Barriers to Employment That Women Face in Egypt

Policy Challenges and Considerations

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Article 12 of the Egyptian Constitution of 2014 enshrines work, stating that it is “. . . a right, a duty, and an honor guaranteed by the state.” In addition, the Egypt Vision 2030 Sustainable Development Strategy, which is based on the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), contains the ambitious goals of reducing the unemployment rate to 5 percent, creating a fair society for all, eliminating illiteracy, and raising the quality of education. There have been important strides made in expanding education in Egypt. The country is close to achieving universal primary education and reducing illiteracy; only 12 percent of youth ages 15 to 24 were considered illiterate in 2017. However, Egypt faces steep challenges in improving the quality of primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions. Furthermore, as of 2016, the unemployment rate in Egypt remained at 11.4 percent, and, among young people ages 15 to 24, the unemployment rate was around 33 percent.

Overall, young Egyptians continue to struggle to realize their potential and effectively transition to adult roles, and this has been well documented by research on the topic. Young women, in particular, have experienced limited meaningful change from efforts to reduce gender inequality in the labor market and improve their economic independence. In Egypt and other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries, attitudes held by both men and women might be changing toward women’s roles, particularly among young and more-educated MENA women. Nonetheless, a survey of male and female youth in 2014 revealed that the majority

KEY FINDINGS

- Several forces have exerted a negative effect on employment growth in Egypt, including a decline in public-sector jobs and the limited growth of private-sector jobs to offset that decline, as well as poor preparation of graduates for available private-sector jobs.
- For young women in Egypt, the labor force participation rate has remained persistently low and unemployment has remained high.
- Large gains in educational attainment among women have not been matched with gains in the workplace.
- Key barriers faced by women include a disproportionate burden of childcare and household responsibilities; poor working conditions in the private sector; poor enforcement of laws barring discrimination and sexual harassment; and a high wage gap compared with men in the private sector.
- Women’s struggles to contribute economically are likely to seriously impede progress toward Egypt’s objective of improving its economic outlook.
- Egyptian officials can take steps now to set the country up to effectively mobilize its full labor force in the future.
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believe men should have the priority in employment when there are few jobs available. Furthermore, there are important barriers, beyond hiring preferences for men, that prevent Egyptian women from participating fully in the labor market. To take advantage of investments in women’s education and anticipate pressures on the labor market that would likely develop as Egypt’s economy grows, Egyptian officials can take steps now to set the country up to effectively mobilize its full labor force in the future.

In this report, we describe barriers to productive employment for young women in Egypt, provide a brief overview of governmental and nongovernmental efforts that are currently underway to address these barriers, and put forward some considerations for policy and practice. Our assessment draws on the following: (1) a literature review and analysis of World Bank data and other sources to understand the labor market context for young people, particularly young women; (2) a descriptive analysis of the International Labour Organization’s (ILO’s) most-recent (2014) Egypt School-to-Work Transition Survey (Egypt SWTS)\(^\text{10}\); and (3) interviews with a select number of key informants. The interviews with key informants were conducted to contextualize and interpret the findings, identify initiatives currently underway, and highlight remaining challenges.

We expect the findings from the study will be relevant to both Egyptian and regional policymaking audiences. Policymakers in the region have been intensely focused on youth since the Arab Spring in 2011, which was expected to empower young people socially, economically, and politically, but in most cases fell far short of that goal. We hope to inform discourse in Egyptian policy circles on the key issues facing young women as they transition to adulthood and on the types of initiatives and programs that have shown promise in other contexts. It is important to note that this study is limited in scope, and, in particular, that its intent is not a comprehensive review of government programs that might be addressing

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<td>Egypt</td>
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<td>GDP</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
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these issues but rather a synthesis of current findings and considerations moving forward. These findings and considerations can form the basis of hypotheses that can be tested through additional data collection and empirical analyses in a larger-scale study.

The report is organized as follows. In the first section, we will discuss key economic indicators related to Egypt, including the macroeconomic situation and the overall employment situation. In the second section, we delve more deeply into the particular employment situation of women in Egypt’s labor market. Next, we examine several barriers that young women face in seeking, securing, and retaining work. Then, we review policies and initiatives in Egypt designed to address these barriers. We conclude with additional steps policymakers can consider to improve women’s engagement with the labor market.

**Egypt’s Economy and Overall Employment Context**

**Egypt’s Economy Has Experienced Modest Growth**

Over the past 20 years, Egypt has experienced some modest economic growth. Annual growth in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was around 5 percent between 2006 and 2008, before dropping to −0.34 percent by 2011, reflecting the global economic recession (Figure 1, orange line). This trend is roughly in line with fluctuations in the growth rates of the MENA region and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which both experienced even greater declines during the recession. Egypt experienced its steepest economic decline from 2010 to 2011, lagging behind the OECD and the MENA region by a couple of years. During the political turmoil that followed the January 25, 2011, uprising in Egypt, growth was further stunted by a contraction in tourism, a substantial contributor to the Egyptian economy and a key source of foreign currency. This was followed by a modest recovery and growth that stood at a little more than 2 percent for 2016.

**Forces Exerting a Negative Effect on Employment Growth in Egypt**

Despite the modest economic growth noted earlier, several factors have had a dampening effect on employment for both men and women in Egypt. Particularly relevant for our analysis are the decline in public-sector jobs in Egypt and the limited growth of formal private-sector jobs to offset that decline, coupled with poor preparation of Egyptian graduates for available formal private-sector jobs. These issues are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

**Decline of Public-Sector Jobs and Limited Growth of Formal Private-Sector Jobs**

The share of employment in Egypt’s public sector has declined over the past ten years, down to about one-fourth of the share of total employment (Figure 2). This trend began in the late 1990s, when public-sector employment was nearly one-third of total employment. One would hope that the decline in demand from the public sector would be offset with an expansion of opportunities in the formal private sector. However, Egypt’s formal private sector has experienced low growth. There has been much more substantial growth in irregular or seasonal work, and World Bank data suggest substantial growth in the share of women in informal employment, increasing from around 20 percent of total
FIGURE 1
Gross Domestic Product Growth in Egypt

GDP per capita growth (annual percentage)

SOURCE: World Bank, undated.

