, we aim to contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on gender and career dynamics.

Egypt's population is currently around 110 million, and the estimated labor force is 26 million, yet only 15% are women, which is dropping (CAPMAS 2021). Egypt's female labor force participation and employment are falling. Women's labor market engagement improves children's education and health, household income, autonomy, agency, and financial independence (World Bank Group, 2015). Research also shows that educated and employed moms produce healthier and more educated children (Leibowitz, 2005). Thus, academics and policymakers must understand the factors that discourage women from working, those that motivate them to work, and the factors that affect their labor market transitions.

Egypt's labor force participation ranks 150th out of 156 nations, with a score of 0.266 (World Economic Forum, 2021)

Table 1. showing Egypt's scorecard in the Global Gender Report

	Score (1.00= parity)	Rank (out of 156 countries)
Global Gender Gap Index	0.639	129
Economic participation and opportunity	0.421	146
Educational attainment	0.973	105
Health and survival	0.968	102
Political empowerment	0.196	78

Source: Global Gender Gap 2021, World Economic Forum

Several factors affect Egyptian women's labor market involvement, and the supply-demand relationship is crucial. The labor market works on supply and demand, with salaries setting the price. Workers sell their services to companies who desire specific skills and characteristics. Since 1990, women's employment rate has stayed around 20% despite gains in education and health (World Bank, 2020). This low participation has major macroeconomic effects and reveals a gender divide in economics. Egypt Vision 2030 aims to expand female labor force participation to 35% by 2030 (Zeitoun, 2018). Researchers have studied women's workforce participation and withdrawal factors to explain this anomaly. Marriage, fertility, and reservation wages may affect supply. Assaad & El Hamidi (2009) report that the

The commercial sector often fails to match women's aspirations, while the public sector, which women prefer, is recruiting less. Other factors influencing women's job decisions include oil revenues, safe transportation and childcare availability, and domestic responsibilities. Despite education and health improvements, Egypt's women's labor force participation could be higher. Recently, girls have gained access to decent education and health care. The gender gap in education is reducing across levels, and more women are seeking higher education. Regarding health outcomes, women now live 73.8 years compared to 69.3

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years for men. Since 1990, women's labor force participation has stayed around 20% despite gains in education and health (World Bank, 2020). This low participation has major macroeconomic effects and reveals a gender divide in economics.

Elementary education net enrollment was 98.5% in 2019, and secondary education was 89.5% (World Bank, 2021). Gender disparities in education remain. 90.5% of 15-24-year-old Egyptian women were literate in 2019, compared to 96.8% of men, and 37.2% were in postsecondary education, compared to 51.8% of men (World Bank, 2021). Arab girls, especially in rural regions, struggle to get an education. Poor infrastructure, cultural attitudes, and poverty contribute to this (Brookings Institution, 2014).

Arab labor force participation and education are positively correlated (Assaad & El-Hamidi, 2009; Assaad et al., 2013). According to this research, government work possibilities for educated women strongly affect participation and educational attainment. Since government recruiting has slowed, women's employment rates have dropped, raising unemployment rates. Women face challenges transitioning from jobs to careers (World Bank, n.d.).

Cultural and societal norms are pivotal in shaping women's participation in the workforce in Egypt. Traditional gender roles, which emphasize women's responsibilities in the household and caregiving, significantly influence their employment choices and opportunities (Said-Allsopp & Tallawy, 2021). Educational attainment and access to resources remain critical in determining women's engagement in the labor market. Despite advancements, disparities in education and vocational training continue to affect women's employment prospects (Elsayed & Wahba, 2020). Further, economic factors, particularly gender-based wage disparities and limited job opportunities, also play a significant role in this regard (Barsoum, 2019). Moreover, discriminatory hiring practices and unequal advancement opportunities continue to pose significant challenges for women, particularly in Egypt, highlighting the necessity for policy and organizational changes to foster gender equality in the workplace (World Economic Forum, 2022).

Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes societal changes, policy reforms, and initiatives to promote gender equality in education and employment. The recent literature emphasizes the importance of continued research and proactive efforts to improve women's representation in Egypt's workforce. This study is comprehensive in its approach to identifying and categorizing these barriers. However, it acknowledges its limitations in scope, recognizing that Egypt is a country of diverse regions with unique dynamics and socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, the barriers and drivers for women's employment vary across different areas. This regional variation implies that more than a one-size-fits-all approach may be needed to address the challenges women face across Egypt.

Looking forward, the study suggests the need for more extensive research to obtain a holistic understanding of the varying conditions across the country. Such research is essential to develop a more comprehensive framework that addresses the current issues and facilitates a smoother transition for all genders in the Egyptian workforce. The ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between the high academic achievements of women in higher education and their proportional representation in the workforce, thereby ensuring equal opportunities for all genders in Egypt.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Women's workforce participation is a global issue, including in the Middle East. Women's economic involvement and opportunities are the lowest in MENA, according to 2012 World Economic Forum data. The region has increased women's economic engagement in recent years, although major hurdles remain. Women in the Arab world are getting more tertiary education than before. Despite increased education, women face considerable impediments to employment (Brown, 2015). Egypt's female employment rate has stayed the same.

