Working Women in Egypt

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According to a labor force participation survey published in the mid-1980s, when men in rural Syria were asked whether their wives worked a large number of them replied that they did not. But when the question was rephrased as whether they will be forced to hire a replacement if their wives did not assist them in their work, the overwhelming number of them replied in affirmative.[255] This was just one striking example of the invisibility of Arab women in the workforce some two decade ago. We also find, for instance, that in Egypt, where women were thought to comprise 11 percent of the total labor force, samples of rural households in Lower Egypt revealed that half the wives plowed and leveled the land and between 55 and 70 percent were involved in agricultural production and 75 percent were engaged in animal husbandry.[256]

Research by Sullivan had also uncovered a vast proportion of "invisible women" whose work was neither reflected in national statistics nor compensated in monetary terms, yet who worked, on average, longer hours than men.[257] Most of these "invisible" women worked in agriculture or other family-run businesses, in the domestic economy, or elsewhere in the informal sector. The consequences of invisibility were serious; if the women were not even recognized as workers, they were certainly not going to be given access to the training, credit, and technology necessary for participating in the development process.[258]

The present paper aims to examine the dynamic of Egyptian working women in historical perspective, including the influence of the state policy towards the empowerment of the women, the barriers for women to work in the private sector, and the attitude toward working women.

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[255] M. Chamie, "Labor Force Participation of Lebanese Women, in Julinda Abu Nasr et al. (eds.), Berlin: Mouton, *Women, Employment and Development in the Arab World*, 1985, p. 99.

[256] Nadia Hijab, *Women Power: The Arab Debate on Women at Work*, New York: Cambridge, 1988, p. 73.

[257] Earl L. Sullivan and Karima Korima Korayem, "Women and Work in Egypt," in *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 4 (1), 1981, p. 13.

[258] Shahida El-Baz, "Women's Group Formation in Egypt," in Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (eds.), *Organizing Women. Formal and Informal Women's Group in the Middle East*, New York: Berg, 1997, p. 152.

Egyptian Working Women in Historical Perspective

Throughout the nineteenth century, vast majority of Egyptians remained a predominantly agrarian society living in the countryside and working their land for their own subsistence and for the revenue of the state.[259] Agriculture sector played a crucial part in the live of the people and the country's earning. When the face of the Egyptian country changes due to the introduction of new crops and technology, changes in land tenure pattern, intervention of the state, and integration into a world economy, the peasant family endured as the basic of social and economic unit, which was both producer and consumer.[260]

Prior to the Muhammad Ali period, subsistence farming along with limited production peasant family dominated Egyptian agriculture, and the individual peasant family formed the basic unit of agricultural production.[261] Although the peasant family certainly practiced a division of labor based on age and gender – women, for instance, did not plow but did work in the fields at harvest and pest-control time – women were very much part of a family productive unit.[262] In addition to their work in agriculture, rural women also practiced a number of handicrafts and were particularly active in spinning. Many worked on their own account, using domestically produced or purchased wool, cotton, and flax, and then selling the finished yarn to weavers or middlemen. Thus women, as agricultural labors on the family plot or as craftswomen, played a critical and central role in the rural economy.[263] Not surprisingly, they sometimes owned agricultural implements and animals and, upon occasion, even managed to assert rights to the usufruct of agricultural land, as the records of the Islamic court testify.[264]

Event of the Muhammad Ali period (1805-1849), especially from the 1820s on, had significant implications for rural women. As the demands of the European economy and the ambitions of the Egyptian state fostered increased commercialization of agriculture and consolidation of land, the state drafted peasant families for work on agricultural infrastructure and for the cultivation of large estates. Although the system of forced labor on public works (corvée) might recruit an entire family for a certain project, male were far more likely than females to be drafted. In addition, Muhammad Ali's military reforms, which included the institution of the first peasant conscription,