FIGURE 2
Trends in the Share of Public- and Private-Sector Employment in Egypt

Percentage of total employment

women in nonagricultural employment in 2008 to 41 percent in 2017.\textsuperscript{13}

In general, both men and women in Egypt tend to prefer public-sector jobs. In the SWTS, both young men and women currently enrolled in school overwhelmingly chose the public sector as their preferred place of employment (Figure 3). Notably, research on unemployment among young Egyptian women has attributed the long durations of unemployment to a willingness to wait for a government job.\textsuperscript{14} Growth in the informal sector also means that the jobs that are available are not well paid, and research using the SWTS finds that unemployed educated youth in Egypt prefer to wait for extended periods of time rather than accept a job below their education level and reservation wage (i.e., the minimum wage required for a particular type of job to be accepted).\textsuperscript{15}

Lack of Preparation of Graduates

Where formal private-sector jobs are available, employers report that they do not find the skills they are looking for among Egyptian graduates. Enrollment in tertiary or postsecondary institutions measured by gross enrollment ratios has generally risen over the past decade—from around 30 percent to 34 percent for men and 27 percent to 35 percent for women.\textsuperscript{16} One of the explanations for the weak link between rising education levels and stagnant or declining labor market engagement is that the quality of education provided is low, and thus employers are reluctant to hire recent graduates.\textsuperscript{17} Egypt ranks poorly on education quality indicators: 109th and 136th (out of 140) on a rating of ease of finding skilled employees and skill sets of graduates, respectively.\textsuperscript{18} Employer surveys and analyses of labor force data reveal that graduates of both secondary and postsecondary general and vocational education are deemed to lack both technical and “soft” skills in demand by employers.\textsuperscript{19} This finding was also reiterated in an interview with an employer representative conducted by the RAND research team.

The share of working-age individuals with a vocational education has risen over time. Among younger male cohorts (age 25 to 35) in 2012, vocational secondary school graduates had become the largest group, surpassing general secondary school male graduates and even lower-educated males.\textsuperscript{20}

### FIGURE 3

Job Sector Preferences of Egyptian Youth Enrolled in School (2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Percentage of Youth</th>
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<tr>
<td>Public sector</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employment</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private company</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO or international organization</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family business</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wish not to work</td>
<td>9</td>
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**Sources:** Authors’ calculations of weighted results from ILO, 2014, data.  
**Note:** Responses are based on the 2,176 respondents currently enrolled in school in the SWTS. NGO = nongovernmental organization.
Among young women (ages 15 to 24) in Egypt in particular, the labor force participation rate has hovered around 20 percent over the past 20 years, sometimes falling just below that number (in 2010 and 2011) and at times rising just above it.

Despite demand for graduates with technical and vocational skills, secondary vocational graduates in Egypt do not fare well in the job market. This appears to be because the level of preparation of graduates is not well matched to employer expectations of skills. Research shows that the effects of formal vocational education on employment outcomes are indistinguishable from the effects of an absence of formal education, thus suggesting that formal vocational education fails to provide students with job-relevant skills. This is further supported by other research using the 2014 Egypt SWTS that finds that vocational education is associated with less likelihood of being employed. On the other hand, practical experiences through apprenticeships and other work-based learning do provide those skills. The question remains as to whether there are low returns on vocational skills in general or whether the formal vocational education system in the Egyptian context is failing to confer relevant vocational skills.

The findings in this section suggest that formal qualifications might not signal—or provide—sufficient or high-quality skills in the Egyptian labor market. Moreover, growth in private-sector demand for labor has primarily been in the informal and flexible private sector, where there might be less emphasis and thus less demand on formal qualifications. There have been initiatives to strengthen the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system—particularly the hands-on, practical component, which graduates were especially found to lack—but it has been difficult to bring reforms to any substantial scale because of limited local government and private-sector capacity to do so. These issues affect the employment prospects of both women and men in Egypt. In the next section, we examine how women, in particular, fare in the Egyptian labor market.

**Egyptian Women and the Labor Market**

When we focus the lens on women in Egypt, we see that their labor force participation rate—the share of the working-age (age 15 and older) female population that is either working or actively looking for work—has remained persistently low, at around 20 percent. This rate is close to that of the MENA region as a whole, whereas around half of working-age women in OECD countries are participating in the labor force. Among young women (ages 15 to 24) in particular, the labor force participation rate has hovered around 20 percent over the past 20 years, sometimes falling just below that number (in 2010 and 2011) and at times rising just above it. This number is less than half of the labor force participation rate for young women in the OECD, which is 40 to 45 percent, but is higher than the average for the MENA region as a whole.

**Unemployment Remains High and Employment Low, Especially Among Young Women**

Among young women (ages 15 to 24) who are participating in the labor force, unemployment is high, estimated to be 43 percent in 2018. It was even higher—around 50 percent—during the global economic downturn that began in 2008, but then it
declined beginning in 2013 (Figure 4). Furthermore, unemployment among young women has been consistently higher than among young men over the past 20 years, and higher than the unemployment rate for all working-age women (15 and older), which was just above 20 percent (Figure 5). For unemployed women in Egypt, this status tends to become persistent—for example, in 2012, 77 percent of unemployed women had been unemployed for two years or more, while only half of unemployed males fit the definition of long-term unemployed.30

Another indicator of labor market performance is the employment-to-population ratio, or the ratio of individuals employed to all working-age individuals (ages 15 and older). For women ages 15 and older, the employment-to-population ratio has been just under 20 percent over the past ten years, and for women ages 15 to 24, the employment-to-population ratio is under 15 percent (Figure 6). These rates are similar to MENA figures, but substantially below the figures for OECD countries, which have ratios of close to 50 percent for women ages 15 and older and close to 40 percent for women ages 15 to 24.

