

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

Moushira Elgeziri

This dissertation is part of the Research Programme of Ceres,  
Research School for Resource Studies for Development.

Funded by the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP).

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ISBN 978-94-91478-06-2

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Commercial School Graduates in Cairo**

**OP ZOEK NAAR WAARDIGHEID:  
Onderwijs en sociale mobiliteit in de levensloop van  
vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma in Caïro**

**Thesis**

**to obtain the degree of Doctor from the  
Erasmus University Rotterdam  
by command of the  
rector magnificus**

**Professor dr H.G. Schmidt**

**and in accordance with the decision of the Doctorate Board**

**The public defence shall be held on  
27 September 2012 at 16:00 hrs**

**by**

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born in Caïro, Egypt**



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## Acronyms

ASCE	Adolescence and Social Change in Egypt
CAPMAS	Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics
CSGs	Commercial school graduates
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
ELMS	Egypt Labour Market Survey
ELMPS	Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission of West Asia
GTZ/MKI	Dutsche Gesellschafr fuer Technische Zusammenarbeit/ Mubarak-Kohl
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LFSS	Labour Force Sample Survey
NCERD	National Centre for Educational Research and Development
NDP	National Democratic Party
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
SCU	Supreme Council of Universities
SYPE	Survey of Young People in Egypt



## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Netherlands Fellowship Programme (NFP) for their generous fellowship. These are by no means cursory thanks to a funding agency. By setting no age limit on this excellent opportunity, NFP made it possible for me to be at the ISS.

Many friends in Cairo encouraged me to go for the degree: Nadia Zibani, Moushira Rasmy, Barbara Ibrahim, Tarek Alam, Hanan Tamam, Ibrahim Kharboush, Amr Kotb, Nagah Hassan and Ibrahim Elnur. Mona Rizk and George were particularly supportive. George was kind enough to push my papers in the Egyptian bureaucracy when I could not take time off work.

Farha Ghannam read an early draft of my proposal to ISS and gave me valuable comments. I was lucky to run into Shomarka Omar Yehia Keita my old-time friend at the American University in Cairo (AUC), many years after we both left school. Not only did I have the pleasure of reconnecting with him, but he also showed interest in my Ph.D project and sent my proposal to his friend Torry Dickinson, whom I did not know. Torry took the time to read my proposal and send comments. Brenda Johnston and Barbara Einhorn also sent comments on that early draft. I had not met them either. Remarkable how far the circle of kind people can extend!

When I first arrived at the ISS in the fall of 2006 I did not unpack for a whole week thinking that I was miserable without my family and had to go back home. Martin Blok sympathized with my home-sickness and my tears, but insisted that I would adjust quickly. And he was right. After that infamous week, I was fully immersed in my studies and enjoying it, no less. Thanks Martin.

Thanks to Maureen Koster, Dita Dirks, Almas Mahmood, Khalid, Cynthia Carreon-Recto, Susan Spaa, Ank van den Berg, Sylvia Cattermole and Nynke Jo Smit for their support and a smooth period of study. Joy Misa and Waltraut Stroh: you have been true friends.

Nahda Shehada shared her interest in Arab societies, followed the progress of my work and sent me many interesting references that I found useful in the course of my work. Our long chats just outside the ISS gate were always inspiring.

I spent the Ph.D. years commuting between Cairo and the Hague. Regrettably, I could not spend as much time as I wanted with my colleagues at the ISS. Yet, I still managed to have many heart-to-heart chats with Yinka, Deniz, Roselle, John, Runa, Piyani, Pedro, Richard, Camilo, Sathya, Bili, Susan and Akimi. Mina and Peter: thanks for opening your home and for your spiritual support. Thank you all for your friendship. The weekly dinners and potlucks with my Pakistani 'brothers' were especially warm in the cold evenings of the Hague. Thanks to Husn-ul-amin, Aamer, Saleem and Maazullah. Kareem and Jairo: you have been wonderful friends.

Mona Amer generously gave her time to go over my statistical data. Ray Langsten was very supportive throughout the Ph.D. process. He assisted me with the statistical data and read several drafts of my chapters providing extensive comments. The discussions we had around the paper we co-authored helped organize my thoughts and improved Chapter 5 of the thesis. My thanks go to Rami Riyad and Mohamed Ramadan for also helping with statistical data.

I am grateful to the comments of the anonymous reviewer of the article I published in *Feminist Formations* based on Chapter 6 of the thesis. Her/his comments helped improve the chapter.

Abdelwahab Benhafaiedh read my theoretical chapter during my shuttle trips to Tunis and was always there for me. Seteney Shami read a close to final draft and reassured me that all was fine.

Thanks to Lilly and my cousins for introducing me to many respondents and for sharing their insights. Nanna, it meant a lot to me that you made the trip from Cairo to attend my final draft seminar.

I wish to thank Nadia (Nanna) for being the sister I did not have and for looking after my children and my home while I was in Holland. I know she did it out of love, not duty.

Gehad Auda, my husband, shared his profound knowledge of social theory and the Egyptian society. I am grateful to our long discussions during which he always managed to find something “brilliant” in what I said, most often when there was none of that.

Bridget O’laughlin, Amrita Chhachhi and Marc Wuyts: I do not need to say what great scholars you are. I cannot stop thinking of the numerous embarrassing drafts you patiently read. I enjoyed every minute of your mentoring and learned a great deal from you. Foremost, I appreciated the space you gave me to explore, probe and grow.

This has been a long journey with many joyful and sad moments. Mariam, my daughter, completed a Masters in Corporate Law at Erasmus; Marwan, my son, earned his BA in economics from AUC; I lost my mother and a revolution happened in Egypt. I hope that through my work with the women of this study, Mariam and Marwan have learned that for Egypt to be a better place, we need to establish a more egalitarian society and greater social justice. I am deeply grateful to the remarkable women who opened their hearts to me during the course of my study and taught me a lot about our society.

I dedicate my work to three dear women: Hanaa (No’a), my friend who does not know how much she inspired me, and to Zeinab Azab and Suad Barakat, my mother-in-law and my mom – two wonderful and authentic women who cared. They both passed away before I finished my thesis, but I am sure they are pleased now.

Cairo, February 2012





## 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.

*Op zoek naar waardigheid:  
Onderwijs en sociale mobiliteit in de levensloop van  
vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma in Caïro*



## Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift gaat over de rol die onderwijs speelt in de sociale mobiliteit van vrouwen en richt zich op vrouwen met een diploma van een handelsschool in Egypte. Handelsscholen vallen onder het technisch onderwijs in Egypte, dat naast een handelsvariant nog twee andere richtingen kent. Zowel de ontstaansgeschiedenis als de ontwikkeling van het technisch onderwijs is intrigerend. Het werd geïntroduceerd als een revolutionair instrument voor economische groei en hield de belofte in van gelijkheid en sociale mobiliteit, maar het werd een vorm van onderwijs met een lagere status die beperkte kansen op werk of een huwelijk bood. Overheidsbeleid op het gebied van onderwijs en werkgelegenheid heeft ongelijkheid veroorzaakt tussen twee generaties mensen met een handelsschooldiploma (*commercial school graduates* of CSGs). De oudste generatie heeft een vaste baan bij de overheid en een stabiel gezinsleven, terwijl de jongste generatie een onzekere positie op de arbeidsmarkt heeft en ook minder kansen krijgt in het privéleven.

In de literatuur over sociale mobiliteit worden economische groei, ontwikkeling en de sociale mobiliteit die daarvan het gevolg is, als vanzelfsprekend beschouwd. Dit onderzoek bekijkt Egypte daarentegen als een ontwikkelingsland waar de economische groei tot stilstand is gekomen. Welke bijdrage leveren onderwijs, werkgelegenheid en het huwelijk aan de levensloop van vrouwen in een dergelijke context? Door de levensgeschiedenis en de loopbaan van negentig vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma te bestuderen wordt een antwoord gezocht op deze vragen, waarbij een genuanceerde kijk wordt geboden op het samenspel van onderwijs, werkgelegenheid en het huwelijk.

Dit proefschrift richt zich op de wijze waarop twee groepen vrouwen omgaan met hun status als geschoolde. De eerste (oudere) groep had te maken met ruim voldoende werkgelegenheid bij de overheid vanaf de jaren 60 tot midden jaren 80. Het tweede (jongere) cohort had last van de verlaagde status van handelsdiploma's en verslechterende werkomstandigheden vanaf midden jaren 80 tot heden. In het bijzonder is onderzocht hoe vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma zich een plaats verwerven op de Egyptische maatschappelijke ladder. Lidmaatschap van de middenklasse is moeilijk te verwerven en statusbewuste werkgevers proberen deze vrouwen laaggeschoold werk te laten doen.

In dit proefschrift wordt onderzocht hoe vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma hun leven opbouwen en vormgeven, welke strategieën ze volgen en wat daarvan het resultaat is. Bourdieu's opvatting van *agency* als een op de habitus gebaseerd idee van de werkelijkheid en een begrip van de beperkingen en mogelijkheden die structuren bieden vormen daarbij een theoretisch kader. Vrouwen met een handelsschooldiploma hebben gebruik gemaakt van momenten waarop maatschappelijk gezond verstand door de veranderende sociaal-economische omstandigheden niet langer van toepassing was. Ze hebben de grenzen van het maatschappelijk aanvaardbare opgerekt en daarmee enig voordeel behaald. Dit hebben ze echter niet zozeer gedaan om er beroepsmatig of in status op vooruit te gaan, maar omdat ze op zoek waren naar waardigheid.

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# 1

## The Role of Education, Employment and Marriage in Social Mobility

### 1.1 Commercial education and the social mobility of urban Egyptian women

Does education enhance people's aspirations and opportunities in life? Contrary to the emphasis in early modernist development thinking on the transformative capacities of education and its power as the "main dissolver of barriers to social mobility" (Smelser and Lipset 1964: 34), the case of Egypt shows that education does not always or necessarily play that role. This has been particularly the case with regard to technical education – the subject of this study. Technical, general academic and religious education, constitute the three main types of education in Egypt.

I was attracted to the dilemma of the link between education and social mobility from the prism of secondary commercial education. Among the three technical education tracks: industrial, agricultural and commercial, the latter has been particularly intriguing and vulnerable. First, it has had a gendered history as the majority of its students are women. As of recently, female students represent 66 percent of the student body in commercial schools and among the three tracks, the latter has the largest number of student enrollment (Ministry of Education 2006). Second, commercial education has been associated with public sector employment. This goes back to the sixties when the government initiated a massive employment scheme in 1963 and gave a job in the public sector to all graduates of universities and technical schools. In 1975 close to 100 percent of female CSGs were employed in the public sector (Amer 2009: 210).

The paradox emerged when Nasser's grand industrialisation and development project failed, with the country's watershed inability to launch

the second national five year industrialisation plan following the first plan (1956/61). The stalling meant not only a limitation on state action in terms of centralised planning and industrialisation, but also put into question the social mobility project for those whose aspirations and livelihoods depended on the state's development plans. Despite the brevity of the economic growth experience in the aftermath of Nasser's (1953-1970) first five year plan, reliable state responsibility for education followed by public sector employment created a precedent of state sponsored occupational and social mobility for men and women alike. There was a time when commercial education ensured social mobility for the early generation of women who held its diploma.

This precedence acquired more significance in the years following Nasser, when under Sadat (1971-1981) and Mubarak (1981-2011) the regime took a different turn, retreating from public services and giving a larger role to market dynamics. With the following restructuring and privatisation in the 80s and 90s, the state public sector employment has been severely downsized. It has been gradually replaced by the informal private sector which has steadily been attracting young people of both sexes arguably to bad jobs that leave much to be desired. Educational differentiation and inequities had started to take shape towards the end of the Nasser's regime. The quality of technical education severely deteriorated and the entire stream was relegated to a low status position, associating the holders of its degrees with inferiority, posing challenges to the process of their insertion in the labour market and undermining their entire passage into adulthood. For a long time it has been disparaged as an obsolete area of study and now with the dim prospects of its graduates on the labour market, represents a burden on the government and a source of disappointment for its graduates.