[259] Judith E. Tucker, "Decline of the Family Economy in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Egypt," in Albert Hourani et al. (eds.), *The Modern Middle East*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 229.
[260] Judith E. Tucker, *Women in the Nineteenth-Century Egypt*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 16.
[261] *Ibid*.
[262] Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, "The Revolutionary Gentlewomen in Egypt," in Beck and Keddie (eds.), *Women in the Muslim World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 262.
[263] Tucker, 1985, p. 21-25.
[264] *Ibid.*, p. 48-49.

siphoned off still more men.[265] Both the forced labor and military recruitment resulted in the labor shortage and suffered the agricultural production in the countryside. What was left to till and harvest the land was chiefly women, children, the elder, and the infirm.[266] This disruption of the family labor unit had a number of effects on women. Among others, women whose husbands, brothers, or sons had been drafted, either for the army or for regular labor, had to take on a crushing burden of work. Even after the heavy labor demands abated with the reversal of Muhammad Ali's development projects, certain patterns had been set: men continued to be recruited for agricultural labor on the large estates while women were relegated to the shrinking family plot.[267]

Integration into a world market also changed the local craft sector. Textile crafts were particularly hard hit by European exports of cloth that, over the course of the nineteenth century, decimated local textile production. The industrialization strategy of Muhammad Ali accelerated the erosion of local textile crafts: many women, who had worked as own-account spinners at home, were squeezed out the textile sector.[268] Although some of them were recruited to work in newly established factory, they were invariably restricted to the less-skilled support jobs, and their wages were appreciably lower than those of the men. After closure of most of the factories in the 1840s, textile crafts never recovered their former vitality, and most cotton and line cloth of daily wear were come to be imported.[269] Nonetheless, a precedent had been set for the use of female labor in factories: when ginning mills and cigarette factories were established in the later part of the century, women were an important, albeit still lower-paid, part of the labor force.[270]

As the pace of land consolidation and population growth quickened in the course of the nineteenth century, many rural women, along with their families, migrated to urban areas. Women migrants to urban areas were far more likely to gravitated toward an informal sector of the economy – petty trade and domestic service in particular.[271] The demand for servants accelerated as the wealthier households lost access to slave domestics with the outlawing of the slave trade and began to employ free women in greater numbers.

Upper-class women held a more central position in the urban economy. As members of wealthy and powerful families, women were important holders of urban land. Fay's study of sales and purchases of Egyptian urban women, *waqf* transactions, estate partitions, and merchant activities, as they were recorded in the various shari'a

[265] Tucker, 1993, p. 234-235.
[266] Tucker, 1985, p. 29.
[267] Tucker, 1993, p. 234-235.
[268] Tucker, 1985, p. 72.
[269] *Ibid.*, p. 70.
[270] *Ibid.*, p. 89-90.
[271] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

courts, arrive at similar conclusion: upper-class women owned considerable property, controlled large amounts of money, and managed some business themselves.[272] The rights under Islamic law that women enjoyed to inheritance and the personal ownership of their *mahr* were also clearly more than a legal fiction.

Although the women of the upper classes remained sheltered in the harem quarters of the great household, they still might participate in the economy. In fact, they did control property and conduct business affairs of various kinds. Using agents to conduct their business outside the confines of the harem, these women were especially active in business connected with the investment in important business venture, such as the lucrative long-distance trades.[273] Upper-class women were clearly acknowledged as competent managers of common forms of property: as holders of *iltizam* (tax-farm) land and as managers of *waqf* property, they were entrusted with a significant proportion of both rural and urban productive property.[274]

As the economic activities of the official and merchant elites altered significantly in the course of the nineteenth century, women of these classes shared in the shrinking fortune of their men folk. The decline in long-distance trade controlled by local merchants, as a result of growing European control of the import-export sector and the erosion of the *waqf* as the state grew more powerful, narrowed the field of economic opportunity for wealthy women. Still, the harem remained a place where elite women acquired skills of household and money management, laying the foundations for a smooth transition to expanded economic activities in the twentieth century.[275]