Under 25% of young women are employed, and many are unemployed. (Matsumoto and Elder, 2010, Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007). Arab women work at 26%, one of the lowest rates worldwide. (Brown 2015). The World Bank (2004b, 2013b) has consistently noted Arab women's underemployment. According to World Bank World Development Indicators (2013c), fifteen of the twenty nations with the lowest female labor force participation rates were Arab in 2011.

This article delves into the nuanced exploration of the transition period for women in Egypt, a nation where women's academic achievements often outpace men's. However, their representation in the workforce lags. Within this sociocultural context, we inquire into the barriers that shape women's career trajectories transitioning from higher education to employment in Egypt For this study, a state-of-the-art literature review was conducted to identify barriers and drivers impacting women's choice of education and their transition to work. Once the factors were identified, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to students and staff members at universities in different parts of Egypt to understand their perspectives. 320 participants answered the survey online, and face-to-face data collection methods were used to overcome the low response rate of online surveys.

Organization

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Private sector	110	34.4	34.4	34.4
	Governmental institution	2	.6	.6	35.0
	Private academic/research institution	175	54.7	54.7	89.7
	Non-profit organization	6	1.9	1.9	91.6
	Other	27	8.4	8.4	100.0
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1. showing the work background of the survey participants

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Figure 2 above shows the background of the participants, and since a university led the research in Cairo, Egypt, most of the participants were from academia. It was followed by the responses from the private sector, including contractors and sub-contractors in the built environment sector, and some responses were from the NGOs and government sectors as well. This was done to ensure a holistic viewpoint of stakeholders and avoid any bias due to a particular sector, i.e., academia or private sector.

Education

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Diploma/ two years course	8	2.5	2.5	2.5
	Bachelors degree	153	47.8	47.8	50.3
	Master's degree	47	14.7	14.7	65.0
	PhD	37	11.6	11.6	76.6
	Other	65	20.3	20.3	96.9
	Prefer not to say	10	3.1	3.1	100.0
	Total	320	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2. Showing the educational background of the participants

Figure 3 above shows the participants' education levels in the data collection, demonstrating that most participants were highly educated, at least at the university level. The study continues, and more data will be collected through focus groups and validated before a comprehensive framework can be devised to address this complicated and multifaceted issue.

III. DISCUSSION

The results highlight a long list of barriers the female population faces when obtaining higher education and transitioning to work. Participants and the literature review in Egypt identified more than 30 barriers. However, after initial focus group discussion and principal component analysis, they were reduced to 24. These factors were then categorized into 3 categories, mainly family barriers, cultural barriers, and workplace barriers, to understand their importance and origin more carefully.

Figure 4 below demonstrates the barriers identified by the female participants when transitioning from higher education to work in Egypt, which is placed in the family barriers category. Women face initial barriers to education and transition to jobs due to their family structure and responsibilities. The household responsibilities affect many women's employment prospects and their ability to participate in work actively. Hochschild and Machung (2012) highlight the persistence of traditional gender roles within households, where women are expected to take on a disproportionate share of domestic chores and childcare responsibilities. This, in turn, affects their ability to engage in the workforce on equal terms with men fully. There is a potential for social change and a more equitable distribution of household responsibilities to address this issue. During this study, it was confirmed by 52.2% of women that it hindered their ability to excel further at work.

Since women often act as the main caregivers for their children, the expenses of substituting maternal care with alternative childcare are likely to considerably impact their participation in the labor force (Kimmel, 1998). More than 52% of the participants agreed that this issue impacted their ability and equity to join work or excel at it. During the data collection, some participants suggested that addressing the impact of childcare costs on women's labor force participation involves implementing subsidized childcare programs, flexible work policies, and promoting gender-neutral parental leave. Additionally, advocating for supportive cultural shifts and community services can create a more inclusive and equitable environment for working women (Blau Oxford, 2012).

De Beauvoir (1949) argues that women have been defined as men, and the expectation of fulfilling domestic duties is part of a broader societal pattern that limits women's autonomy and perpetuates inequality. Sadly, the same applies even today, and little has changed, as shown in the figure below, with most participants agreeing with it. The responsibilities associated with marriage can impact women's ability to engage in the workforce fully. Traditional gender roles within marriage often lead to women taking on a greater share of domestic responsibilities, which can limit their time and energy for professional development and career progression (Blau, 2007).

Family Barriers	Agree	Strongly agree
Household responsibilities affect women's employment prospects and their ability to actively participate in the labor force	26.3	25.9
Childcare costs impact on women's employment opportunities and their ability to engage in the labor force	25.3	27.2
There are expectations for women to fulfill domestic duties	26.3	27.5
The responsibilities associated with marriage can impact women's ability to fully engage in the workforce	28.8	23.1

Figure 3. Showing the 1st category i.e. Family Barriers identified by the participants.