On 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 Egypt witnessed the climax of young people's frustration with Mubarak's regime. Millions took to the street protesting long years of political repression and social inequality. The banners they carried demanded freedom and jobs. They read "I want to be a citizen not an insect", "I want a job and a decent life", "I want a dignified future for my kids" and "We have been waiting a long time not finding a place for ourselves". The revolutionary fervour encompassed a broad cross-section of social classes, but what stood out was the youthful driving force and the long-stifled energy of millions of young people – men and women. Those embodied the dangerous class of the *precariat*, who above

all have no sense of career or any economic or social security in occupational terms (Standing 2011).

At *Midan El Tahrir* many mothers faced television cameras to lament that their educated children were unemployed after long years at technical schools and universities. It was now obvious that education, and above all, technical education, especially the commercial branch, has not played any significant role in advancing young people's occupational or social advancement at the present time. The paradox is that public demand for commercial education has not waned and in general, technical education has continued to expand. Students are increasingly channelled into it so that enrolled students have outnumbered their counterparts in the general (academic) secondary stream (60 percent and 40 percent respectively according to the 2006 Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey (ELMPS). Poor families still send their daughters to commercial schools long after it has proved its futility in the labour market. It is in this context that I began to wonder what has been happening to young commercial school graduates (CSGs) as the some of the originally envisioned beneficiaries of Nasser's modernisation project and to their aspirations for social mobility. I found it legitimate to ask: what possibilities of social mobility are families aspiring for now as they send their daughters to commercial schools?

As I listened to accounts of young women who graduated from commercial schools and their journeys in life, I questioned the strong relationship between education and social mobility claimed by early modernisation theorists. For those, education is viewed as a transformative instrument of economic growth and development. It is also associated with the spread of a higher achievement societal orientation. As it opens the way for productive participation in the labour force, education is claimed to permit a wider variety of jobs and allows both men and women to break the fetters of class and status and climb up the social ladder. But the young women who participated in this study indicated that their education was terminal and employment and marriage possibilities were limited. Social mobility assumed that individuals were in a constant state of movement – and progressive movement for that matter – with each move resulting in improvements in income, better possibilities of marriage and automatically status. To the contrary, my interviews indicated that young women's movement in the occupational and social space was neither linear nor upwards as predicted. Their experiences

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pushed me to question the emphasis of the theory on the “openness of the system” and its predictions about the collapse of structural constraints in the face of the exigencies of modernisation and industrialisation

The experience of young female CSGs is especially important in the context of social mobility when juxtaposed to that of the older generation of CSGs; the latter obtained the same educational diploma three or four decades ago, but have had a more secure occupational and marriage trajectory shaped by their public sector employment. In this thesis I stress that the problem of the current generation of CSGs cannot be viewed as merely a question of unemployment caused by the shrinking public sector nor can it be explained in terms of the declining returns of education as it broadens, as economists would claim. The paradox which the situation of CSGs poses lies in their association with the 1952 promises for expansion of opportunities, equity and egalitarianism. Some have gone as far as to claim that along with illiteracy eradication, technical education was the revolutionary embodiment of these goals. The paradox reflects the tension ensuing from the discrepancy between a revolutionary vision, the actual deterioration in technical education and declining rewards in the labour market, and finally, subjective and family aspirations about rewards of education and employment.

Thus, in this thesis I examine the puzzling position of education within changing socio-economic, political and demographic contexts and its differential impact on the life trajectories of CSGs. Those different conditions generated two distinct groups of women for whom education meant different things: An older group of CSGs, representing the early generation of CSGs who became state employees in the public sector, and a younger group who graduated more recently and because of the decline of the public sector, faced unfavourable work conditions and unemployment. How did the two groups who carry the same educational credentials draw their trajectories and deal with their status as educated women in two different contexts? How did these changing contexts affect their views of social mobility and subsequently their strategies for occupational and social advancement? In contrast to the lack of personal agency in the modernist theory which sees social mobility as occurring automatically as a result of economic growth, the case of CSGs demonstrate women’s agency in deciding what kind of social mobility they are seeking and the paths they choose to follow.

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Social mobility theorists claim that social mobility is gendered in the sense that marriage does for women what employment does for men. In contrast, I argue in this thesis that even though both employment and marriage are central to our understanding of the social mobility of CSGs as products of a particular type of education, their mediation is not linear and clear cut as suggested by modernists. For example, type and place of work as well as its timing is of central importance to our understanding of women's trajectories. Depending on what stage in women's life course they happened and what other factors they were interacting with at a particular moment, the outcome and impact on women's chosen strategies may completely differ. To take an example, the expectations and outcome of employment for a married CSG are different from those of a single woman and the way the former negotiate their employment and life aspirations and their resilience in accepting constraints is still different from that of a single woman. I suggest that the importance of employment and marriage lies in their complex interdependence as they reinforce, repel and impact each other.

## **1.2 The shaping of social mobility: The mediation of employment and marriage**

### **1.2.1 Employment**

My initial interest in the subject was driven by the observation that among all educational levels, female technical school graduates have been the most hit by the transition from a centralised to a market-led economy mainly characterised by the privatisation of the public sector. Ironically, the recent good news about the decline in unemployment uncovered by the ELMPS 2006 has been attributed in part to female graduates of technical schools changing their status from "unemployed" to "out of the labour force". Naturally, their complete withdrawal from the labour force adds fuel to the fire of women's poor participation in the work force which in 2007 stood at 21 percent (NCW 2007: 22).<sup>1</sup> The downsizing of the public sector is an obvious structural cue that requires further exploration.

The other observation mentioned earlier, is the sharp line dividing the occupational trajectories of CSGs, with the majority of the older generation concentrated in the public sector and more of the younger women out of it and dispersed along a variety of occupations in the informal sec-

tor. As mentioned earlier, the fact that CSGs have landed in two sets of neatly divided work locations conceals behind it different paths and journeys with a different variety of expectations, reflexivities and negotiations. The question that comes to mind is: Should we assume that the same gender, class and status dynamics have continued to govern and shape young CSGs' work trajectories?

Within the two employment trajectories I give migration special attention in both its rural/ urban and international variants. Although rural-urban migration does not play a significant role now, it has been responsible for many of the changes that made this study worthwhile. First, it was responsible for the redistribution of Egypt's population and the rapid growth of Egyptian cities (Zohry 2002) so that close to half the Egyptian population has now been designated as urban population with many cities crossing the 20,000 threshold and qualifying to become urban centres (Waterbury 1982:312).

Rural/urban migration has always been driven by migrants' perception of their economic chances in the big cities and recognised as a crucial vehicle for their social mobility. It started with massive male migration from rural areas to the urban centres following the 1952 revolution in search for livelihoods in the new industrial enterprises. Eventually, rural migrants formed families and sent their children to schools and higher education institutions. Since then, they have become "established migrants" engaged in a variety of formal and informal jobs in the urban economy (Zohry 2002: 48). The incomers to the cities, along with many of the already existing urban poor who were similarly lifted up through education and employment, were always the warp and woof of Nasser's regime in terms of both the support they gave to it as well as their dependency on the state and its decisions for both their income and consumption with the large part of the latter provided through subsidies (Cooper 1982: 463). However, under Sadat, a "reverse" migration took place. With a slackening economy and drying up of employment opportunities in the urban centres, many migrants returned to their rural villages either because of lack of work, or for retirement (Zohry 2002) but only after contributing to the remarkable expansion of the middle class, with them occupying its lowest ranks.

On the other hand, international migration of Egyptians is of continued relevance to this study. Of special importance is the wave of migration of professionals, state employees and skilled workers in the wake of

the Open Door policies (*Infitalh*) in the 70s, and the current clandestine migration of young men to Europe driven by the search for better life opportunities. International migration has also reflected the active and the less visible role of the state in shaping people's lives. While on one hand the migration of government employees in the 70s has often been described as largely state-sponsored and blessed, the current trend of young males' desperate clandestine migration to Europe reflects both government helplessness and young people's increasing frustration with the former's employment policies and failure to provide for its citizens. The latest wave of uncertain migration to Europe indicates the extent to which social mobility has become an individual project for which young people take full responsibility with no interference from the state.

Egyptian migration has been mainly studied as a question of remittances of relevance to the national economy and has been treated primarily as a male phenomenon, attracting male workers and involving only male skills. Little do we know about the role of women who accompanied their husbands or about single migrant women for whom migration was a turning point or a failed project. I focus in this work on those women and claim that like marriage, migration also has different meanings and goals depending on its timing in women's life course and the project they aspired to.

In this thesis I do not devote an entire chapter to migration as such, but deal with female and male migrants in various parts to demonstrate different aspects about the role of migration. In the final analysis, they all fall within a broader point about the vulnerable position of CSGs as graduates of a particular type of education. In Chapter 4, I address the limitations of migration for married women within the context of public sector employment, while in Chapter 6 I deal with gendered strategies for social mobility. I focus on clandestine migration as a male gendered route to social mobility in contrast to women's more domesticated journeys, but one that represents an equally dead end for young men. In Chapter 8, I examine migration as a reflection of the euphoria created by the *Infitalh* years in the 70s and 80s. I use it as an example of an exciting project for single women with several pros and cons; on one hand it lifted some restrictions on women's physical mobility but failed, on the other hand, in breaking social barriers and hierarchies in substantial ways.

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### 1.2.2 Marriage

Marriage is a central institution in the Egyptian society and is the ultimate aspiration of young people of both sexes. While recent marriage laws have arguably shed off some patriarchal grips, giving women many more choices to exit a bad marriage (see Chapter 3), ironically young women do not seem to be fully able to enjoy these new gains. For many young people, marriage is not forthcoming. They experience delays in the age of marriage and fear its prohibitive costs. The state of no marriage, no work after leaving school contributed to prolonging their period of “waithood” (see Singerman 2007 for definition and discussion). For young CSGs this has had implications on their ideas about the role of marriage as a tool of social mobility and their eventual choice of marriage partners. Statistics indicate that young women are compromising the educational level of their husbands; they are not particularly dismayed about marrying men below their educational level with no stable work prospects.

Marriage and employment are also related in a complex way. Recent studies on Egypt have shown that women’s work after marriage is strongly related to the sector of work, with those employed in the public sector certain about their ability to continue work after marriage and those in the informal sector much less assertive about that (Assaad 2009: 254). Although many unmarried women even in the informal sector have expressed their desire and hope to continue to work after marriage, those who have already experienced work in the informal sector are discouraged by their experience and have come to see employment merely as a strategy to prepare for marriage. They are reluctantly accepting and holding on to bad jobs and treatment in order to save for their marriage, but as soon as this is accomplished, they are ready to quit and devote themselves to their families (Amin and Al-Bassusi 2003: 23). On the other hand, not much has been said about women who join the labour market *after* marriage. Evidence in this study shows that for a number of women, being a housewife has been an unaffordable status; they have decided to go back to the labour market after years of inactivity.

These vicissitudes and complex relationship between work and marriage are under-represented in the early modernisation literature which un-problematically assumes that marriage is women’s path to social advancement. Demographic and social changes in marriage patterns suggest that marriage might be playing a different role in women’s lives now.

The threat of a long wait for a husband implies that women might have to re-adjust their aspirations about marriage and consider other strategies – including new living arrangements – to fulfil their needs and advance in life.

### **1.3 Research questions**

The main question this research attempts to answer is: What are the class, gender and status dynamics that mediate the aspirations for social mobility of female CSGs educated before and after the failure of Nasser's grand industrialisation and development project? The following sub-questions will be addressed:

- What were the objectives of technical education, particularly its commercial variant, and how did they undermine or reinforce inequalities?
- How have patterns of employment and marriage changed over time, and what opportunities and constraints do they pose for CSGs social mobility?
- How did the older generation of CSGs experience the promise of social mobility associated with public sector employment?
- What new factors entered into decision making to select commercial education for the younger generation of CSGs?
- What were the possibilities for social mobility for the younger generation in the labour market and workplace? How did they experience the process of informalisation of employment?
- How did the younger generation of women negotiate marriage and employment in relation to social mobility?
- How far did the younger generation of CSGs challenge existing class and gender boundaries in their struggle for social mobility?

### **1.4 Interrogating the literature on social mobility**

In considering the role of education and how employment and marriage mediate CSGs' social mobility, this study draws on a number of theoretical threads. Within the core themes in the literature on social mobility, I deal specifically with issues addressing education, employment and marriage.