In the nineteenth century, the ground was also sown for the later entry of women into the liberal professions. As early as the Muhammad Ali era, the government sponsored a school to educate women of harem in reading, writing, geography, and drawing.[276] The drive for female education generated a demand for female teachers so that girls could lean in an all-female environment, therefore teaching was the first profession that not only was open to women, but also actively recruited them in order to meet the needs of a sex-segregated educational system.[277]

Women economic activities were profoundly affected by nineteenth-century developments. The economic changes of the period did not necessarily spell improvement for women or raise their level of participation in the economy. Indeed, in the case of peasant women, where commercialization agriculture came to dominate, the

[272] Mary Ann Fay, "Women and *Waqf*: Property, Power, and the Domain of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Egypt," in Madeline C. Zilfi (ed.), *Women in the Ottoman Empire. Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, Leiden: Brill, 1997, p. 28-47.
[273] Tucker, 1985, p. 83.
[274] *Ibid.*, p. 93-96
[275] Marsot, 1978, p. 263.
[276] Tucker, 1985, p. 125.
[277] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

erosion of the family economy and the rise of wage labor could lead to their economic marginalization.[278] Some women also lost their means of livelihood as the local textile industry faltered in the face of European competition. Certain crafts that employed women, however, probably expanded in the course of the century, and women were recruited to work in the light industries established in the nineteenth century. Overall, the sexual division of labor appeared to be remarkably fluid; women were often drawn into industries that had not previously been dependent on female labor. Although women were very much a part of the work force, they could expect to be remunerated at a rate far lower than that of men.[279]

Government as a dominant employer for educated women

After the 1952 Revolution, the state adopted a comprehensive strategy based on social justice and self-reliance for which full mobilization of human resources was a prerequisite. The new Constitution, which adopted a secular approach, granted equal opportunities to all citizens, regardless of gender, ethic origin or religion, to participate in realizing the goals of development.[280] The revolutionary government made conscious efforts to promote women's participation on the social, economic and political level. During the Nasser era, reforms provided free schooling and guaranteed work in the government bureaucracy upon gaining a degree, a policy that encouraged lower-class families to keep their children in school, with goal of secure employment in a government office.[281] This policy proved particularly attractive for families of lower-middle class, given the need for respectable employment which would not harm family honor, and ultimately created the overcrowding that now characterizes government offices.

Young women of lower-middle-class working outside the home are generally the first in their families' recent histories to pursue formal employment and their memories of the parameters of women's lives become the key to constructions of women's role, and the crucial market that separate their lives from those of older women.[282] These women belong to families in which the parents are migrants to the city, coming from peasant villages and lacking formal education. The fathers of these families usually work as unskilled laborers, and often they are far away working as migrant laborers in the oil-rich states of the Middle East. Mothers work in the home, as housewives and by bringing resources to the family through constructing important networks of friends, relatives, and contacts.[283] Women are expected to contribute

[278] Tucker, 1993, p. 230.
[279] Tucker, 1985, p. 90.
[280] Sullivan, p. 10-11.
[281] Arlene Elowe MacLeod, *Accommodating Protest. Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 51.
[282] *Ibid.,* p. 44-45.
[283] *Ibid.,* p. 46-47.

through this channel, as well as through income-producing activities such as raising ducks, sewing for friends, and cooking for neighbors. Therefore, the change to daughters working in paid formal employment must be evaluated in the context of trade-offs of sources of income, prestige, and daily routines. Obtaining these jobs makes an immense difference to their families, for they leave the lower class based on the small but secure incomes and the higher prestige accorded by this office work.