Despite seeming improvements in Egypt’s economy beginning in 2013, low labor force participation, high unemployment, and low employment-to-population ratios for women—and the fact that these indicators have remained relatively steady for many years—suggest that the key impediments to employment of young women are deeply structural in nature.31

Educational Gains Have Not Been Matched with Workplace Gains

Low labor force participation is particularly troubling given the large gains in educational attainment among Egyptian women, including higher rates of achievement and completion at every level of education compared with men. This phenomenon is often referred to as the “MENA Paradox” in research on this topic, and it further highlights the barriers to employment that women face in Egypt.32
FIGURE 6
Employment-to-Population Ratio of Women in Egypt, MENA, and OECD

SOURCE: World Bank, undated.
Decline of Public-Sector Jobs Disproportionately Affects Women, Especially More-Educated Women

With respect to occupation, young women in Egypt tend to study certain subjects that prepare them for careers in education, health, and public administration—hence for largely public-sector employment. Jobs in these sectors tend to be fairly stable and have good working conditions (see the section on preferences for working conditions for more on this topic), and wages in the public sector are more equitable between men and women. Moreover, implementation of anti-discrimination and anti-sexual harassment policies and implementation of maternity leave and working hours that are reconcilable with family responsibilities are typically characteristics of the public sector.

A World Bank report states that close to 37 percent of employed women in Egypt work in the public sector, and a separate report found that more than half of all young women ages 18 to 24 that are new workers (those who began their first job in the previous six months) report the public sector as their first job. In the 2014 SWTS, close to 25 percent of employed women, compared with 6 percent of men, report working in the government sector.

According to the World Bank, during the decade of 2000-2010, in which there was robust economic growth in Egypt, there was actually a decline in labor force participation among more-educated young women. This is partly because occupational and sectoral segregation tend to expose women to the inherent risks associated with lack of job diversification. For example, the steady decline in public-sector employment in Egypt in the past decade disproportionately affected women—especially educated women who were employed in the education and health fields in the public sector. The skills they acquired and the long tenures they tended to spend in those jobs did not easily translate into private-sector work. This decline in public-sector employment
took place without commensurate increases in private-sector employment. The literature shows that structural barriers might prevent women from working in the private sector. We discuss these barriers in more detail later in the report.

Vulnerable Employment Is on the Rise

Vulnerable employment, defined by scholars who have looked at employment trends in Egypt as irregular (seasonal) or informal employment, employment without a contract or benefits, or underemployment, has been growing in Egypt. In 1998, around 16.5 percent of employment was in jobs that could be classified as vulnerable, and this number grew to 24 percent in 2012. Individuals working in these types of positions might be working fewer hours than they would like and might face unstable employment and poor working conditions. New labor market entrants whose first labor market experiences are in these types of employment conditions tend to remain in these positions, making it more difficult to accumulate wealth and transition into adult roles. Because new opportunities for work have largely been in the vulnerable work sector rather than the public sector and the formal private sector, many women choose to remain unemployed or out of the labor force altogether. Notably, women are less likely than employed men in Egypt to hold a job that is considered wage and salaried, according to modeled ILO estimates (63 percent versus 69 percent in 2018) (see Figure 7). In comparison, around 88 percent of employed women and 82 percent of employed men in OECD countries hold wage or salaried jobs. Research on the topic finds that 59 percent of women are in public or private formal jobs compared with 36 percent of men, suggesting that when formal jobs are not available, women turn to nonwage work in Egypt. The lack of formal-sector jobs outside the public sector, in the face of diminished employment opportunities in that sector, is likely one of the reasons that labor force participation among women has remained persistently low over the past two decades.

FIGURE 7
Wage and Salaried Employment by Gender, Egypt and OECD

SOURCE: World Bank, undated.
A High Share of Young Women Are Not in Employment, Education, or Training

Because many young working-age individuals might still be in school, it is important to clarify the share not in employment, education, or training (NEET) to better understand the economic status of young people. Estimates of NEET rates, especially for women, tend to vary by year and data source. For example, according to the 2012 SWTS, NEET rates for youth ages 15 to 29 in Egypt were estimated to be 9.3 percent for men and 49.5 percent for women in 2012, and 14.8 percent for men and 54.5 percent for women in 2014. Using the Egypt Labor Market Survey 2012, researcher Mona Amer estimated the NEET rate for men to be 7.2 percent and for women to be 62.7 percent.

To allow for a comparison with OECD countries, we use the World Bank Development Indicators, which provide the share of youth ages 15 to 24 who fall into the NEET category. In 2017, the NEET rate in Egypt was around 35 percent for women and around 20 percent for men, whereas the NEET rates among OECD countries were 16 percent for women and 11 percent for men (Figure 8). There has been some improvement in Egypt, according to World Bank data—NEET rates for young women ages 15 to 24 decreased from 46 percent in 2012 to 35 percent in 2017, but remained steady for men at 20 percent. Nonetheless, overall NEET rates remain high, at more than twice the rate of OECD countries, and are especially high for young women.

Several factors might be contributing to relatively higher NEET rates among women, including lower labor force participation and higher unemployment among women. High rates of labor market inactivity, among women in particular, are the major contributor to higher NEET rates. Whether this inactivity is because of choice or because of structural constraints and deep discouragement remains an important issue to investigate further.

**FIGURE 8**
Share of NEET Youth (15 to 24), by Gender and Year, Egypt and OECD

SOURCE: World Bank, undated.
NOTE: As of July 2019, the most recently available year is 2017.
For a country that is seeking to improve its economic outlook, women’s vastly disproportionate struggles to contribute economically—in terms of high unemployment, low labor force participation, and high NEET—are likely to seriously impede progress toward that objective.