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### 1.4.1 Propositions of social mobility

The early propositions of social mobility mainly focused on the US and European countries' path to industrialisation and development.<sup>2</sup> Those propositions stressed that economic development was the main cause of social mobility. To that extent, social mobility and economic development were regarded as feeding on each other: the former determined the rate and form of development and the latter directed development, occupations and wealth (Smelser and Lipset 1964: 12-3). It is claimed that in most of those countries economic development and free enterprise had led the way and other societal sectors tended to adjust and follow. In an industrialising world, "the logic of industrialisation" (Kerr et al. [1960] 2001) put the whole society in flux and motion and the new industrial momentum imposed its own economic rationality on the social system, reinforcing features that are functionally consistent with it and undermining others that are not (Bendix and Lipset 1953; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992: 45). According to this logic, mobility was imperative: a new work force rose as new jobs were created; other jobs became redundant and the industrial workforce was subject to new skills and training. As workers picked up new skills, this opened new areas for them, leading to more occupational mobility and geographical movement. Education also moved to new disciplines and specialisations that were to serve and invigorate the industrialisation process. As people became mobile, flexible and competitive following their jobs, and as workers had greater freedom and choices of occupations, class – in terms of occupational borders – became fluid and easy to cross (Kerr et al [1960] 2001: 798-7). Industrialisation also generated its own values which are synonymous to modernity and progress. As people became more mobile, they were expected to acquire individualist values and break away from their families. As occupations became the yardstick of success, achievement, rather than ascription became the norm and individuals derived their social status from their occupations and the life they personally built through their entrepreneurship.<sup>3</sup>

Although education has increasingly been viewed as regulating access to high status position ensuring in this sense a certain degree of permanence in the social structure (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989), some authors (see for example Payne 1987a) still believe that occupation is a more useful indicator of social mobility than education. Exigencies of industrialisation, they claim, create different demands on jobs that are

not necessarily linked to educational levels. To that extent and given the confidence in the transformative power of economic development, social mobility researchers have accepted vertical occupational mobility as a proxy for social mobility and tended to use the latter interchangeably with class mobility (Payne and Abbot 1990). Occupation has been considered the single and simplest indicator of position within the social hierarchy because it carries with it connotations of changes in income, which in turn influence values and attitudes, ideological preferences, consumption patterns, political behaviour and other settings that are not related to work. Thus, the notion is that to understand individuals' moves on the social ladder, all we need to do is trace the progress (or lack thereof) they made in their occupational careers (Payne 1987a:20).

These early conceptual frameworks prescribed a path to modernisation that is linear and does not pay attention to other development trajectories and specificities of other societies that did not follow the Western path to industrialisation. They provide a specific direction and goals for change as well as an exact depiction of its specific mechanisms (Allman 1979:9). No study of social change in the context of less developing countries like Egypt, can overlook the role of the post-colonial state in shaping the development process through central economic planning and engineering of educational and employment policies within the context of the public sector. To study social mobility in the Tunisian context, for example, Allman (1979), found it more useful to examine the effects of the structural changes that accompanied industrialisation and development. He focused on the impact of education as a social measure and process brought about in its expanded form by the post-colonial state, unlike some European countries like Germany and France, where education preceded industrialisation. This is the approach that I am adopting here.

The other problem that this dominant sociological approach, based on assumptions about Western trajectories, poses is the claim that by imposing its own logic and values, modernisation prompts societal changes; it subordinates familial ties to the exigencies of development, accords supremacy to achievement orientations and facilitates occupational and physical mobility so that in general class and status borders become fluid and easy to cross. Again such contentions raise methodological and conceptual challenges for the study of non-Western settings in which industrialisation was stalled. Among other things, these coun-

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tries did not witness the predicted transition into an achievement oriented and status free society but experienced instead a combination of both ascriptive and achievement values as well as capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production (see Ibrahim 1982b). As an industrialising country, the challenge in Egypt has been how to deal with the persistence of status rigidity and the continued tensions between traditional status values and less differentiated social structure on one hand, and the exigencies of industrialisation on the other (see the discussion in Smelser and Lipset 1964: 12-24). This structural functional model established a binary between tradition and modernity, and was criticised for ignoring structural contradictions and conflict.

The excessive focus on the “openness of the system” has spurred interest in studying individuals’ sheer movements from one fixed point to another as if the landscape was totally void of structural constraints and social distances (Blackburn 1997). This has led the early social mobility studies to concentrate on inter-generational mobility to test the taken for granted openness hypothesis (Allman 1979: 3). This they did by comparing male children’s occupational position with that of the father at specific points of time in the life of the two. In operational terms, the farther is destination from origin, more specifically, the movement away from the father’s manual position to the child’s non manual job has been, the closer one got to a situation of perfect mobility (Blackburn 1997).

The problem with the inter-generational approach is that by definition, it requires the choice of specific points in time in the lives of fathers and male children which de-contextualise those changes and do not, therefore, say much about specific forces driving or stalling social mobility. My belief is that without losing sight of familial origins, the qualitative study of intra-generational mobility in terms of individual’s movement along his or her own career – which has received less attention – is more useful in illuminating this missing context.

The argument in early propositions goes on to claim that in industrial societies, work, class and status had become so closely related to one another that it was understood that changes in occupation would result in change in class and status position. Lipset and Bendix (1959:66) claim that occupationally successful individuals only need to change their house to bring their economic and social status in line. But that approach to mobility has been criticised for failing to discern the social processes



entailed in job change (Blackburn 1997: 492-3; Richardson 1977: 19-20). This explains why the shift from manual to non-manual job, which is of particular relevance to this study, continues to be significant in terms of social mobility. The obvious implication is that crossing the threshold from a working class affiliation to membership in the middle class through clerical work, is essentially a qualitative leap.<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis on openness and linearity also entails an inherent assumption about the progressive direction and upward orientation of job moves. No attention is given to horizontal moves and to jobs that do not offer possibilities of promotion and advancement or in contrast, to qualitative and nuanced differences between jobs and subjective feelings towards them. Such an unproblematised presentation of social mobility risks oversimplifying the broader and more significant meaning of particular job moves to individuals. Job changes may appear puny in the bureaucratic sense of the term, but may have a subjective meaning and long term implications for an individual. Once more the example of the move from manual to non-manual jobs is appropriate here as it encompasses many of the complexities of job moves. In particular the case of CSGs emphasises the significance clerical job for women, while raising for discussion at the same time, how these jobs can be mis-defined and manipulated and how they may not necessarily result in any occupational or social mobility.

I claim that occupational and social advancement is not merely a question of job change or income modification, but is more about the social status and experience that accrue when jobs are changed and/or when one gets married (See Hope 1972: 35-6). This requires that we expand the definition of social mobility mainly to emphasise the change in social status as a result of the enhancement of cultural capital (lifestyles and tastes) and social capital (relations with significant others) and economic capital (money and wealth) (Edward liPuma and Sara Keene Meltzoff 1989 in Freeman 2000: 51). Occupations and marriage should be judged by the new social and work environment they help create and the network of people they allow one to build, but most importantly, by their ability to result in durable and sustainable status changes all of which have to be recognised by other strata of the middle class.

The Egyptian case shows that sudden wealth and economic resources alone do not guarantee membership in the middle class. Much more important is the possession of class culture and mastery of class practices

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(Bourdieu 1977) which is difficult to acquire. In Egypt, cultural capital, pedigree and the role of the family in transmitting class, is what distinguishes a 'true' middle class person from a parvenu (Bourdieu 1984). These distinctions are reminiscent of the important division between status and economic groups (Mommsen 1989: 63). The two are treated as separate conceptual categories but they could influence each other on the empirical level. The fact however, is that ownership of material property may or may not serve as an entry to status groups which are conscious of their positions, setting restrictions and imposing limits on their interaction with others and manifesting their distinctiveness through following a particular life style (Giddens 1971: 166).

This study recognises ownership and non-ownership of property as important basis of class division. However, this division results in inequalities that are apparent in the distributive sphere of market situations where individuals display their possessions of "capital" and skills and exchange them for work, life and social opportunities. While variations in wealth can result in inequalities in the sphere of distribution, they are not the only source of inequality. Gender and social status are non-economic social divisions and sources of social and cultural distinction that are as significant as economic resources in determining individuals' inequitable position in the distributive sphere (see Anthias 2001). In particular, social status is an ideological and discursive attribute that lies in the moral and symbolic systems of certain groups (Beteille 1996). Like gender, however, status has material consequences and can contribute to inequality "in terms of the production and allocation of socially valued resources of different types" and involve "hierarchical and inferiorising discourses and practices leading to social inequality" (Anthias 2001: 838; see also Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1983: 66). Thus social mobility denotes a situation in which class conflict is diffuse and not polarised. The multiplicity of sources of inequality implies that different possibilities and multiple strategies are open to people so that those who have limited prospects on one dimension or area can do better on others (Kingston 2000: 8-9). This point will be elaborated below in the discussion of strategy.

#### **1.4.2 Gendered and classed approaches to marriage and work**

Social mobility propositions understand opportunities for occupational and social advancement on the basis of individuals' membership in social

classes in accordance to their positions in the occupational structure. Given the strong link between work and occupational mobility, women are seen to have a disadvantageous position in the labour market due to their domestic responsibilities. This has been used as a reason to append women to the class positions of their fathers before marriage, and to their husbands after marriage. Thus the tendency in the early literature was to confine class analysis and therefore social mobility research to men in their stable role breadwinners and household heads.<sup>5</sup>

The claim that women's position in the stratification order can only be seen through their location next to males within families denies extensive responses. For one, it conveyed the requirement that women had to be family members in order to be recognised. This emphasised an immanent sense of patriarchy as women's existence in the stratification order – particularly if they were not working – could only become visible through their appendage to males (Acker 1973). Other criticisms go further to state that even if women were to be appended to their husbands' social class, it did not necessarily follow that wives were equal to their husbands in terms of community prestige, income, education, opportunities and style of life and (Ibid) . There is also the question of how to define the less visible and more latent "work" that enhances family social status but that is not income generating economic work as defined by labour force surveys, or even the controversial house work. "Status production" which is core to social mobility, is regarded as the type of work that is "non-work" in which various strata of the middle class, particularly women, engage in and is significant in enhancing family's status (see Papanek 1979).<sup>6</sup>

Though the criticisms are significant, they still do not go beyond the structural functional Western model of social mobility. Both the propositions and their criticisms are parochial in that they fail to see the implications of social change in labour markets and marriage contexts in different parts of the non-Western world. Once more the question of including or excluding women from the stratification order is based on a functionalist equating of mobility with occupation and reduces the entire question of social class differences between married couples to occupational differences.

I argue for the need to both contextualise and problematise marriage particularly in its link to employment. We need to examine the feasibility of marriage across different status – and not merely occupational groups.

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It is also important to consider the possibility that marriage may not result in upward social mobility – that it might in fact constitute downward mobility and then in this case, we would need to investigate how to discern such a demotion when it happens (see Acker 1973: 942). Similarly, it is important to find out when and how marriage can be described as contributing to a “successful” social mobility for women and finally, to analyse the relationship between marriage and women’s employment – how employment affects marriage prospects, and also how marriage shapes women’s position towards the labour market and largely determines the choices they have there.

There is no major disagreement about women’s intermittent affiliation to the labour market. However, many place the blame on labour markets which discriminate against women and in which women’s work is segregated into a small number of occupations in the lower hierarchy. Labour markets are said to provide different positions for men and women, favouring the former in terms of both status and financial rewards and restricting the latter’s mobility to higher occupational positions.<sup>7</sup> On other hand, some have opted for a closer examination of women’s work experience over time to ascertain if they are indeed segregated into the same occupational groupings over the life course, and whether they do experience downward mobility as their work life is interrupted by child rearing and family chores (Dex 1987). Others (e.g. Hakim 1995) have taken the position that problems with the labour market and other scapegoats are merely “myths” propagated by feminists, and that there is indeed sex differentials with regard to commitment to work that cannot be attributed to the labour market. In response to those claims, Crompton and Harris (1998: 119), for example, have claimed that women do indeed have a weak relationship to the labour market but the reason lies in that they often have to make adverse choices about work and construct their biographies within constrained conditions.

A deeper look into women’s work reveals the complexity of the picture so that gender segmentation is not the only problem. The jobs women tend to access also correspond to different social class subcultures of low skilled manual jobs, low level non-manual work and professional and managerial work, with women particularly dominant in the second area (see Dex 1987: 16). Not only do these divisions reflect dif-

ferences in wage scales and work conditions but also, curtail mobility between the three sectors.