However, working outside the home for these group of women can be best termed ambivalent;[284] while paid employment is considered as a major change which differentiates their lives from those of their mother's generation, this change might not designated as progress. On the positive side, the obvious material benefit of earning income of their own is deemed important by these women. They go to work primarily because they and their families need the extra money, although socializing, keeping busy, the challenge, and finding husband are also among the reasons for valuing the work.[285] These women value the ability to earn and are proud of their capacity to contribute to the family's resources. Furthermore, earning their own salaries gives them and their children greater financial security, rather than relying on husbands who might keep some of their earnings for personal indulgences like coffee, films, and cigarettes.[286]

As they work in the government bureaucracy, they benefit from protective labor laws, which bar discrimination on the basis of sex in hiring, benefits, and salary.[287] Additionally, their workplaces offer maternity leaves and often provide childcare. Women value the flexibility, shorter hours, and easier work these jobs offer when compared with alternative employment. Nevertheless, the salaries they earn are very low; they often earn less for the clerical tasks they perform than other workers earn in factories or in private firms.[288] Because women's income is still generally regarded as supplementing family incomes, low salaries are considered justifiable.

Despite the low salaries they earn from working in the government offices, they still keep the job because to get these jobs they at least have to complete secondary school and often attended a higher school or college, where they studied commerce, secretarial skills, social work, or liberal arts.[289] Beside being underemployed, they seldom learn new skills at he office, where the work is usually repetitive and boring. To spend the tedious hour, they usually occupy it by chatting, since the work itself requires so little attention. Usually four or five women hold similar positions and can easily cover for one another while one slips out to shop, pray, run an errand, or go home to

[284] *Ibid.,* p. 54.
[285] *Ibid.*, p56
[286] *Ibid.*, p. 60-61
[287] *Ibid.*, p. 57.
[288] *Ibid.*
[289] *Ibid.,* p. 67

visit a sick relative.[290] While the time to do these chores is useful, it is also clear that they are not doing truly necessary labor.

Another reason for the women to keep their jobs in government bureaucracy is mobility. Traditionally, both men's and women's lives centered on the home and the neighborhood. In more recent years it has become increasingly common for men to go out of the neighborhood to work while women remained inside. While older women are limited to shopping at nearby markets accompanied by their children or occasionally to venturing out to visit relatives in other areas of the city, their working daughters' lives provide new challenges and valued opportunities.[291] For instance, each day women must commute, often long distances, to their offices. This traveling to and from work gives them a knowledge of the city they never had before; they gain the ability to master the bus systems, memorize the winding streets, and acquire the way that makes them more successful in dealing with the bureaucracy. On the other hand, they are also exposed to annoyances, out on the streets alone or in the company of female fellow workers, away from the protective family. Learning to deal with the annoyed situation they may have to face in the streets without the help of family members is crucial for maintaining their reputation. Typically, women cluster in groups on the buses and stroll arm in arm on the streets. They will walk far out into the street to avoid passing right in front of a sidewalk café and to show that they are not loose women, but moral ones. While the necessity of avoiding such is annoying, the ability to take care of themselves becomes a source of great pride and self-respect for them.[292]

However, a woman's labor in the workplace is largely unappreciated, while her work in the home is highly valued. The work these women do at the office is regarded as simple and boring, unchallenging and unimportant, while the work they do at home is considered challenging and important.[293] Indeed, in a culture where family and household are the centers of economic, political, and social activities, it is quite reasonable that work done at the government offices would be seen as less useful than that accomplished in the home. As the government bureaucracy has become more and more bloated, the prestige of these jobs has suffered along with the salaries.[294] The final result is a devalued workplace and sense of personal accomplishment.

At the juncture of workplace and household women face the issue of the political atmosphere each embodies. Working involves women's moving from the sphere of the household into the workplace; moving from home life in which women are very much in charge to the bureaucratic atmosphere of the office. For Egyptian families,

[290] *Ibid.,* p. 68
[291] *Ibid.,* p. 63
[292] *Ibid*.
[293] *Ibid.,* p. 68-69.
[294] *Ibid.,* p. 87.

home life has many public aspects; women involved in organizing the economic and social resources of a large family. They prepare the budgets, purchase, and weddings, and help in the children's education.[295] Family life is firmly tied into informal network of larger economic, social, and political importance. In the workplace, most women hold low-ranking jobs where they follow orders rather than organize and instruct themselves.[296] As they transfer their time and attention from home to workplace, they lost their informal power. However, women tolerated diminished authority in part because this loss is counterbalanced by an increased ability to earn and to provide.[297]