Another factor that contributes to the higher NEET rate among women is lack of education access among disadvantaged households. Although education enrollment and progression has increased substantially for women, and even surpassed that for men in some respects, this is not the case across the socioeconomic spectrum. Girls from the poorest households have a 75 percent chance of entering school and a 43 percent chance of reaching secondary school, compared with an 83 percent chance of entering school and a 54 percent chance of reaching secondary school for boys from those same households. In contrast, virtually all boys and girls from the most-advantaged households enter primary school and continue on to secondary school.48

Why Is Women’s Low Participation in Egypt’s Labor Force a Problem?

Despite modest improvements to the economy after the 2011 political turmoil and the global recession, the indicators described earlier portray a country that is paying a tremendously high opportunity cost by not effectively using the human capital of half of its youth population. For a country that is seeking to improve its economic outlook, women’s vastly disproportionate struggles to contribute economically—in terms of high unemployment, low labor force participation, and high NEET—are likely to seriously impede progress toward that objective. For one, it is clear from the combination of women’s growing educational attainment and their low employment that society is not fully reaping the rewards of its investments in human capital. Moreover, with Egypt spending substantial resources on education, including tertiary education, the country cannot be said to be allocating resources in an effective manner if the biggest recipients of these education benefits are not given an opportunity to fully contribute to the country’s growth and development. The investments that are made in female education do result in rewards that accrue to society in some important dimensions (in particular, improved child welfare and development), but they also leave many benefits unrealized because women’s skills are not being deployed in the labor market.

The challenge Egyptian policymakers face is in addressing the situation when female unemployment is being caused by deeply rooted structural and institutionalized barriers. The indicators discussed earlier suggest that in Egypt, young women face persistent structural challenges in securing employment. Without appropriate policy responses, this problem is bound to persist. As Egypt seeks to grow its economy, it will need to ensure that it has the workforce to meet its labor market needs, and that the workforce has access to jobs.
Obstacles That Prevent Egyptian Women from Participating in the Labor Force

In this section, we explore obstacles—both demand-side (employers, jobs) and supply-side (labor, skills)—that interact to prevent women in Egypt from reaching their full potential in the labor market. We focus primarily on the private sector, given the role of the private sector in leading economic growth and also in light of diminished public-sector employment. Given these factors, there is a need for Egypt to diversify women’s employment so that it is less heavily concentrated in the public sector and address women’s historically low participation in the private sector. It is important to recognize that low female participation in the labor force and specifically in the private sector reflects preferences for some women (or their families) and constraints for others. It is also important to consider how preferences for public-sector work are shaped by institutional and cultural factors, as we will discuss in the following subsections. We also note where policies exist that attempt to address obstacles that prevent Egyptian women from working.

Aside from low preferences for private-sector jobs, research has pointed to other factors limiting women’s private-sector employment. As discussed earlier, one factor is skills: private-sector employers report that they do not find the skills they are looking for among Egyptian graduates. Another is discrimination. Studies have pointed to the higher likelihood of women encountering employer discrimination related to employment, wages, and career progression in the private sector, and higher incidences of workplace sexual harassment in the private sector relative to the public sector. Only recently (in 2016) did Egypt pass an anti-sexual harassment in the workplace law. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to implement labor laws, including wage and benefits requirements and anti-discrimination provisions, in the private sector. These and other factors are discussed in more detail in the following subsections.

Family-Related Factors Affect Both Supply and Demand for Female Labor

Child Rearing and Cost of Childcare, Elderly Care, Other Household Responsibilities

Marriage can act as a constraint to employment of women in Egypt—research has shown that married women are close to 30 percent less likely to participate in the labor force compared with unmarried
Moreover, the effect of marriage on women’s employment is particularly large with respect to the private sector. Similar to in many other parts of the world, in Egypt the bulk of childcare and elderly care responsibilities still tend to fall on women. In Egypt, employment status does not change the share of domestic responsibilities that women carry out—responsibilities that consume approximately 31 hours per week, nearly a full “second shift”—which is a deterrent to long-term work sustainability at the status quo. Arranging for childcare can be complicated, requiring multiple arrangements with different relatives, which also acts as a deterrent to consistent work. External childcare services are expensive, and wages might not sufficiently cover those costs to make working a worthwhile endeavor from a personal cost-benefit standpoint. Households with traditional roles for men and women might also dictate working hours, availability for work-related travel, and other considerations.

Legal Barriers to Women’s Active Engagement in the Labor Market

Egyptian women, particularly married women, face several restrictions that actively limit their access to employment. For example, married women face restrictions in such matters as obtaining a passport, obtaining a national identity card, and traveling outside the home. These restrictions, in addition to such factors as demands on their time for family and childcare, could hinder the efforts of married women to find and retain employment or advance in a career. Although Egyptian law stipulates that a woman can register a business, the restrictions outlined here could also hinder a married woman’s ability to operate the business, in addition to her ability to access financing. These factors might also partially explain the drop in labor force participation as young women reach marrying age in Egypt. As we examine employment by age for women over three time periods, employment rates tend to flatten during ages that women are likely to be marrying and forming families (in their 20s and 30s). This pattern has become more pronounced over time, as public-sector jobs decline and fewer women keep their jobs in the private sector after marriage and during family formation. For example, employment rates among women in their mid- to late-forties, many of whom entered the labor force when there were more public-sector jobs available, are notably higher, peaking around
age 50, before beginning to decline as these women approach retirement age.59

Egyptian Women Generally Prefer Specific Working Conditions and Arrangements

One frequently referenced factor that contributes to an incompatibility between women’s employment and private-sector opportunities is reservation working conditions, or the minimum characteristics of a job that would make it an attractive option for a job seeker. This is akin to reservation working wage, except that it refers to the features or characteristics of jobs rather than wages exclusively.60 In general, women in Egypt and in the MENA region prefer public-sector jobs because they are generally more likely than private-sector jobs to have favorable conditions related to working hours, leave, job security, and social status.