Job divisions along class lines have reflections on the class identity of job incumbents. For example, workers at lower levels of the non-manual occupational hierarchy have tended to perceive themselves as middle class (Lipset and Bendix 1959: 14-15). Poulantzas (1974: 260-1) believes that this is due to the intermediate type of education they acquire which is not quite that of the working class nor is it the “intellectual” type of education typical of the petty bourgeoisie. It is an education that leans towards the mental side of things or is at least impregnated with this notion. It reinforces the artificial divide between mental and manual work. He also sees clerical workers as politically and ideologically allied with capitalist management and their interests as antagonistic to those of the working class. This alliance is further reinforced by the “secrecy of knowledge” promoted, for example, in bureaucracies and capitalist institutions which clerical workers uphold, and further strengthens the manual/non-manual dividing line between managers and supervisors and the working class (Poulantzas 1974: 270; Burris 1989: 58).

Several authors (see Crompton and Jones 1984; Lockwood 1958; Blau and Duncan 1967 and Braverman 1974) have observed a large degree of indeterminacy of the class position of clerical workers between the middle and the working class. They have pointed to the tendency of class convergence between lower level non manual-employees and manual working class employees given the increasing proletarianisation of white collar workers and the *embourgeoisement* of the proletariat. Braverman in particular believes that both manual and non-manual workers have become deskilled; manual workers have lost their autonomy in the separation between “conception and execution” of work under capitalism, while white collar workers also serve as proletariat, undertaking alienating work under conditions of increased mechanisation of clerical work. These conditions have rendered clerical work similar to factory work: deskilled, degrading, repetitive, routine and offering few opportunities for career improvement. Collins (1991: 68) reaches somewhat similar conclusions with regard to lower level female clerks and secretaries, by applying Dahrendorf’s criteria of power and organisational hierarchy. On the basis of order taking, Collins places female clerks with the working class and names them “white collar working class”. However, he realises that women in lower level clerical positions are in jobs with a strong cul-

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tural component that orients them more toward the status hierarchy and its upward emulation. This in turn tones down their class alienation in contrast to the male working class.

The above positions do not offer space to explore other possible sources of the indeterminacy described above, which, as the case of CSGs shows, could find their sources of tension in the difference between parents' manual occupations and women's non-manual jobs. For CSGs this inter-generational job difference has not been without problems; it posed challenges to women's subjective identities and much of the struggle has been on how to draw a line between their family past and their own present identities, and gain recognition as members of the middle class. In Chapter 4 I explain how this move could not have materialised without the intervention of the state and its active role in conferring a protected context-specific environment in which employees could practice their non-manual middle-class membership. I also show that it has been a vulnerable situation that did not resolve the problem of their original affiliation to manual working class families. Moreover, it did not always guarantee their recognition as members of the middle class by other middle class strata (see the discussion on the Egyptian middle class in Chapter 3).

Generally speaking, the above positions are oblivious to how women experience and negotiate these manual/non manual moves within their gender specific jobs. I argue here that the discussion is particularly important for young women's recent employment which has witnessed the rise of female jobs that are fluid in nature and further blurred the manual/clerical divide by adding a gender tinge to them. In contrast to Acker's (1990) claim that abstract jobs require disembodied persons that only men can fill, the jobs CSGs acquire are embodied both in gender and class terms and in some cases also require "emotional labour" (Wolkowitz 2006: 77) that feeds on gender ideologies and is typically performed by women in lower level positions. On the other hand, a position that may be inferior in terms of authority or pay as is the case with CSGs, may become a resource of human capital in the labour market if it requires a particular set of gender traits and could place its incumbent in a desired position (see Anthias 2001: 386). Again this is relevant to the case of CSGs who have been associated with a specific set of jobs in the labour market. On one hand, this has meant the availability of jobs for

them. On the other, these jobs, as the thesis argues, have not enhanced CSGs' social status.

In this thesis I extend the above discussion, which is central to the trajectories of the younger generation of CSGs, to how the manual/non-manual divide becomes a terrain for the operation of closure mechanisms which seek to perpetuate inequalities by restricting access to non-manual work "to a limited circle of [sic] eligibles" (Parkin 1974: 3). By attempting to define gendered and classed spaces for CSGs, the old and more entrenched middle class makes a collective status claim on who is to be included or excluded from the middle class, which is essentially a claim for the subordination of CSGs. The latter, on the other hand, respond by counter strategies that include usurping opportunities, contesting their position, insisting on a more equal distribution of resources and equal treatment, but also creating sub-strata of individuals beneath them against whom they also close off opportunities (Ibid). The main struggle, as will be indicated below, takes place over the "systems of classification" and the destabilisation of "doxa" by moving it from the sphere of the "self-evidence of the common sense world" to heterodoxy, the realm of discourse and multiplicity of opinions (Bourdieu 1977: 167).

#### **1.4.3 How to understand structures and women's agency**

In this work I address the relationship between social structures and human agency: whether they are independent and/or opposing entities and the extent to which structures are impervious to human powers and choice. In the following paragraphs I deal with the nature of structures and, the potentials and limits of human agency in particular as they relate to women.

First there is the question of whether all social structures are inherently constraining. Lived reality shows that structures are not necessarily homologous and as they include constraints within them, they also offer different sets of resources. Moreover, the sheer multiplicity of structures also entails opportunities. This multiplicity implies that some structures or mechanisms may counteract the effect of other structures (Baert 2005: 94). While individuals – women in this case – may not have the choice of their class locations, they may have more freedom in choosing their gender path. Also, structural dynamics may not be oppressive in their entirety. Thus, while this study sees class and gender as mutually reinforcing

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and often overlapping, it does not see this relationship as necessarily leading to irreversible disadvantage.

The fact that gender and status dynamics take place on subjective, inter-subjective and institutional levels implies that while women may be disadvantaged on one level, there are always emancipatory possibilities on other levels.<sup>8</sup> An oppressive gender order in the private sphere may be offset by a more relaxed employment situation. Similarly, a disadvantaged status situation at work might be balanced by an equitable gender division of labour at home (Risman 2004). For example, my interviews have shown that depending on whether or not they marry from their own social class, women may not feel status equality at home with members of their own family. They may however experience gender and status equality in their homogenous work environments, for example, in the public sector. In other words, preoccupation with oppressive intersectionalities might prevent us from seeing some windows of opportunities.

The next question then becomes how to depict agency and understand how actors exercise it, selecting one path and not the other. Some believe agency lies in the reflexive and deliberative abilities of human beings. Archer (2007) for example attributes a large amount of power to the “internal conversations” whereby individuals decide their course of action on the basis of an individual project, in this case a social mobility project. In this sense, she contends that social structures are not inherently constraining as they include both enablements and constraints. According to her, the activation of those causal powers largely depends on the individual projects of actors. The problem with Archer’s propositions is that she accords a large amount of power to human intentionality, reflexivity and projects. The conversations she proposes seem to be too internal and intra-subjective with little input from inter-subjective interaction with society.

Post-structuralists find agency in discourse and open discursive spaces that enable individuals to speak as agents (Hekman 1995: 202). They contend that the sheer presence of multiple discourses allows the possibility of agency. Some discourses construct women as passive and dependent but others portray them as active and resourceful; some discourses are hegemonic while others are less powerful. It is the task of the agents to piece together individual and creative subjectivities from the repertoire available to them, while destabilising and subverting hegemonic discourses. Post-structuralists believe that just as there are discourses



that repress, there are others that liberate and the tools or resources available to counteract discourses are there for individuals from the same culture, who speak the same language (Ibid: 205). Other post-structuralists, like Butler (1999: 19) see the power of discourse in its ability to confirm social norms by reiteration and re-enactment, while the power to resist hegemonic discourse emanating from “failure” in the process of repetition or “misrecognition” (Ibid). Subjectivities, she contends, are products of the discourses present to subject; the creation of subjectivity is bound by discourses but it can also result in unique creations (Ibid).

The problem with agency as depicted in discourse is that it does not tell us what conditions must prevail in order for subjects to become agentic through discourse. In particular, Butler relies a great deal on the possibility of “misrecognition” in the sense that the one who is hailed may fail to hear, misread the call, turn the other way, answer to another name, or insist on not being addressed in that way (Ibid). For her, agency happens as a result of the vulnerability of the re-enactment of social norms (Butler 1999: 19) which can fail in the process of their repetition.

While I believe that relying on “slips and gaps”, does not produce a positive form of agency, I agree that discourse is important in influencing subjectivity and in destabilising interpersonal relations. As Chapter 8 shows, domestic servants can contest their middle class madams by producing a feminine discourse on health and beauty which madams believe is their own monopoly. But what is the power of this discourse in terms of transforming structures? Even if we accept that we can have a “war of discourses”, we have to admit that some discourses are more powerful, more pervasive and more penetrating than others. Post-structuralists assert that by language we create our world. However, I claim that by “we” is meant dominant groups who can make their words stick. A dominant group can exercise power over others groups because there is an objective relationship of inequality which the dominant language only mirrors. Snook (1990: 174) rightly asserts that a dialogue between two persons reflects the objective power of the groups these two persons represent. When they speak, they bring their two groups into existence.

Feminists have also left their mark on the definition of agency by introducing the notion of agency as resistance. This again raises questions on how to depict this resistance and if it provides a good description of women’s experiences in different contexts. Thus, instead of an active

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notion of resistance, Risseuw (1988: 162) for example, proposes the concept of “power by consensus” which postulates that through ideological hegemony – “invisible mechanisms of power” – men and women take decisions that stabilise the status quo and inequality, but that are viewed as “normal” and common sense. Her definition entails the possibility that women will choose not to articulate resistance (Ibid: 154).

Short of active resisters, women have been depicted as bargainers and negotiators. They have been presented as manoeuvring and demonstrating daily but subtle acts of resistance both in their homes and at their work places (see Bibars 2001; El- Kholi 2002). They adopt discrete strategies that go beyond the simple powerful/ subordinate dichotomy as they protest and acquiesce at the same time (Macleod 1992: 388). Although these approaches seem to over-rely on the “cunning of culture” (Hawkesworth 1997: 680) i.e. women’s cultural resourcefulness, wiles and ruses, they have opened up women’s lives and lived experience for scrutiny from the prism of gender relations that are mutable, historical and contextual.<sup>9</sup>

Feminists writing particularly about Arab and Islamic societies have attacked notions of modernity that follow on the heels of the Western experience with its emphasis on individualism and freedom, to pose the important question: Are there alternative modernities that encompass different definitions of agency? (Abu Lughod 2009). Joseph (1999: 2) takes this line of reasoning a step further to underscore that unlike the “bounded, autonomous, and separate self” in Western societies, men and women in Arab societies have “relational selves” that valorise rather than pathologise their embeddedness in their families from which they derive their sense of meaningfulness and fulfilment. It is a relationality that helps generate “healthy, responsible and mature persons” (Ibid: 9). Similarly, Abu Lughod claims that modernists do not want to believe that for example, it is possible that women would value their families more than their work and that it is the tension between these values and economic needs that push them into the labour market with its degrading jobs and unrewarding careers. Others have pushed the question of resistance further, not ruling out locating agency in submission. Mahmood (2005: 15) questions whether agency should only be viewed in terms of acts that challenge social norms, and not those that uphold them. She doubts if we can have one fixed sense of agency in advance and claims that what appears to be acts of docility and submission “from a progressivist point

of view, may actually be a form of agency in other discourses and structures of subordination. Agency in this case is not merely resistance to domination, but the capacity of action that this subordination creates and enables” (Ibid: 18).

I agree with Sewell (1992: 21-2) that agency is implied in the existence of structures and is constituent of structures. Agency in the sense of our “[sic] socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112) refers to our ability to exert some degree of control over social relations and change them to some degree, but it is the characteristics of the structures that inform our social world and our ability to act in a particular context. The workings of structures are essentially a function of time and place.