In 1974, four years after coming to power, Sadat adopted the economic "Open Door Policy" and encouraged the private sector to increase the productive capacity of the economy. This policy resulted mostly in the growth in external commercial activities with no investment in productive sectors.[298] Begun as a guarantee to publicly employ all university graduates, it was extended to vocational secondary school and technical institute (two-year post secondary institutions) graduates and the policy was formalized in Law No. 14 of 1964. It was later made permanent in Law No. 85 of 1973.[299] The graduate employment guarantee has had major implications for the size and composition of the public sector workforce in Egypt. As a result of the graduate employment guarantee scheme, Egypt has one of the highest proportions of total employment in the civil service in the world.[300]

Historically, government policies have had a major role in changing gender norms about women's employment outside the home. Applied equally to male and female graduates, the graduate employment guarantee has resulted in large numbers of women joining the public sector workforce. Consequently, employment outside the home is now part of the normal expectations of young women who achieve a secondary level of education. This is clearly apparent when one examines the pattern of female

[295] *Ibid.,* p. 69
[296] *Ibid.*
[297] *Ibid.,* p. 70
[298] El-Baz, 1987, p. 148.
[299] Combined with the abolition of fees for higher education institutions in 1963, the employment guarantee for graduates provided a major boost to the demand for education. The employment guarantee greatly enhanced the private benefits of university education and the abolition of fees significantly lowered private costs. See Ragui Assaad, "The Effects of Public Sector Hiring and Compensation Policies on the Egyptian Labor Market," in *World Bank Economic Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1997, p. 86-87.
[300] The proportion of the civil service in total employment stood at 24 percent of total employment and 39 percent of non-agricultural employment in 1998, up from 19 percent and 32 percent, respectively in 1988. Despite the formal suspension of the graduate guarantee scheme, government employment continued to grow at 4.8 percent per year in the 1990s, twice the rate of overall employment growth. However, even that rate of growth was significantly below the 7.5 to 8 percent growth rates logged in the late 1970's and early 1980's. See Heba Handoussa, "The Burden of Public Sector Employment and Remuneration: The Case of Egypt," in Wouter van Ginneken, ed., *Government and its Employees: Case Studies of Developing Countries*, (Aldershot, Hants, England: Avebury, 1992).

labor force participation by educational attainment, where there is a sudden and large increase at the secondary education level, the point at which graduates become eligible for the employment guarantee.[301] Besides making paid employment the norm for educated females, the employment guarantee scheme has also helped shape what is deemed female-appropriate employment. Public sector work is strongly preferred by female workers because it has other important characteristics that make it gender appropriate. These characteristics include generous medical and retirement benefits, relatively short work hours (six hours a day and six days per week is the public sector norm in Egypt), low effort requirement, and the presence of a large number of other women in the workplace, providing a measure of sexual safety. With the inevitable slowdown in public sector employment, its role in "normalizing" female employment outside the home might see a significant reversal.[302] Although a relatively small proportion of Egyptian women work for pay in the private sector, few remain in that sector after marriage and many would rather queue for years for a public sector job rather than take one in the private sector.

However, the economic logic for married women being employed in the government sector has been eroded. When women work away from the home, the cost to the household in terms of both finance and convenience has become so high that in many cases employment is no longer a viable option. Their expenses included the cost of clothing in conformity with middle class expectations, which is considerable in Egypt, transport, and miscellaneous items. The household budget suffers considerably because women do not have the time to shop efficiently. Childcare and nursery expenses are a further cost; even when female kin help, the service they do as a favor is often expected to be repaid in the form of gifts. As a result of all these factors, more and more men are demanding that their wives give up their jobs and stay at home.[303] Although men often justify such a demand primarily on the grounds of cost-effectiveness, there are often other unvoiced desires for reinstating or reinforcing their own position as breadwinner.