Tied to these issues is evidence that suggests many women are concerned about the work environment. Close to half of women in a national household-based survey of around 3,000 women ages 18 to 64 reported encountering problems in the workplace. The most frequently cited problem among that share of women was sexual harassment. This issue was most commonly cited for younger women and those working in urban areas.61 Another study that employed purposive sampling techniques to interview women in both public areas and places of work found that virtually all respondents reported encountering some form of sexual harassment at some point.62 Egypt adheres to several international and national norms and laws that prohibit sexual harassment and address prevention of violence against women. Egypt recognizes the 1993 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The Egyptian Constitution of 2014 introduced additional rights, including greater representation in elected and appointed government positions and protections from other forms of violence and discrimination, and a Presidential Decree in 2014 modified articles of the Criminal Code to include penalties for sexual harassment, to levy fines and imprisonment, and to address repeat offenses.63 Despite the existence of these laws, however, there remain issues with privacy for victims of sexual harassment and violence, support for victims to report incidents, and investigations of incidents.64 Poor enforcement of sexual harassment laws and the lack of privacy protections and supports, particularly as they pertain to the private sector, likely further deter women from shifting their preferences from public-sector to private-sector jobs.65 At the very least, these findings reflect negative attitudes toward women in the workplace, including a lack of acceptance both by male colleagues of women working in the same environment and by customers of women working in outward-facing jobs. All these factors are effectively limiting women’s ability or willingness to work in or enter certain industries.66
Lack of Mobility Makes It Difficult for Women to Access Work

Several factors contribute to low mobility among women in Egypt. Studies have shown that women in Egypt are far less likely compared with men to migrate for employment, and, while men have had to increase their geographical mobility to access paid formal work, women have not similarly increased their mobility. Women also report greater difficulty in commuting long distances compared with the difficulty reported by men, and they report more-frequent incidences of sexual harassment, theft, and pushing or shoving when using public transportation. Laws to protect women from sexual harassment and violence were a direct response to frequent incidents on public transportation, though, as noted above, enforcement of such laws is not robust. Furthermore, commuting long distances tends to take up a substantial portion of pay, particularly for women in lower-skilled jobs. Because women are less likely to commute long distances to jobs, and formal private-sector work tends to be concentrated in metropolitan areas, women outside those areas are less likely to accept work in that sector. A study found that private-sector employment for both men and women, but particularly for women, drops steeply when it requires a 30-km commute or farther.

Required Benefits and Anti-Discrimination Laws Are Poorly Enforced in the Private Sector

As a signatory to the 1981 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, Egypt is bound by international agreements, and Article 11 of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution promotes gender equality in “civil, political, economic, social, and cultural” spheres. Egyptian law also mandates the granting of up to 90 days of maternity leave with full pay for women in the private sector and up to 120 days for women in the public sector. The costs are supposed to be assumed by both the government and employers. The law does not stipulate that returning mothers are guaranteed a position of equal value. Although it is illegal to dismiss a pregnant woman, in practice there are no provisions or mechanisms that would explicitly prohibit employer discrimination in hiring on the basis of gender. For example, the law does not prohibit employers from asking job candidates about family status. Our interviews on this subject suggest that employers do take family status into consideration, particularly the
likelihood that a female job candidate might decide to start a family in the near future. In addition to the maternity leave provision, employers with 100 or more women in the workplace are required to provide childcare facilities. The requirements under the current law and the costs that would be assumed by employers, combined with weak enforcement of gender discrimination, effectively reduce the incentives for employers to hire women.\textsuperscript{75}

In addition to requirements to grant maternity leave and provide childcare, our interviews suggest that some employers perceive women as “more costly and less productive” relative to men, because of the need to create conditions that limit contact with men through separate workspaces and to adapt to restrictions that women have in terms of travel and freedom of movement.\textsuperscript{76} Efforts to enforce anti-discrimination laws should be coupled with initiatives that directly address the disincentives that employers might face. These might include subsidies or other cost-sharing measures that reduce the costs to private-sector employers and encourage hiring of women.

**Persistent Wage Gaps Might Discourage Women from Pursuing Work in the Private Sector**

Another potential deterrent for women is low pay and the pay gap between men and women, particularly in the private sector. Estimates of the wage gap vary across studies, although there is convergence on the conclusion that the gap has gotten smaller in the public sector but remains large in the private sector.\textsuperscript{77} One World Bank study estimates that, controlling for such factors as age, education, industry, and occupation, women earn 12 to 14 percent less than men in Egypt, which is comparable with the OECD average of 14 percent,\textsuperscript{78} although this number reflects the inclusion of the relatively equitable Egyptian public sector. In the formal private sector alone, the difference in earnings between men and women is 20 percent, and studies have found a 40 percent wage differential in the informal private sector.\textsuperscript{79} The World Bank MENA Development report cites an overall pay gap of 22 percent after accounting for a host of factors including education, experience, and type of occupation.\textsuperscript{80} The differences reported here reflect the use of different data sources and sectors included and the different ranges of years. Nonetheless, the results are broadly consistent in

The law does not stipulate that returning mothers are guaranteed a position of equal value. Although it is illegal to dismiss a pregnant woman, in practice there are no provisions or mechanisms that would explicitly prohibit employer discrimination in hiring on the basis of gender.
showing that lower earnings and the wage gap might serve to discourage women from seeking employment in the private sector, further reinforcing preferences for work in the public sector. Moreover, when costly childcare and transportation take up a large portion of take-home pay, low pay further discourages women from working altogether.

Although there have been some efforts over the years to mobilize multiple agencies, both governmental and nongovernmental, to address the issues discussed above, political and economic instability have not been conducive to making substantial progress on this front. We discuss these efforts in the next section.