Furthermore, as our conditions and identity shift both spatially and temporally, the distributional impact of structures on us and our ability to deal with them varies (Hulko 2009: 49). This explains why I find it useful to adopt a life course perspective to the study of agency which links personal biographies to changing social and historical developments and structural changes. A critical life course analysis, with its emphasis on life as “experienced” rather than as “expectable”, (Handel 2000) underscores variations of experiences and strategies over one’s life. It emphasises the possibility of doing away with stereotypical images of women’s life path determined by marriage, child-bearing and child-rearing (Katz and Monk 1993: 27) and allows us to uncover the extent to which individuals abide or do not abide by the social roles and expectations assigned to them (Handel 2000). This is particularly pertinent to the experience of married women who enter the labour market and begin their occupational journey after marriage, as will be demonstrated below.

The above emphasises the need to study agency through lived experiences in changing contexts that mirror the internal workings of immanent social structures of gender and class and at the same time, generate an overarching framework for “commonality of experiences” (Collins 2004: 248). This, in other words, stresses the likelihood that individuals in the same social position and common location will confront a similar situation that is different to that of others from outside it, and will be subject to dominant discourses (McNay 2004b: 187). Commonality of experience is important because our knowledge, for example of female CSGs, remains incomplete if we do not support it with knowledge about others – men in particular – in comparable situations (Sayer 2000: 55). It is only in this sense that experience can become [sic] “analysable in terms

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of the *social* category of experience... when my experience includes *the experience of others*" (Bhaskar 1978: 187 in Lazreg 1994: 51) and can also be contrasted to the experience of other groups. It is important to remember however, that studying agency through experience also demonstrates that although CSGs – both old and young generations – wrestle with the same governing structures, their experience is not *identical* as they do not pursue the same courses of action. Perfect regularities are rare because "...Lived reality is an open social system (Baert 2005: 94) and it is the site of action and agency mediating between women as individuals and the macro structures (McNay: 2004a).

As mentioned in the Introduction, the concept of "dignity" is central to this study (see "Reflexivity and ethical issues" below.) As I use it here, dignity does not merely denote a dignified life which guarantees basic needs such as income and work but more importantly the recognition by others as individuals who are visible and worthy of recognition and respect. I argue that both men and women, products of technical education, are engaged in a collective pursuit of dignity that is part and parcel of their professional and social advancement. Their dignity is contested by other segments of the middle class who emerged in different times and are more established in their positions. The notion of *Welad Nass*, literally meaning children of people, which I develop in Chapter 3, is a status-conscious exclusionary concept that distinguishes those with legitimate social claims for advancement from others who do not. For the old middle class it entails ownership of status traits that allows membership in the middle class. Without those status privileges, the dignity of CSGs is undermined and has to be struggled for.

In this thesis I argue that different age cohorts who have been exposed to different historical times and events have addressed different constraints and resources. Also within the same group of women, the ability to take decisions and act on them has varied from their position as daughters and siblings within families to that of married women in a conjugal homes or even as adult single women. For example, I have observed that emotional connectivity which according to Joseph (1993, 1994) reinforces patriarchy, has had significant trade-offs in the case of resourceful young women in families where male members are unemployed and cannot support their female members. It gave young women a sense of indispensability which reinforced their decision making power and agency. On the other hand, it diverted their attention from plans for

more education or marriage. This, in the wider picture, might have undermined their opportunities for social mobility (See Chapter 8). Moreover, women in this study have demonstrated a superior ability to push their agentic abilities to the limit on the basis of their reading of the mutability of social norms. Unconventional living arrangements that do not fall within the society-sanctioned marriage norms are generally disapproved of. But again, under circumstances when no other option could be found, they were accepted. It has all depended, at the end, on women's ability to decide which norms and rules could be twisted, and again, shift them from the arena of the doxa to heterodoxy. This approach to studying women's agency, I suggest, elides seeing women as perennial victims of patriarchy and viewing men as women's enemies across time and space. At the same time, it allows us to glean women's power of resistance, selectivity and dismissal (See Chapter 8).

#### **1.4.4 Habitus, common sense and strategies**

I situate this study within a theoretical framework that brings individuals and society into a relational interaction, in an attempt to break the dualism between agency and structure. According to this approach, the subjective and objective dimensions of action are not seen as two distinct realities. Rather, there is a dialectic relation between action and objective chances that is always at work throughout the social world.

Bourdieu provides the conceptual tools needed to understand how agency works and the limits of individual action, which I find particularly pertinent to the study of social mobility.<sup>10</sup> First, he enriches the concept of status referred to above, by articulating the notion of cultural and other capitals, so pertinent to the experience of class (see Bourdieu 1984). I also find the concepts of habitus, strategies and common sense and the links between the three, particularly useful to this study.

Bourdieu believes that individuals embody the social structure through their habitus which takes the form of a "system of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu: 1977: 72), allowing individuals to know how to "read" the future that fits them: that is made for them and for which they are made.

Social reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like 'a fish in water': it does not

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feel the weight of water, and it takes the world about itself for granted (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 127).

Habitus constructs and classifies the social world and makes some choices seem the only choices. The social context, inculcated by habitus, not only directly shapes the capacity of individuals to access certain resources, but also limits their ability to imagine other outcomes and to determine whether there are other legitimate or worthwhile pursuits (Young 1999: 202).

Bourdieu provides further insight into the notion of habitus by taking it above the level of the individual and giving it a collective character in the sense of a family habitus, which mediates between individuals and social classes setting the limits on what is possible for the whole group. In this sense, it stabilises the social order. Acting as a “collective subject” (Bourdieu 1998: 70),<sup>11</sup> families transcend the wills of their members. They manifest themselves in collective decisions in which members feel required to act as parts of a united body. Even any diversity or deviation should be viewed as taking place within an overall context of this homogeneity and sharing of objective conditions emanating “...from singular but concerted standpoints” (Bourdieu 1977: 86).

The homogenising of family and class habitus results from the homogenous conditions in which a group lives. Objective structures manifest themselves in the convergent experiences of same group members who tend to face the same “closed doors”, “dead ends”, and “limited prospects” (Ibid). This is what enables practices to be harmonised without intentional calculation and without any need for coordination (Ibid: 80).

As it embodies this correspondence between the objective and internalised world, habitus develops a ‘sense of limits’ (or ‘sense of reality’) – the bases of “common sense” or *doxa* (Harker 1990: 90). For Bourdieu, common sense represents the unsaid; it constitutes the consensus of the community and collectivity and their commonly held sense of the world.

Understandably, habitus has been criticised for its over- emphasis on the function of “inculcation” and “conditioning”. The main question raised by critics (e.g. Bohman 1999; Calhoun 1993 among many others) is how to understand the role of individual agency if acts are so closely curtailed by habitus that provides excessive correspondence between one’s aspirations and objective situation outcomes. Critics have argued

that with this degree of internalisation of one's social environment and surrounding structures, there is actually no need for any conscious strategic planning.

Indeed Bourdieu states that in such situations where habitus predominates, strategies are often neither conscious, guided by rational calculations, nor are they mechanically determined (Bourdieu: 1990: 22). They too are practical sense of things – a “feel for the game” and a practical mastery of its logic which is gained through experience of the game (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986: 112). An individual with a habitus that is a perfect fit between subjective inclinations and objective conditions strategises with seeming dis-interestedness (Risseuw 1988: 175).

But a good player according to Bourdieu is also an individual who does what needs to be done and what the game demands and requires (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986). This presupposes that within the possibilities and constraints offered by habitus, individuals are expected to be creative and to improvise in order to adapt to situations that are infinitely varied.

It is here that I would like to make a distinction between strategies in terms of the power to generate relations with an exterior other – and I also add the ability to put in place durable and long term arrangements – and daily tactics and manoeuvres. De Certau (1988) emphasised that daily tactics are those that reflect a weaker position by individuals in a space that is not their own and whose rules are set by others exterior to them. In initiating their acts, he claims, individuals have an ability to manoeuvre and mobility but they initiate their moves in a context bound by the exigencies of the moment. A tactic according to De Certau, “cannot secure independence with respect to circumstances ... [and] has at its disposal no base where it can [sic] capitalize on its advantages” (De Certau: xix). It is a situation where individuals deal with circumstances as “blow by blow” in an attempt to manipulate immediate events and turn them into opportunities (Ibid: 37). I have found this to be crucial to the case of CSGs. Regardless of the context in which women are found, whether they are daughters in families, married adults, or single women, they have not ceased to display agentic capacities in intending, designing and following through creatively. This is a central element that runs throughout the thesis. However, I have found it useful to draw a distinction between tactics and daily moves in response to perceived immediate closures on one hand, and strategies that reflect some degree of deliberation about

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more lasting arrangements on the long run, as indicated in the following chapters.

It is important to remember that despite unmistakable determinism, Bourdieu leaves room for experience and improvisation. Those are acquired through practice given the availability of multiple fields and therefore, the possibility of a variety of positions and new adjustments. Yet practice, according to Bourdieu, is invariably in the direction of compromising with surrounding material conditions (Harker 1984: 121) and there are limits within which we act to achieve our goals (James Bohman 1999: 134). Any changes that come as a result of experience in life are never too radical because they are always based on “premises of the previous state” (Bourdieu 2000: 161). Following this argument about the determining role of habitus, Bourdieu is really saying, and I agree, that habitus is a product of history and thus is “durable but not eternal” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133); it is open to experience and subject to change and can, therefore, reinforce or modify structures. However, there is no room for major strategic calculations, or for grand transformations (Bourdieu 1977: 76). It is a situation where individuals co-opt parts of the system, rather than attempt to overthrow it altogether (Risseuw 1988:148).

Strategies as used by Bourdieu are appropriate because they dispel the sense of excessive strategic calculations, rationality and planning typical of the military and corporate worlds, which arguably dictate a discourse that influences individuals as they construct their lives, instead of allowing them to construct their lives by themselves (Wallace 2002: 3). I find Bourdieu’s notion of practical strategies derived from one’s habitus that conditions individuals and imposes limits, particularly useful when applied not only to women in their life trajectories, but to households as they reflect on the education and allocation of financial resources for their children. I argue in Chapter 5 that strategic deliberations do not apply to families that do not have control over ‘strategic’ resources to make such planning and deliberations possible. As I also demonstrate in this thesis, families’ ‘strategies’ reflect their position as a collectivity. Equally importantly, the intensity of the need to strategise differs from one generation of families (and women) to the other.

Not only is habitus open to new experiences and allows therefore some (limited) social change, but an exact reproduction of the status quo is elided given the inherent nature of common sense. *Doxa*, or common



sense, might be subject to change as a result of new and major economic, ideological and political forces that put into question the practices of applicable common sense so that the “common sense of yesterday becomes inapplicable today” (Holton 1997: 41). Applicable common sense needs to be revisited and a new one elaborated (Ibid). Thus, a clever agent is one who takes advantage of such a situation and can see when a situation of shared common sense is moving into the arena of heterodoxy i.e. multiple and competing views, has a sense of imminent change and can take advantage of that. After all, the sense of limits allowed by habitus gives agents that monitoring power and gives them as well the freedom to judge when the order can be breached and the limit of that breach. Bourdieu says that habitus

[G]ives an agent a sense of limits in the widest sense of the term, while it also offers a legitimate transgression of limits, on the basis of knowing and ordering of the world and strategies of handling necessary or unavoidable breaches of that order (Bourdieu 1977: 124).

We also need to remember that doxa is an area that is contested by different groups in the society as it constitutes an arena of struggle over “systems of classification”: The dominated groups “seek to push back the limits of doxa and expose the arbitrariness of what is taken for granted”, while on the other hand, “the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect substitute, *orthodoxy*” (Bourdieu 1977: 169).

The struggle over doxa has changing forms in different economies. In modern capitalist economies mechanisms of control are in place, that run business and appropriate profit without much personal intervention. However, in traditional, pre-capitalist economies and in transitions to new systems that organise work and economic life, one cannot be reassured that institutions are firmly in place that would perform the functions of imposing doxa and reproducing domination. In such a case, the task becomes personalised. Bourdieu argues, until such a system that ensures reproduction is established, dominant groups have to

[W]ork directly, daily, personally, to produce and reproduce conditions of domination which are even then never entirely trustworthy. Because they cannot be satisfied with appropriating the profits of a social machine which has not yet developed the power of self-perpetuation, they are

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obliged to resort to the elementary forms of domination, in other words, the direct domination of one person by another (Bourdieu 1977: 190).