Although Sadat's regime was not against women's equality in principle, the new economic order had less need for women's participation. As the government gradually withdrew its commitment to guarantee employment to all graduates, unemployment among school graduates rose rapidly. The expectation that women would enter the workplace thus became a burden on the state rather than an asset. With the decline of work opportunities in the formal sector, women are increasingly participating in the

[301] Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil, *The Political Economy of Nasserism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 9.

[302] Shirin J.A. Shukri, *Social Changes and Women in the Middle East. State Policy, Education, Economics and Development*, England: Ashgate, 1999, p. 27.

[303] Homa Hoodfar, *Between Marriage and the Market*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997, p. 115-116.

informal sector. However, they work under no social or legal protection. Their work is not included in formal statistics, and they received no support service.

The national view of women's work also seemed to shift, and the definition of women as playing primarily a domestic role gain ground. Justifying ideologies based on sexual division of roles began to appear, supported by the newly emerging Islamic fundamentalist ideology which is based on the central role of the family and put emphasize on women's private role to the detriment of their public role. Some passage from the Qur'an were taken out of context and reinterpreted in a misogynistic way to justify male supremacy. The impact of these interpretations was made possible by adding a qualifying provision to Article 11 of the 1971 Constitution which declared the state's commitment to help reconciling women's family obligations and their equality to men in the public sphere. The addition held, "provided that this did not infringe on the rules of Islamic Shari'a." Thus, the new Constitution created opportunity for Islamic groups to oppose women's rights to work outside their household.[304]

Barriers to Private Sector Employment for Women

The access to public sector employment for young women was also reduced because older women were staying longer on government payrolls, and this reduction is not being counteracted by increased access in the private sector. In fact, although private sector wage employment was primarily the domain of young women in their twenties and early thirties, access to it had not increased from time to time. There seems therefore to be some support for Moghadam's contention that structural adjustment is crowding women out of the Egyptian labor market by reducing access to public employment without affecting the barriers to entry women face in the private sector.[305]

The problem is not one of general lack of dynamism in the private sector. Wage employment in the private non-agricultural sector was the second-fastest growing segment of the labor market after government. It grew at an average of 4.3 percent per year from 1988 to 1998, a rate that is 72 percent higher than the 2.5 percent overall employment growth rate in that period. However, the growth of employment in that sector was much more rapid for males (4.7 percent per year) than for females (1.6 percent per year), despite the fact that overall female employment growth was more rapid than that of males. Given the almost certain prospects of a slowdown in the growth of public sector employment in Egypt, the barriers to female employment in the private sector may lead to continued high unemployment rates for women and a

[304] M. Hatem, "Economic and Political Liberalization in Egypt and the Demise of State Feminism, in *International Journal of Middle East* Studies, 1992, no. 24, p. 241.

[305] Valentine Moghadam, *Women, Work and Economic Reform in the Middle East and North Africa* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 109-112.

possible reversal in the growth of female labor force participation observed in recent years. Thus, it appears that the growth of the female labor force in Egypt in the foreseeable future will be more constrained by factors related to labor demand and labor market structure than to labor supply.[306]

Women's paid employment in the private sector is one area in which the prevalent social norms interact with government policies in powerful ways. The availability of government employment for female graduates has done a lot to attenuate strong social norms that discourage women's employment outside the home. What government employment has also done, however, is define what is a gender-appropriate job in Egypt. If private sector work does not fit into that category, it is virtually closed to women, both because employers do not consider them worthy candidates for such jobs and because the women and their families do not consider it suitable employment.