**Efforts to Address These Challenges**

As noted earlier, obstacles preventing women from becoming integrated into the private-sector labor force in Egypt include tension between work and family responsibilities, commuting distance and other mobility challenges, and fear of sexual harassment. Furthermore, although labor laws do exist in Egypt that are supposed to promote equal and safe working conditions, the reality is that they are not enforced effectively. Below, we examine policies and programs intended to address many of the challenges—from both supply and demand perspectives—that women working in Egypt face, particularly in the private sector. We examine why these policies are not more effective and what could be done to improve them. We also consider where strengthening regulations might have unintended consequences, such as disincentivizing employers from hiring women. Where relevant, we have included some lessons from other countries regarding effective policies that have been implemented to address similar challenges.

**Addressing “Supply-Side” Challenges**

**Maternity Leave**

As discussed in the previous section, Egypt does have regulations intended to support pregnant women and those who care for dependents. However, existing
As noted earlier, obstacles preventing women from becoming integrated into the private-sector labor force in Egypt include tension between work and family responsibilities, commuting distance and other mobility challenges, and fear of sexual harassment.

Laws in Egypt that are designed to help working women might not be achieving their intended goals in some cases. For example, maternity leave laws, as they are currently structured, could distort employer behavior; being forced to comply with these laws could disincentivize employers from hiring women. Thus, gender discrimination in hiring could be an unintended consequence of these laws. Other countries have explored ways to address this issue. In Jordan, for example, employee leave programs, including maternity leave, are funded through a payroll tax to which all employees contribute so that an individual firm’s cost of maternity leave is not tied to the number of women it hires. It is important to recognize that even such solutions as increasing the payroll tax on a formal business might create inadvertent harm by inducing employers to reduce overall formal employment. The implementation of such a policy in an Arab country, such as Jordan, provides a close lesson for Egypt and demonstrates that such a policy shift is possible, but it also offers lessons to mitigate the potential detrimental impacts on employment.

Expansion of Early Childhood Education and Subsidizing Childcare

The evidence of the positive effect of high-quality early childhood education on children, families, and society has mounted over the years, and there is significant evidence that supports this investment. In addition to the positive effects on children, studies have shown that investments in early childhood education can have positive results for women’s participation in the labor market. This also has the advantage of providing employment opportunities for women. The evidence on the effects of subsidized childcare on maternal labor supply is mixed, with one study finding positive effects on socioeconomically disadvantaged women, and another study, which used labor force data to examine a national policy, finding a modest effect on employment. Thus, although further research is needed on the effects of investments in early childhood education on maternal labor supply, there is some evidence that targeted childcare supports for socioeconomically disadvantaged women could have an effect on their employment.

Transportation Policies

Efforts to circumvent mobility barriers do exist in Egypt, such as co-locating work settings to places of residence and providing subsidized, gender-separated transportation options. For example, public transportation provides women-only metro cars in Cairo, and there are well-established examples of women-only transportation (and housing) options...
in the textile industry. These types of accommodations, if shown to work, could be further encouraged and expanded over time to include other areas and sectors. Investments in safe and reliable modes of transportation have been shown to increase employment of women in other countries, such as Peru.

Legal Reform to Address Gender Discrimination, Mobility Restrictions, and Sexual Harassment Prevention Policies and Programs

As mentioned, many existing laws protecting Egyptian women from employment discrimination have not been effective. The relevant legal and law enforcement systems are also not equipped to handle the complexities associated with violations of these laws. Furthermore, mechanisms that implement these laws are needed to better reflect the reality of evolving workplace norms and expectations, particularly around the areas of equal pay for equal work, employment discrimination, and zero tolerance for sexual harassment in the workplace. Laws that effectively constrain women from obtaining formal documentation, traveling, or conducting other independent activities need to be reformed so as not to hinder women from seeking employment or being able to register and operate a business. It is important to recognize that some of the policies and laws intended to protect women might also simultaneously disincentivize employment.

Addressing the Shortfalls in Formal Vocational Education and Training

There is some disagreement in the literature on the most-effective means for providing the education and training that employers seek in new labor market entrants and improving overall outcomes for young people. Here, we discuss vocational education because it has been a focus of the literature that has examined labor supply in Egypt and emphasized its poor returns in the labor market. These findings, which are supported by research that has examined life-course labor outcomes comparing vocational and general secondary education using international assessment data, are not exclusive to Egypt. A study finds that vocational secondary school graduates have short-term labor market gains over general secondary school graduates but that these gains erode over the life course as general secondary school graduates are better prepared to acquire new skills through their more academically focused preparation. Yet recent rigorous research exploiting national policy changes suggests that vocational secondary education, when better integrated with general secondary education, coupled with robust work-based learning experiences and feasible pathways to pursue postsecondary education, could yield positive outcomes in high-skilled vocational fields. Although there is little evidence that “engineering” reforms of educational institutions will work, there is room to consider alternative models for vocational education that integrates academic preparation, formal work-based learning, and pathways to post-secondary education, particularly into high-skilled technical fields that are typically in short supply and in high demand.

With respect to existing programs in Egypt that attempt to address shortfalls in the vocational education system, effects have been limited. One example is a youth intervention program called Tawgih, implemented in TVET institutions, which included career guidance and counseling services designed by the ILO and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a German agency that designs vocational training programs. A study reported that Tawgih had placed close to

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14,000 young women in jobs. An evaluation of the intervention found that these types of services do raise awareness, self-confidence, and general preparation for the job search and interview process, but there were no differences in employment status between students who received these services and students who did not. There is a need to understand why these programs are not yielding desired effects, whether because of problems in their design or in their implementation or because of broader employer or labor market factors.

