

IN PURSUIT OF DIGNITY: Education and Social Mobility in the Life Trajectories of Women Commercial School Graduates in Cairo

Abstract

This thesis addresses the role of education in women's social mobility, focusing on the case of female graduates of commercial schools in Egypt. Technical education, which encompasses the commercial variant along with two other streams, has been intriguing in both its beginnings and evolution. It was launched as a revolutionary tool for economic growth and associated with promises of egalitarianism and social mobility, but developed into a lower status type of education with limited opportunities for employment and marriage. Essentially, state education and employment policies have created divisions between two generations of commercial school graduates (CSGs) with the earlier group enjoying secure public sector employment and stable family life and the latter facing precarious work conditions and more uncertain life opportunities.

In contrast to the literature on social mobility which takes for granted successful experiences of economic growth, development and consequently, social mobility, my work explores the case of Egypt as a developing country in which economic growth has been stalled. In such a context, what role does education, employment and marriage play in advancing women's trajectories? Studying the life and work histories of 90 CSGs, I attempt to answer these questions, while providing a nuanced understanding of the interplay between education, employment and marriage.

I focus in this thesis on how two groups of women navigate their status as educated individuals: the first, an older group, who enjoyed auspicious state employment from the sixties to the mid eighties, and the second, a younger cohort, who suffered deteriorating status of commercial diplomas and work conditions from the mid-eighties to the present time. In particular, I have attempted to find out how CSGs have gone about securing a place for themselves in the Egyptian class map where membership in the middle class is contested and where status-conscious employers seek to relegate them to lower level manual jobs.

The thesis examines how CSGs construct and shape their trajectories, the strategies they adopt and the outcomes they experience. I draw on Bourdieu's depiction of agency as a habitus-derived sense of reality and an understanding of limitations and possibilities offered by structures. CSGs have taken advantage of moments when, within changing socio-economic conditions, societal common sense was no longer applicable. They have pushed the limits of what is socially acceptable and won some gains. Those attempts, however, have not been necessarily in search for professional advancement or high social status but rather in pursuit of dignity.