Bourdieu (1998: 101) argues that in such situations, sometimes even in the “very heart of the economic economy”, the logic of symbolic exchanges and “symbolic alchemy” prevails. That logic is based on mutual knowledge and recognition on the part of parties to the exchange in which the euphemism of economic power and interest is implicitly understood. Through discourse and through acts, economic relations particularly those characterised by exploitation are [sic] “misrecognised” and “transfigured” by the recipients (Ibid: 99-100).

The last point is that in this thesis I extend the concept of habitus to organisations. It is argued that organisations have hegemonic definitions of gender (Trautner 2005: 773) whereby gender practices are enacted in accordance to and accountability with accepted gender culture and norms in particular work institutions and expectations about how men and women should act (Yancey-Martin 2003: 354). Social class and gender structures become closely inter-related and women perform gender roles that are “integrally linked and inseparable from their class” (Bettie 2000: 15).

Bureaucracies are based on formal rationality that organises the economy. Through rules, they do not only provide technical efficiency, but also secure the consent of their employees by delineating responsibilities and jurisdiction, division of labour, rights, hierarchies and allocation of positions according to qualifications and on the basis of all the above, powers and rewards (Hodson 2001: 28, 29). On one hand this process involves a great deal of depersonalisation, isolation and lack of social interaction (Ferguson 1984: 12-3) but on the other, it often implies collective institutional attitudes and practices to the extent that one can speak about “collectivities as the locus of subjectivity and agency” (Connell: 2003: 371). Within this collective agency, women in bureaucracies are urged to conform to norms and not encouraged to demonstrate “individualism” (Ferguson 1984: 84-5). They also participate in imposing and reproducing the institutional culture. As Foucault (1975) has shown, power is reproduced through the creation of new subjectivities as well.

## 1.5 Methodology

In order to undertake this study, I used a variety of methods. Next to findings of labour market surveys (see below) that introduced me to the education, employment and marriage terrains, I relied on the literature on Egypt's political economy and social history from the 1952 revolution onwards, to place policies in perspective and grasp changing contexts. I conducted interviews in the form of extended work histories with women of different age groups and marital status, and in the two main work sectors: public sector and informal sector, in addition to men, and employers. The most insightful part of the process was when the two accounts – surveys and interviews – intersected and when I could see, for example, how socio-economic and labour market changes were reflected in women's job decisions and moves and when women's accounts directly corresponded to broader macro events (Walby 1991). The correspondence between women's narratives and theoretical constructions and other empirical data represented in survey findings, indicates that the "...narrative/construction can be said to determine the evidence as much as the evidence determines the narrative/construction" (Skeggs: 1997a). The process of conducting this research required more than just reading and listening. It involved a construction of complex data that was simultaneously past and present.

### 1.5.1 The process: The construction of data

#### *Capturing change in a changing context*

The challenge in this study has been to grasp social mobility as a *process in time* (Karpati 1981) in a world that is also moving on. This work focuses on women who shared a particular stream of education that was made possible in the context of a major revolution for social change, but within subsequent changes in socio-economic and political contexts, have experienced different outcomes. Governments and policies have changed; labour markets were not the same and social groups had risen and disappeared while status rigidity has remained largely intact. Exposures to different historical times meant that education, employment and marriage were experienced differently by the two cohorts of women under study, working as enablements in some situations and blockages in others. Different timing of marriage and entry into the labour market meant that women did not deal with work careers, marital relations and

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transitions to school and adulthood in the same way. Where women were in their lives when change was most felt, impacted the way they experienced their trajectories, decisions and strategies. Because of delayed marriages, young women were living longer with their families and their lives continued to be connected to that of their parents and siblings.

Throughout the thesis, it was important not to lose sight of – and attempt to capture – aspects of continuity and change, mobility and immobility – all hard to see – in a changing world. Soon in the process I realised that even though I was focusing on intra-generational mobility, respondents were narrating a continuous present in which families and significant others have had an influential role in shaping but did not entirely monopolise (Bertaux and Thompson 1993: 1-3). Families offered aspects of their own cultures. They transmitted possibilities, disadvantages and dreams that remained unfulfilled. Many critical decisions were taken within families. The concern with education and subsequent decisions were socially grounded in family aspirations, but equally so were decisions of incompatible marriages, the results of which extended into later stages and became women's responsibility to deal with. Selecting what in family transmissions individuals sought to perpetuate certainly spoke of individual agency, but evidence also points to the limits of the two – families and individuals – in the face of changing circumstances.

Critical events in the processes of social change such as coming up against a dead-end, moving into a transition and experiencing turning points and the effect of all these on one's aspirations and practices had to be highlighted. Along with these were the effects of socio-historical and economic developments in changing the content of certain jobs. For example, a central point this thesis tried to understand was while cross-sectional data shows two groups of women as essentially performing secretarial work at specific points of time, my interviews have shown that the definition and content of that work for CSGs has changed in a major way, that we may no longer be talking about the same job performed 20 years ago. My work also shows that we have to be extremely cautious comparing two types of women, one of whom had a linear clerical career all along while the other came to it from disparate work backgrounds and left it to get married then went to another job of a manual nature.

Essentially all these moves have had different meanings to the women and implications on how they strategised in life.

### ***Moving between statistics and narratives***

I cannot say that this study started only with my work on the dissertation. I had been interested in the situation of women in intermediate locations long before my formal studies began and some of my observations were made years earlier. I had had many informal chats with CSGs at hairdressers', shops and houses. I had heard stories, read books and watched movies mostly about their deviance and their poverty, but none about their education and their work. These informal encounters were diverse and each woman was taking me in a different life journey. With my work on this thesis, I started to look for a pattern or a thread to follow.

My work coincided with a visible national interest in studying labour force participation represented in the successive labour force surveys conducted in 1988, 1998 and 2006,<sup>12</sup> the 1999 Adolescence and Social Change in Egypt (ASCE), the Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE 2010), and the continued tradition of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), among others. In particular, the 2006 Egypt Labour Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) added more modules to the questionnaires on marriage and educational histories that enriched our knowledge of labour force participation (See Assaad 2009: 4).

The 2006 ELMPS findings were disseminated in 2007, the year of my field-work. The survey highlight was that unemployment in Egypt had declined from 11.7 percent in 1998 to 8.3 percent in 2006 (Ibid: 20) but remained high for technical school graduates and reached its highest levels among university graduates (Ibid: 29). I started my field work by engaging in the interview process while simultaneously learning more about the results of the ELMPS. The two processes continued to inform each other: I would observe a statistical trend which I tried to ascertain from the interviews, or alternatively, I would learn of a trend in my interviews which I would seek to verify statistically. Often there was agreement between the two as when for example, ELMPS 2006 showed that the majority of women who worked in the public sector did not change jobs and remained there until retirement. Similarly, once in the informal sector, women tended to stay there or move out of the labour force. These

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were my observations too. Only the reasons were different and those could not be explained thoroughly by the ELMPS.

Undertaking this study, I came to question the extent to which labour force surveys have been able to capture the intricacies of CSGs work. They have not been capable to fully grasp women's labour participation even quantitatively.<sup>13</sup> I also developed new insights into work in the informal sector, understanding what "disguised unemployment"<sup>14</sup> meant and realising that when addressing women's work I was mostly dealing with a rather flexible and "extended" definition of work rather than the "market labour force" definition which excludes production for subsistence and family consumption.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, I observed women's reluctance to report work that they perceived as compromising their social status. Particularly in the informal sector, women often combined two and three jobs at the same time. And because of the low status of two of the three jobs, they were ready to only report one. Most often it was the other two jobs that had richer insights about the question of social mobility. This confirms what other authors (e.g. Dex 1991) have observed, that accurate reporting of work events was not only related to how far back in time it goes and the number of events, but also to "social desirability and association with success and failure" (Ibid: 6). Moreover, my interviews have demonstrated the difficulty of finding a pattern for women's job moves in the informal sector as they have tended to move back and forth between manual and non-manual jobs and waged and self employment. Also, some CSGs were secretaries in a public sector company in the morning and domestic maids in the afternoon. I had doubts about the ability of surveys to capture the multiplicity and frequency of job moves men and women experienced. I also wondered what we could meaningfully understand from survey questions about "reasons for unemployment" which considered "voluntarily unemployed" individuals reporting that "pay was unacceptable" or the "job did not correspond to qualifications" (See Assaad 2006: 28 and 43). Particularly in my interviews with women in the informal sector, these two categories of reasons provided insightful cues about job degradation and exploitation and areas of contestation that only an extended and qualitative discussion could disclose.

My aim was to unravel the *meaning* CSGs as products of a particular type of education, attached to employment, unemployment and job moves, in order, in the final analysis, to discern what social mobility

meant to them. I was interested in how they experienced the job market and the implications and effects of labour market restructuring on them. As I proceeded with the work histories, using the successive jobs as stations in CSGs social advancement, women were pushing their narration forcefully to other areas such as the influence of their families on their decisions, the effect of family socialisation and the influence of neighbours, schools and numerous significant others on their choices. They also wanted me to know about the trajectories of siblings and how and why they took different or similar paths, and what education, marriage and dignity meant to all of them. What started out as work histories, expanded and grew into richer life histories with work occupying only one of their many aspects.

### 1.5.2 The sample

#### *A caveat on sampling method*

It is important to note that the sample drawn is not a random sample, but instead purposely drawn. The reasons for doing so are twofold. First, there is no sampling frame available from which a sample could be drawn. National statistics give aggregate numbers, but no registry of CSG workers exists. Given, furthermore, that CSG workers can be found across different sectors in the economy, including the informal sector, it is not possible to construct a two stage sample obtained by first sampling employers and then sampling workers within this category. Second, given the in-depth nature of the interviews, my fieldwork could only include a limited number of cases (90 women and 20 men) within the sample, the selection of cases was done purposely to make sure that the sample would include sufficient variety of worker characteristics and of the sectors within which they work.

The method used was to start from a group of women (men) within my immediate circle of acquaintances and to use this initial selection to generate a larger sample by “snowballing” the sample size in a manner described earlier.

This form of sampling has allowed me to come to grips with diverse qualitative contexts within which CSGs work. But it should be explicitly noted that this type of sampling does not allow me to make valid statistical inferences about the population since it is not possible to calculate confidence intervals or sampling errors from a non-random sample. The

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summary tables drawn from this sample and presented subsequently in this thesis, therefore, are merely indicative of patterns inherent in the sample, but are not representative of the population at large. This does not mean that they do not provide insights, but rather that such insights can at best be taken as suggestive of possible population characteristics, but not as estimates thereof.

My sample comprises female CSGs, male technical school graduates, public sector officials as well as employers in the private sectors and NGOs, both local and international as follows:

### ***Women CSGs***

By mid eighties, the Ministry of Manpower which had the job of matching graduates to jobs, started to discourage young people from applying to the public sector and the waiting period was getting much longer than before. It became clear that the public sector was on its way to dissolution. Also, around 1985 the effect of the oil boom had receded; Egyptian workers returned home from the Arab Gulf countries and unemployment began to rise. Thus, I used 1985 as the year of graduation to divide the two groups. Those who graduated before 1985 – aged between 40 and 60 – belonged to the old age group. They were state employees, having graduated before the imposition of restrictions on public sector employment. The younger group comprises women who graduated in different years after 1985. Their age ranged between 20 and 39.

Typically, young people leave secondary school around the age of 18. In the spring of 2007 when I interviewed respondents at the lower end of the young age group (20-39), they had left school only a few years earlier, had experienced a job or two, were transitioning into a job or were already working. The older women in the same young group have often had longer years of experience in a variety of jobs.

As mentioned earlier, I interviewed a total of 90 women. My sampling was generally informed by the findings of 2006 ELMPS which indicated that the vast majority of the old generation was in the public sector while the younger generation engaged in the informal sector. My initial interviews were with some women within my immediate circle of acquaintances in NGOs and the informal sector. Those helped me find my bearings and I had a better grasp of the age, work and marital status categories I was grappling with. At the same time, those were constantly informed by my readings and exploration of statistical data. As I became



confident that I was to explore two main areas of work, I asked respondents to introduce me to their friends making sure to diversify the types and sectors of work and to capture as many age ranges and marital status as I could. I was aware of the risk of typically ending up with a homogeneous or mosaic-like sample. For example, within the public sector broadly defined,<sup>16</sup> I interviewed women in public sector companies, as well as women in government service departments and noted differences between the two, as indicated in Chapter 4. In the informal sector, I also interviewed young women in different work places. This is detailed in the following paragraphs.