**Addressing “Demand-Side” Challenges**

**Programs to Improve the Environment for Investment and Doing Business**

Given that future prospects for increasing Egyptian women’s employment will depend on availability of good jobs in the formal private sector, one avenue for increasing opportunities in the private sector is to pursue policies that encourage formalization and, consequently, firm growth. These policies might include streamlining government processes that deal with businesses, including licensing; simplifying and modernizing regulatory requirements; improving access to capital and finance; and investing in infrastructure. These policies, some of which might take a long time to realize any gains, are potentially an important means to improve the long-term prospects for employment of women. Easing access to finance, which studies have indicated is particularly challenging for female entrepreneurs because of their limited control over assets for collateral and other factors, could be one area of short-term focus, though understandably limited in its potential for large employment creation.

Notably, there have been some efforts to boost infrastructure upgrades, and yet more could be
made. For example, the Social Fund for Development, a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) initiative, has poured $600 million into Egypt since 1991 to support initiatives in several areas, including infrastructure improvements. These include investments in health facilities, improvements in potable water access, and improvements in road infrastructure. However, it is unclear whether the initiative has had a measurable impact on the employment prospects of young women. Of the 182 youth-focused employment interventions documented in Egypt, many of which were financed through the Social Fund, less than 10 percent specifically targeted young women. Furthermore, most interventions succeed only in creating temporary jobs, often in sectors, such as construction, that are unlikely to employ a substantial number of young women. Efforts to improve infrastructure that would more specifically target women include making information and communications technologies upgrades to call centers, which tend to employ women; subsidizing early childcare; and building facilities to house childcare centers that will also tend to employ women.

On a smaller scale, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has invested $23 million since 2015 to promote the growth and competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises that either are women-owned or have the potential to hire substantial numbers of women and youth. These efforts focus on improving access and capacity of women and youth to use market information, develop business plans, and acquire financing.

Further Considerations for Policymakers and Program Implementers

Pursuing Macroeconomic Policies to Promote Near- and Long-Term Growth

There is no question that, in addition to initiatives for young women’s economic empowerment, reforms of the Egyptian economy are necessary to make possible a more-robust engagement of women in the labor market. Currently, the Egyptian government has prioritized investments in large-scale infrastructure projects (e.g., the new Suez Canal and the new capital outside the city center). Although these investments might have benefits, they are unlikely to bring about sustained increases in female labor force participation. For long-term growth, the Egyptian economy needs to diversify, the investment climate needs to be improved, and the policies to remove hurdles to private-sector growth need to be in place. These need to be coupled with greater political stability and improvements to security. Nonetheless, it is important to note that Egypt has experienced a period of sustained growth in the recent past (2000–2010) without substantial improvements in women’s economic participation. Lasting changes to women’s participation in the labor force, therefore, are predicated on addressing the structural barriers that women face and pursuing growth-oriented policies. These policies might include, for example, investing in infrastructure to improve and expand access to transportation, electricity, and broadband internet. These policies could be particularly helpful in supporting export-oriented industries.
Addressing Barriers Facing Institutions That Target Economic Empowerment of Young Women

Current government agencies active in employment policy tend to be under-resourced in terms of both funding and quality of staffing, and they have little real authority to carry out government policies. For example, the regional and local employment offices that are overseen by the Ministry of Manpower and Migration typically provide very limited services, making it difficult to diffuse new ideas and developments throughout the country. An evaluation of the ILO-run initiative titled "Decent Jobs for Egypt’s Young People," which targets young people in agriculture and agribusiness sectors in a select number of rural governorates, recommended measures to strengthen local institutions to improve implementation of programs; the evaluation noted that local institutions were hampered by instability at the national level, lack of resources, and an absence of focus and direction.

In addition, many of the initiatives and programs, large and small, tend to be siloed within the government entities in charge of them, and there is little incentive for interagency collaboration. Mechanisms to improve coordination across ministries that target the same populations, including the pooling of resources, could ultimately improve the quality and sustainability of those initiatives and programs. Egypt’s National Council for Women (NCW) and its Ministry of Social Solidarity are in a strong position to lead efforts that target young women, but that might involve multiple government agencies with broader population portfolios. For example, many of the NCW’s efforts intersect with the efforts of Egypt’s Ministries of Trade and Industry (which supports small- and medium-sized enterprises); Investment and International Cooperation; Education and Technical Education; Manpower; and Finance; and improved coordination could help scale up and expand the reach of the NCW’s initiatives.

Raise Public Awareness

When considering the option to work, households make important calculations that factor in the opportunity costs, including the costs of childcare, transportation, and other considerations, and whether these would be offset by earnings. There are, however, additional considerations, including confronting deeply held attitudes and expectations about women’s appropriate role in the economy and family. National initiatives to highlight the participation of women in the workforce could be used as a mechanism to communicate national priorities on the value of women working across various sectors in the economy, particularly in areas where there is demand for skills. Some of these efforts are already underway. Government agencies, such as the NCW, which was established in 2000, and the Ministry of Social Solidarity, which was established in 2005 and targets low-income families, have pursued various initiatives with the goal of empowering women economically, socially, and politically. In 2016, the NCW

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National initiatives to highlight the participation of women in the workforce could be used as a mechanism to communicate national priorities on the value of women working across various sectors in the economy, particularly in areas where there is demand for skills.
launched the “Knocking Door Campaign,” reaching out to 100,000 households to raise awareness about family topics, including economic empowerment of women. The NCW continued its efforts in 2017, tying its women’s empowerment strategy to the SDGs and broadcasting public service announcements and communications that have reached the vast majority of Egyptians.105

Egypt should continue to build on its efforts to reach ordinary citizens through its public service announcements and marketing campaigns that extol the benefits of women’s employment. Outreach to important members of the community at all levels could also commence to both inform about and advocate for greater involvement and engagement of women in the labor force and the economic, health, and social benefits this involvement and engagement can bring to the local community. Importantly, these public service announcements should be targeted to men, who play an important role in improving employment prospects for women. Specifically, raising awareness about sexual harassment in the workplace and public places, encouraging men and women to take on an equal share of domestic responsibilities, and promoting equality of opportunity are all objectives that deserve attention as part of the national discourse.
Notes


5 World Bank, undated.

6 World Bank, undated.


10 The Egypt SWTS is a nationally representative survey of Egyptians between the ages of 15 and 29 that gathers information on education and employment experiences. The SWTS was carried out in 30 countries between 2012 and 2016 (for more information, see ILO, “School-to-Work Transition Survey (SWTS) Micro Data Files,” database, 2014).