Moghadam argues that excessive regulation, and in particular female-specific mandates, such as paid and unpaid maternity leaves and child care provisions, discourage private employers from hiring women.[307] This argument appears to be somewhat exaggerated, however, given that the Egyptian government has been very lax about enforcing its own labor laws. One can safely assume that jobs that are not protected by a contract will not provide all the female-specific benefits that the law stipulates.[308]

The main reason Egyptian employers are reluctant to hire women has been associated with the widespread perception that women have a low attachment to the workforce. This perception manifests itself in several ways, including a sense that female workers have a high turnover rate, which makes them poor prospects for training, that they have high absenteeism rates, and that they are unwilling to work the long hours that the private sector in Egypt requires. Such low commitment to the workforce is a direct outcome of social norms that make the home women's primary domain of responsibility. Although this applies to both married and unmarried women, the situation for married women is compounded to an extent that private sector wage work is seen as totally incompatible with marriage, leading to a virtual certainty of quitting such work at marriage. All these factors lead to the reluctance of private sector employers to hire female workers, gender wage differentials are fully consistent with such a hypothesis. Besides employers' reluctance to hire them, women face other sorts of constraints in the private labor market. Women tend to prefer working in relatively

[306] *Ibid*.

[307] *Ibid*, p. 119.

[308] Labor Law 91 of 1954 made special provisions for married women and mothers. Later, under Sadat, these provisions were expanded to facilitate women's labor market participation. This law was applied primarily in the public and government sectors, which made jobs in these areas particularly attractive to women. As a result the state has become the single most important employment of women. See Earl L. Sullivan, 1981, p. 10.

large establishments with many other female workers in them because of the protection against sexual harassment that the presence of other women provides.

Women are also more geographically constrained than men. Their place of residence is generally determined by either parents or husbands, so that they cannot adjust where they live to where the jobs are.[309] Moreover, they are less able to commute long distances to work because of time constraints and safety concerns. Men working in the private sector in Egypt have to commute significantly more to get to private sector jobs. Women's inability to make such commutes limits them to jobs that are locally available, and therefore is likely to be an important entry barrier to women in the private sector.

In the final analysis it could safely be said that the rapid increase in the female labor is mostly due to economic necessity, rather than changing social attitude. And, in fact, both society as a whole and the working women themselves are developing a more conservative attitude towards women's work by considering women's domestic role as their natural and main role.

Conclusion

The changes in women's economic participation have varied by class. Among the rural and urban lower class, capitalist development seems to have restricted and devalued women's work by demarcating the home from the workplace and defining appropriate women's work as work at home. Economic need, however, whether produced by rapid industrialization or male labor shortages, could pull women into the modern labor force whenever they were needed.

Working seems an ambivalent step for the lower-middle-class women rather than an example of completely progressive change. This ambivalence is particularly unsettling as they had extremely high expectation for leaving the home to work and its potential benefit for their lives. Their families often sacrificed considerably to enable them to stay in school, and women expect their jobs to bring them financial security, challenging tasks, new social contacts, and especially, firm middle-class status. Many of these expectations have not been met. Yet despite this ambivalence, this group of women valued their works as giving them opportunity to explore outside the realm of the home, and especially the mobility.

Being at the interface of the division between the household and the labor market, women see a significant change in their roles as development proceeds. Rising educational attainment among women further reinforces a significant association

[309] Moghadam, 1998, p. 118-119.

between educational attainment and work outside the home. These powerful forces are counteracted by the strong social norms that are much slower to change.

Gender norms about the primacy of women's reproductive role and the sexual division of labor constrain women's geographical mobility. Women tend to be disproportionately concentrated in the public sector, partly because public sector jobs tend to be more compatible with women's household responsibilities than paid employment in the private sector, and partly because public sector employers are less able to discriminate against women.

The Nasser era reforms were designed in part to encourage social mobility through education and work in the government bureaucracy. However, the result has been an enormous swelling of the government bureaucracy. Not surprising, as the status of these jobs has fallen, lower- and lower-middle class men often migrate to other nations or perform blue-collar work, which pays better. Women, however, remain in the government ranks, as alternatives such as factory labor are considered unsuitable.

Finally, with the slowdown in government hiring in recent years and judging by the high number of female graduates seeking paid employment, the expectations of work remain. However, the opportunities to work are becoming increasingly limited due to the presence of significant barriers to female employment in the private sector. Unless these barriers can be reduced in the near future, the gains achieved from significant increases in female participation in the labor market are liable to be reversed.

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