### ***Place of work***

#### **Women in the formal public sector**

These include 35 women aged 40-60 who worked as clerks in the public sector broadly defined.

#### **Women in the informal public and private sectors**

These comprise 55 women aged 20 to 39 in the informal sector. Jobs in this category cover a wide variety including: secretaries/clerks, clinic attendants, shop assistants, kindergarten supervisors, workers in local NGOs, domestic workers, hotel waitresses and factory workers. The main feature here is informal relations with employers: no long term contracts and/or no social or medical insurance.

### ***Marital status***

Most of the women in the public sector were married. A minority was widowed, divorced or single. In the informal sector, the number of respondents was distributed between unmarried, engaged, and married women. A few were divorced.

Feminists (e.g. Acker 1973) and other writers (e.g. Kingston 2000: 50) have pointed out that social mobility propositions are not only ambivalent about the situation of working women, but also complexly exclude some groups from the stratification order, such as unemployed women and men, housewives, and the elderly who are no longer active in the structure. The concern with housewives is particularly critical in the literature because of the question of women's appendage to husband's class status, as mentioned earlier.

**Table 1.1**  
*Sample summary*

Women 1 (N=35)	Women 2 (N=55)
Public sector; formal (long term contract and social insurance)	Informal market: public and private; (definite period of time or no contracts; no social insurance)
Mainly clerical	Clerical, manual, undefined
Age range: 40-60	Age range: 20-39
Marital status: mainly married	All types of marital statuses

Although I have been aware of this shortfall, I did not focus in this study on housewives *per se* for a number of reasons. The first is that as I interviewed more women, it was becoming clear to me that the intricate relationship between CSGs as products of a particular type of education on one hand, and employment and marriage as mediators of social mobility on the other, was significant and not marriage or housewifery *per se*. The second justification (which does not apply to women formally employed in the public sector) appeared in the course of my fieldwork. It had to do with the fact that a number of the women in the informal sector were indeed housewives at least for a period of time before they decided to join the labour market and I got to learn from them about both their status as housewives *and* the move from home to work. The third reason was my observation that in general the tendency was for CSGs to marry within the same social strata i.e. from similar socio economic and status levels.<sup>17</sup> This point will be elaborated in the following chapters.

### **Men CSGs**

Similarities and differences are a central concern to this study and gender raises challenges because women in general are distributed across other groups, are members of other populations and occupy different positions in power hierarchies. CSGs in this study have overlaps and differences with other women but also with men of their same social background and education. I interviewed 20 men in the age group 20-60 who graduated from technical education as a comparator group. Again I applied the same work type, age and marital status diversification used with women.

I observed that men were more evenly distributed among the three types of education: industrial, commercial and agricultural. Also, because of the large number of male graduates of technical education, the mismatch between specialisations and jobs among the older group in the public sector was more pronounced among males than females. Thus it was more common to see for example males with industrial or agricultural degrees working in clerical positions. In the informal sector they were also represented in different areas of work. Some were exclusively male like security personnel or fast food delivery while other areas were shared by men and women, like waiters in hotels, salespersons, pharmacy attendants etc.

### ***Employers***

In the public sector, I interviewed senior officials and managers in their capacity as supervisors of technical school employees, my main target group. I also interviewed officials mainly in the ministries of manpower and education as well as the Central Agency for Organisation and Management, in order to obtain direct and clear information about rules and regulations governing employment, particularly those related to technical education graduates. These latter interviews proved essential to sort out the massive flux and contradictory regulations, many of which are not in written documents, such as the current status of the employment scheme that was enforced in 1963 and the present role of the ministry of manpower in securing jobs for young people.

In the private sector, I conducted interviews with a variety of employers in both the formal and informal private sector in banks, hospitals, clinics, schools and in NGOs. After a few interviews in the formal private sector, for example in banks, I was learning that they were mainly recruiting university graduates and were not hiring technical school graduates in “professional” positions, so I focused on the informal sector.

### **1.5.3 Interviewing women CSGs in the public sector**

Interviewing women in the public and informal sectors posed different challenges. It was easy to find public sector employees as they were located in specific work places and government agencies and once I got to their offices and explained to their superiors my research, I had their permission to speak to CSGs. My routine was to spend a day in a department, which as explained in Chapter 4, usually consisted of a majori-

ty of technical school graduates. I would learn about their age, marital status and previous work places, and then approach those of them that I felt provided the diversity I needed. Sometimes, just by approaching women with different types of dress, I was reaching that diversity. Often women who did not cover their hair were Christian, or from a higher social class.

In most of the cases, women agreed to speak to me. But the interviews were too formal and businesslike as respondents felt assigned by their superiors to speak to me and were “brought” to meet me in the company’s salon for an interview. I changed my strategy after a couple of interviews and began to use my informal contacts to guide me to potential participants. Without obtaining the permission of company directors, I was able to walk into their offices as a personal visitor and sit around until they finished their daily business. Sitting there, I had the chance to observe the physical characteristics of the place and arrangement of work stations and acquire some insights about occupational hierarchies and interpersonal relations between co-workers. I asked other office occupants casual questions about the history of the company, organisation of work and their daily routine, before I had quiet and focused time with the participants.

A number of times after spending a day with a participant at work, I gave her a ride to her house and was sometimes invited to have tea or a meal with her family. At respondents’ homes, I had the chance to observe how they arranged their houses, their pre-occupation with orderliness and cleanliness of place and children and obsession with and display of status and consumption markers such as electric appliances and cellular phones. This, I noted in chapters 3 and 5, is a central element in the gender and class ideology characterising lower class employed women.

Feminist writers believe that the interaction between women of two different class backgrounds may ultimately be useful to the two of them. It may please women from the lower social background to see that someone is finally paying attention to their insights and analyses about how they were discriminated against. On the other hand, the confession by middle-class women of how they have been trained to discriminate could also serve simultaneously as a conscience-clearing tool and as some kind of solace for poorer women (Zmroczek 1999: 3). This harmonious understanding, at least the first part of it, did not hold in my interviews with CSGs in the public sector. In several encounters I expe-

rienced a hidden source of tension which I attributed to the respondents recognising me as a middle class peer or rival who was there to undermine their attempt at status consolidation. Later on I realised this was an important feature of their work trajectories as will be explained in the public sector chapter. Their keenness to put the past behind them and appear before me as socially solid and officious employees was obvious and hard to penetrate.

Nor did I experience feminists' caution against asymmetries in power relations between researcher and researched that emanate from the former's ownership of the research idea and ability to steer the wheel of the research process in the direction she wants. To the contrary, often I felt that with public sector employees the power balance was tilting to their favour as they wanted me to hear the official story they were willing to tell. In the first set of interviews I could not go beyond the usual tropes they insisted on giving me – that they came from modest social backgrounds but ended up working for the government, with basically nothing else in between. They recounted their life as blocks of experience and omitted to dwell on specific events and what those meant. Breaking the ice by talking on the more familiar, common and safe grounds of gender, about “us” as women, our similar roles and challenges as mothers, daughters and wives, was the way to allay some of the tension that arose from hidden class competition.

Most of the early interviews remained within the comfortable zone of family life and children's education, with each case reinforcing the one before. The fact that they skipped the details of their journey or whizzed through them convinced me that they were worth pursuing. I was increasingly assured that the homogeneity of the work places and the rigid rules concealed a larger diversity beneath. Whenever appropriate, and to encourage them to open up, I shared (anonymous) stories about my other CSGs friends and brought up unusual paths and decisions they took, including those that I knew many would disapprove of. I reminded them of incidence of corruption in public sector companies that were known to the public. I told them about myself and my family and the difficulties of being a mother and an employee and recounted incidents about gender and class dynamics in my previous jobs. I opened many threads and left them to choose which ones they felt comfortable pursuing and from there we moved on to other issues. Once they started telling their stories, nothing stopped them. In fact, I was astonished at their courage to re-

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count sensitive and personal events and I ended with narratives that were revealing rather than representative.

#### 1.5.4 Interviewing CSGs in the informal sector

Outside the public sector, it was more difficult to locate women because they were dispersed in several occupational sectors. When I started to ask around within my own circle of acquaintances and friends if they knew women I could interview, I was surprised at their arrogant and displeased reaction that I might be insinuating that they or their children might have pursued this type of education. I got reactions like: “But you know that all my children graduated from the American University” or “why would I know people like those; the people I know are all doctors and engineers” or “why do you want to talk to them? They are so dumb!” Social distancing was obvious. Interestingly enough, when I persisted and encouraged them to think of women for me to interview, they were actually able to name a few. True they were not their relatives, but were their hairdressers, children’s bus attendants, the women in the shop next door and quite often their own maids. The invisibility of CSGs to higher segments of the middle class could not be overlooked. Their presence was not acknowledged and their status as educated working women was ignored.

Unlike their public sector counterparts, the young were reluctant to speak to me because they did not think there was much in their stories that was worth knowing about. In general, they were much less self-confident and assertive but easier to approach, nonetheless. There were different power dynamics in that we both quickly realised I was the age of their own mothers and as a mother, I was sympathetic to their struggles and dilemmas and expressed candid interest in their stories which eventually they were not embarrassed to disclose. There was no rivalry and no competition. Also, the interviews with them were more structured mainly because they could remember vividly most of the events of interest to me and their stories covered a shorter time span.

The location of the interviews differed from one woman to the other and I always left it up to them to decide on the place. Attendants in small shops did not want to be interviewed in their work place understandably because of lack of privacy as sometimes the owners were there, or because of work interruptions. Women who worked in schools or kindergartens and public places allowed me to visit them there. Domestic

workers always chose restaurants and coffee shops, while secretaries/clerks wanted to meet in their NGOs, or office, and sometimes in their homes or my home. Although in the beginning I welcomed them in my home and was pleased to introduce them to my family, after a couple of interviews I realised that it might have influenced the interview process and made us both researcher and researched feel uncomfortable. The visible aspects of my middle class family life which could not be concealed confused the young women. They were curious and asked questions about me and my children, who were their own age. I gave them correct answers about what my children were doing and where they were studying but tried not to divulge unnecessary details. I realised, for example, that they had no idea how much it *really* cost to put a child in an expensive university and the thought that my family, like most middle class families, could spend in one day what they earned in a whole month, started to torment me. By the end of my interviews, I was embarrassed of my middle class status.

#### 1.5.5 Reflexivity and ethical issues

The experience of the 90 women depicted here cannot be generalised to their entire population. But representativeness is not the goal of this study. Undergirding my argument is that CSGs represent a socio-cultural ensemble at a particular location within the social system. In examining their life trajectories, I tried to grasp the pattern of socio-structural dynamics that shaped these women's life (Bertaux 1981: 37), but beyond this, I recognised that each woman had a unique experience and I tried to highlight those experiences that brought interesting insights to the question of social mobility. Some studies on social mobility conducted on specific occupational group, such as bakers in particular French towns (see Bertaux and Bertaux-Wiame 1983) allowed the researchers to speak about points of saturation beyond which new cases were not adding to their understanding of socio-structural patterns and were merely confirming the validity of their sociological interpretation (Bertaux and Kohli 1984: 226). In the case of CSGs each additional interview was adding more complexity: more diversified personal experiences and strategies and richer and more extensive data to analyse. I had to remain within the limits of what I could manage given my time constraints. On the other hand, each new interview was reinforcing my understanding of the limits of those strategies within the overall structures of constraints. By

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the time I finished all 90 interviews, I felt confident writing about CSGs in their diversity and commonality.

By making marginalised women the focus of the study, by reflecting on the experience of ordinary people (“history from below”), it is believed that we may in fact be able not only to give them a voice but also to challenge the “truth” of official documents and figures (Nielsen 1990: 20). But the hallmark of feminist research is that the personal is political and research should go beyond describing situations to advocating change. It is about giving women – particularly marginalised women who have been kept away from history – a voice to empower and liberate them.