13 World Bank, undated.


16 World Bank, undated.

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21 Krafft, 2018.

22 Dimova and Stephan, 2016.

23 Krafft, 2018.


26 Ragui Assaad, Caroline Krafft, and Shaimaa Yassin, “Job Creation or Labor Absorption? An Analysis of Private Sector Job


28 World Bank, undated.

29 World Bank, undated.


34 World Bank, 2013.

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38 Ragui Assaad and Caroline Krafft, “The Evolution of Labor Supply and Unemployment in the Egyptian Economy: 1988–2012,” in Ragui Assaad and Caroline Krafft, eds., The Egyptian Labor Market in an Era of Revolution, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; and AlAzizawi and Hasny, 2018. This line of research primarily focuses on the market rather than the extended definition of vulnerable employment. The market definition excludes economic activities that are primarily for the purposes of household consumption, such as animal husbandry and dairy processing. The data discussed in this section are similarly focused on the market definition of employment.


40 Assaad and Krafft, 2015.

41 These data are derived from the World Bank Development Indicators. The wage and salaried employment numbers are based on estimates from the International Labour Organization Department of Statistics (ILOSTAT). Wage and salaried is defined as follows: “Wage and salaried workers (employees) are those workers who hold the type of jobs defined as ‘paid employment jobs,’ where the incumbents hold explicit (written or oral) or implicit employment contracts that give them a basic remuneration that is not directly dependent upon the revenue of the unit for which they work.” World Bank, undated.


43 Assaad et al., 2018.

44 The NEET rate is the measure of the share of youth who are not working (whether unemployed or out of the labor force) and not in school or in training out of total youth; Sara Elder, “What Does NEETs Mean and Why Is the Concept so Easily Misinterpreted?” International Labour Office, Technical Brief 1, January 2015. Typically, NEET rates are provided in age ranges of 15 to 24 or 15 to 29. Unlike measures of unemployment and labor force participation, which are less meaningful for young people because these measures do not factor in individuals who are enrolled in school or training, the NEET rate accounts for individuals who are enrolled in school or training.

45 Elder, 2015.


49 Assaad, Krafft, and Yassin, 2018; Vishwanath et al., 2014.


51 Ragui Assaad, Caroline Krafft, and Irene Selwaness, “The Impact of Early Marriage on Women’s Employment in the Middle East and North Africa,” Maastricht, Netherlands: Global Labor Organization, Discussion Paper 66, January 23, 2017; and World Bank, 2013, p. 105. Labor force participation rates by marital status are not readily available. However, OECD data on labor force participation by age reveal that, in 2018, labor force participation rates were highest among women ages 35 to 54, at around 74 percent. Labor force participation was 61 percent for women ages 20 to 24 and 73 percent for women ages 25 to 34. According to OECD data, the mean age for first marriage among women in 2017 was around 30, which is in the age range cited above. Notably, we do not see as drastic a decline in labor force participation for women who reach that age in the OECD compared with those in Egypt (See OECD, “OECD Employment and Labour Market Statistics,” 2019b; and OECD, “OECD Family Database,” June 30, 2019c.)
2019b).

before declining to 55.2 percent among 55- to 64-year-olds (OECD, 44-year-olds and was 73.7 percent among 45- to 54-year-olds, for women ages 25 to 34. It rose to 73.9 percent among 35- to force participation rate in the OECD in 2018 was 72.8 percent

in the OECD, though the change is modest. The female labor


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About This Report

Young Egyptians struggle to further their employment prospects and contribute economically. Young women, in particular, face substantial inequalities in the labor market in terms of opportunities and wages. In this report, the authors synthesize the research on key constraints to young women’s labor force participation and employment in Egypt and provide an overview of initiatives attempting to address these challenges. The report addresses young women’s aspirations and intentions toward work, the efforts that women who want to work make to find and secure jobs, the barriers these women face, current initiatives to address these challenges, and considerations as policymakers in Egypt seek to improve upon current policies and programs to target those underlying structural and institutional barriers.

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Young women in Egypt face substantial inequalities in the labor market in terms of employment opportunities and wages. Labor force participation of young women is low and unemployment is high. Although education disparities between Egyptian women and men have diminished, women continue to earn less than men and face numerous challenges in finding employment. Furthermore, far more young women than young men are not in employment, education, or training. These indicators suggest that young Egyptian women seeking work face persistent structural challenges in securing employment. Key obstacles include the high cost of childcare, the expectation that women carry out the majority of household responsibilities, negative attitudes toward women in the workplace, lack of mobility, legal barriers, persistent wage gaps, sexual harassment in the workplace, and poor enforcement of anti-discrimination laws.

The authors of this report assert that women’s vastly disproportionate struggles to contribute economically are likely to seriously impede improvement of Egypt’s economic outlook. Society is not fully reaping the rewards of its investments in human capital, as evidenced by the combination of women’s growing educational attainment and their low employment. The authors point out that Egypt has allocated resources to expand education access, but has not provided a major beneficiary of this expanded access the opportunity to fully contribute to the country’s growth and development.

In this report, the authors examine the issues that are constraining young women in Egypt in terms of labor force participation and employment, consider governmental and nongovernmental initiatives that are underway to address these issues, and present policy considerations that can build on current efforts to help economically empower young women.