Following the family barriers, the second barrier in this category is related to the local culture in the country. Figure 5 below demonstrates the list of barriers that the female participants highlighted during the data collection.

A range of sociocultural and structural barriers multifacetedly hinder the participation of women in the labor force. Certain religious and cultural beliefs significantly limit women's involvement in the workforce (Moghadam, 2017). This limitation is further exacerbated by male-dominated decision-making processes, leading to a lack of gender diversity in leadership roles (Schmitt, 2009). Mary Daly (2000) argues that there is an unequal distribution of resources and opportunities based on gender, which perpetuates economic disparities. These systemic issues are compounded by societal biases, where negative perceptions towards women who work outside the home are prevalent. Such biases are intertwined with stereotypes questioning the

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commitment and competence of women in their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Practical barriers also play a significant role; limited transportation options and inadequate infrastructure directly impact women's ability to engage in the workforce.

Additionally, safety concerns and limitations on mobility further restrict women's employment opportunities. These challenges are compounded by inconvenient travel distances and time constraints, which significantly impede women's participation in work, particularly in post-industrial societies. These barriers form a complex web that significantly impedes women's full engagement in the labor force. These challenges were further validated by the majority of survey participants, as shown in the figure below.

Cultural Barriers	Agree	Strongly agree
Certain religious beliefs may limit women's involvement in the labor force	27.2	28.7
The majority of decision-making processes are often controlled by men, leading to a lack of gender diversity and representation.	25.3	23.4
There are unequal distribution of resources and opportunities based on gender	24.7	25
I have personally experienced/ witnessed negative perceptions towards women who choose to work outside the home.	29.1	25.9
I have experienced/witnessed situations where women are unfairly stereotyped as being less committed or competent in their careers.	26.9	22.8
I have personally faced challenges due to limited transportation options and inadequate infrastructure	27.8	24.7
I have experienced safety concerns and limitations on my own mobility as a woman.	28.4	28.4
There is an Inconvenient travel distances and time constraints	32.8	21.9

Figure 4. Showing the cultural barriers category and the barriers within

Finally, the last category was more comprehensive than others: workplace or professional environment barriers. Since the topic of the study was the transition from education to work, more questions were related to the workplace environment and its associated challenges. Figure 6 below demonstrates the list of workplace barriers identified and the rating of participants.

A series of systemic and institutional barriers mar the landscape of women's professional advancement. The lack of formal mentoring programs for women, a critical factor in career development, is a significant impediment (Ragins & Kram, 2007). This challenge is often compounded by limited access to educational resources and opportunities and insufficient financial support for women's education and training. Within workplaces, gender-based disparities in job rewards and opportunities are prevalent, highlighting the inequality in recognition and advancement. Similarly, unfair hiring and promotion practices are another hurdle that delves into discriminatory organizational practices. Gender-based harassment is also a severe issue and further exemplifies the hostile environments women often face.

Moreover, the prevalence of leadership styles favoring men contributes to gender imbalances in leadership roles. Pay disparity remains a critical issue (Blau & Kahn, 2007). While some organizations have policies to support employees with families, more is needed (Williams, 2000). The limited career options for women compared to men and challenges in accessing male-dominated industries further restrict women's professional trajectories. Collectively, these factors create a challenging environment that hinders women's full participation and advancement in the workforce (Helgesen & Johnson, 2010; Reskin & Padavic, 2002).

Workplace Barriers	Agree	Strongly agree
There is a lack of adequate support for women's career development and advancement	27.8	25
There is an unequal access to networking opportunities	29.7	25.9
There is a scarcity of women in leadership positions	31.9	23.8
There is a lack of formal mentoring programs for women	34.7	28.9
I have personally encountered the limited availability of educational resources and opportunities	28.1	21.6
There is Insufficient financial support for women's education and training	32.8	27.5
Gender-based disparities exist in job rewards, recognition, and opportunities within the workplace	29.4	27.8
There are unfair standards and processes that are used for hiring and promoting employees	26.6	23.4
I have personally experienced or seen any instances where someone was harassed, either through words or actions, because of their gender	26.6	25.3
leadership styles that tend to favor men over women are prevalent or common in your organization	30.9	24.7
There is a difference in pay between men and women	28.1	28.8
Your organization has enough policies and support systems in place to accommodate the needs of employees with families	25.6	27.2
There are limited career options and professional paths available for women compared to men	29.7	29.7
Women face challenges in accessing industries and sectors that are traditionally dominated by men	33.4	21.3

Figure 5. Showing the workplace barriers faced by the participants

IV. CONCLUSION

Although Egypt, like other countries globally, has taken several measures to ensure gender equality and equity in various private and government sectors, much work still needs to be done. Several challenges related to family and culture can only be addressed through highlighting these issues and educating the masses through structured education programs at different levels. The quota systems have proved to be unsuccessful previously. Therefore, long-term and sustaining change can only be brought about through education, further research, community participation, and visionary leadership.

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