The women I interviewed, particularly the young ones in the informal sector admitted that it was gratifying for them to see that someone was paying attention to their story, insights and analyses of their life. I earned their confidence especially when they tested me and were reassured that what they said was not relayed to their employers in the office or to the madam in the house. But beyond gaining their trust, can my work claim any emancipatory objectives? I think not. If anything, I only diagnosed the situation but maintained the status quo. I could not have possibly helped to solve the problems of an unrewarding labour market or break the status rigidity they complained of. They often asked me to help them find a job and sometimes asked if I would take them to work as domestic servants in my home. This was a dilemma. With my own self I had to answer the question of which was better: no job or bad job? After finding out their problems with low status jobs, should I help them access one and continue to reinforce their degradation? On the other hand, wasn't it a good idea to have them work for me or recommend them to friends who I trusted were sympathetic instead of leaving them to battle a degrading job with ruthless employers? At the end, I refused to have them work as maids and whenever possible, helped them find jobs in other places in which I was certain they would be treated with respect and dignity.

As I went into the field, I had been critical of the modernisation and social mobility literature that projected Western countries' development path. I was prepared for a different experience by a society in which the modernisation project has been stalled. I was searching for an answer to the question what people did when the modernisation recipe did not work. But my state of mind and the terminology I used was still influ-



enced by what I had learned about social mobility: that it mainly works upwards. The interviews opened my eyes to other possible types of status and directions of social mobility which are less theorised in the literature. Increasingly I felt the need to recognise standstills, horizontal and downward movements. I was also increasingly drawn to notions of “waithood” and “transitions” which I did not realise were so central to my study. Instead of asking about movement, I listened to accounts of inertia and blockages.

I went to the field with an initial attitude, influenced by my middle class status that CSGs were generally looking up to the middle class and aspired to be in their position. I had assumed all women had a social mobility project which they were determined to pursue. I had conceived anything short of this to be a limbo situation of restlessness and frustration. The questions I posed in my early set of interviews revolved around this theme and sought to locate *the* project.

However, as I spoke to more women, I realised that the connotation of a limbo situation that had once obsessed me, did not apply, at least not without nuanced qualifications. Many women were conveying the sense that it was a state they knew how to manage well. I learned that middle class aspirations were not necessarily a dream that obsessed them. I learned that higher incomes and solid middle class membership was not a project that preoccupied them. More importantly than moving up was the search for dignity – a dignified life in which their status as educated human beings with legitimate claims for a respectful treatment and secure life would be recognised.

I chose in this work to focus on CSGs’ search for dignity. This was the closest translation of the word *Karama* كرامة which the respondents often referred to or articulated in the interviews. For CSGs dignity was deeper than respect and consequently, indignity was more painful than disrespect. Their sense of dignity had to do with how others understood their human and social worth. Most of the stories depicted in this work reflect the struggle for recognition as human beings – poor but educated beings – worthy of dignified treatment. I observed that dignity was not in the parlance of the older generation of women in the public sector. By providing public sector employment, the state had resolved the predicament of the educated poor. However, among the younger women and men in the precarious labour market, the term was used more frequently because their human and social worth was more challenged. They were

constantly reminded that as human beings, they had limits and that neither their education nor their work could help them break the fetters of class and status.

But does that mean that the pursuit of dignity is a diversion from the original goal of social mobility? Should we interpret the insistence on dignity as the second best recourse or a compromise for a dream they failed to actualise? The answer is not without nuances. As this thesis develops, it becomes clear that social mobility in the sense of occupational advancement conveyed by modernist theories, does not reflect the situation in Egypt. Much of this thesis is about the journey to advance and the discovery of stumbling blocks that render advancement a far-fetched pursuit. Social mobility in the sense conveyed by modernist theorists is largely an uncharted road. Along that journey CSGs are embroiled with closure mechanisms that challenge their very capacity to explore, to aspire and to be visible – elements that need to be there before any mobility can take place. The pursuit of dignity is part and parcel of that journey. When employers block CSGs' access to opportunities and when the latter are forced to function within imposed class boundaries in order to earn their living, their existence as individuals with human dignity who are visible and recognised is curtailed. The denial of dignity undermines their ability to move and to achieve which is central to any social and professional advancement.

Education has much to do with the above struggle. An educated maid suffers quietly watching her dignity slip away when she is made fun of and forced to toil under harsh conditions *despite* and *because of* her education (Chapter 7). Acts of silence and protest are strong statements about disappointment with education and its failure to deliver dignity. Beyond the broad range of strategies described throughout the chapters is the commonality of experience represented among other things in the collective pursuit of dignity.

I had to heed the above precautions as I broached the concept of strategy with its calculative connotations and the dilemma of whether the researcher should impose the term on respondents. As I interviewed more women, it was becoming obvious to me that they were not thinking in terms of calculative strategies. For example, on the job, as I will explain in the following chapters, the moves young women made were more akin to immediate reactions to employers' actions in order to prevent or overcome what they perceived was an injustice or a deliberate

attempt at subordination. But even with longer term solutions that reflected a way of thinking about social mobility or a durable arrangement within marriage and employment, women did not think in terms of a strategy, but rather as taking advantage of an opportunity that presented itself. It did not seem right to ask: “What was your strategy?” but it always resonated well to ask “What did you do?” It was a situation where life conditions were forcing women to act strategically without being self-conscious that they were, which, as I have alluded to above, fits Bourdieu’s notion of practical strategies.

### 1.5.6 Limitations

Early on, I had been warned that my study was biased in that it has not depicted successful cases of social mobility among CSGs. One of my examiners in the proposal presentation seminar rightly claimed that most of the “fat cats” (businesswomen millionaires) who rose in Egypt during the Open Door (*Infitalh*) years (1973-1985) were likely to have had no university education.

It would have indeed been useful to find ‘successful’ cases of social mobility. But even then, some caveats would be in order. As I alluded to earlier, social mobility implies long term status acquisition and conversion of economic capital into cultural capital. If such “successful” women existed, with their new social status, they would probably not be willing to reveal their past or share their experience. Moreover, although “fat cats” did exist (and probably still do), they were imprisoned and punished by society for corruption and accumulation of wealth from illegal sources – for deviating. Notwithstanding the illegality of their acts, the public surprise that these women rose despite their intermediate education and wide scale societal reprimand, should in itself be seen as admonition of social climbing and favouring that things stay as they are. Societal punishment should be seen as the price these women had to pay for exaggerating their aspirations for social mobility.

Because I have been interested in the effect of this particular type of education and the opportunities it generated, it was useful for me to focus on the “middle mass” (Richardson 1977: 19) of women who searched for work *using* their commercial diploma, and in their job interviews whether in an office or in a home as domestic servant, were fully conscious that their degrees were their credentials. I interviewed a couple of women who had commercial diplomas and took up sex work, but not

once did they refer to their education in the interviews, nor did they state that they made any attempt to find a job using their diplomas, or articulate a relationship between the line of work they pursued and plans for advancement. However, even though I chose to focus on “ordinary” women, this did not mean that they too did not have their own adventures in life. In the next pages there are stories of women who had unusual options for mobility that entailed major decisions and reflexivity. But these reflexive moments were stops in their life trajectories which they crossed and went beyond to face other challenges and opportunities. The cases I present here help us understand the processes that have reinforced social barriers within change and recognise that change is not always progressive or intended.

Another limitation has been my inability to focus on family strategies and intra-household decision making among the older generation of CSGs as I did with the younger generation. Although I sought to convey the gist of the strategies in Chapter 4, the older generation of women could not recall details that would have made their families’ strategies comparable in terms of extent and richness to the younger generation’s.

## 1.6 The chapters

I organised this thesis in the way I saw appropriate in reflecting how I wanted to narrate the story of CSGs. Using historical and secondary data and statistics, I devoted the first three chapters to introducing the reader to the subject and main actors of the study. The bulk of the empirical work is in Chapters 4 to 8.

Chapter 4, devoted to the older generation of CSGs, serves to expound the root causes of the paradox I have chosen to address here. Studying their youthful life experiences, offers a comparative lens and reinforces the paradox. On the other hand, opening their experience to scrutiny, has allowed me to reach some conclusions about their own acclaimed and taken for granted social mobility.

The thesis is principally about the current generation of CSGs. Chapters 5 to 8 focuses on their experience, the vastly different labour market they confront, the related issue of the marriage possibilities they meet and their life strategies.

Following are the chapter descriptions:

This chapter presents the problem of the study and locates it within a theoretical framework informed by theories of social mobility, women's work and the debate between structure and agency. Following a critique of the different theoretical propositions, I present my approach with its main elements of emphasis on closures and locating agency in changing contexts on the basis of practical strategies adopted by women to achieve their objectives.

In the following Chapter 2, I examine the status of technical education in a changing context. I trace Nasser's vision of the role of education, particularly the technical variant, and the resulting expansion of this stream. I demonstrate how this revolutionary educational scheme associated with a grand vision of modernisation, social mobility and gender equality ended up suffering inferior status and identified with poor families, with commercial stream especially feminised and neglected. Chapter 3 lays the ground for some of the tensions faced by CSGs in the changing socio-economic context. In addition to the changing class map, these tensions are pronounced in the changing patterns of employment and marriage.

In Chapter 4 I assess the experience of the older CSGs who worked in the public sector. It examines ways in which the vision of the Nasser regime fuelled the employment aspirations and marriage possibilities of the old generation. This chapter shows that the bureaucracy is also riddled with structures that both promote and limit women's occupational and social advancement. I demonstrate how gender and class dynamics are played out on the individual, inter-subjective and organisational level to reproduce the dominant gender and class relations in the bureaucracy.

Chapter 5 explores intra-household education decisions among the young generation of CSGs. I demonstrate the role of the gamut of economic, cultural and other factors related to personal abilities in influencing education decision at branching points with the end result that poor families end up identifying with technical education.

Chapter 6 introduces the younger generation of women in the informal sector and focuses on the job search process and some types of available work opportunities. I demonstrate how gender and class closures work in the labour market and the work-place and women's endeavours to resist daily attempts at subjugation.

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In Chapter 7, I examine women's strategies in the area of marriage and employment and relate the discussion to some of the main propositions in the early literature. I underline the complex interdependence of these two mediating factors.

Chapter 8 addresses long term strategies that reflect women's view of social mobility and their ability to push the limits of common sense.

In Chapter 9, the conclusion, I summarise my key findings and reflect on the methodology. I pull together the various theoretical threads to further reflect on how the study of the Egyptian case affects our understanding of the propositions raised earlier.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncwegypt.com/arabic/pdfs/newPublications/362.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I grapple with propositions of social mobility that came to life in the fifties and sixties of last century. I found those early propositions highly relevant to the situation in Egypt. Around 1952, the post-revolutionary regime in Egypt developed its own modernisation project in which industrialisation, economic development and education were central pillars. In particular, as will be explained in the following chapters, post-independence Egypt envisaged a central role for education in dissolving social barriers. However, since then, not only did research in the US and Europe cast doubt in the inverse association between economic development and mobility chances (Goldthorpe 1992), but more and more authors have written critically about the role of education in limiting rather than promoting chances for social mobility. As early as the late fifties, in his seminal work on social mobility, Sorokin (1959) indicated that educational institutions functioned as selective agencies. Based on empirical data, Jencks and Riesman (1968) also noted that education institutions were more of "social sieves" than ladders to higher social positions. Similarly, Blau and Duncan (1967) found that not only was occupational destination greatly determined by one's educational achievements, but that that was in turn largely determined by family background. More authors have written about the role of education and family in reproducing inequalities: Through unequal educational opportunity, parents' economic status and advantage (Bowles and Gintis 1976; 2001), or the middle class culture (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) are passed on to children which affects the latter's life chances and equalities generated in schools when, through credentialism (Collins 1971), particular educational job requirements do not pay much attention to the technical requirement of the job, and reward instead only those who have been socialized into particular elite and status cultures (Ibid; see also Murphy 1988: 162). This thesis follows on the heels of the literature critiquing the early

propositions of social mobility and unravelling the role of education in social inequalities.

<sup>3</sup> Smelser and Lipset (1964: 21) argue that mobility through entrepreneurship has worked well in the US because of exactly this “purity” of the tie between economic achievement and social status given that there was no traditional aristocratic class and no upper class values.

<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that in post-industrial societies, the lives of manual and non-manual worker has become much closer to one another that the move is no longer that meaningful. The topic has gained even more importance with the claim on the death of class in post-industrial societies (See for example Pakulski and Walters 1996) which has been attributed to the weakness of production-based economic relations, the undermining of private property as determinants of one’s social position and the importance of consumption, cultural and human capital rather than economic capital in shaping class identities.

<sup>5</sup> The controversy has resulted in two distinct approaches: A conventional approach which takes precedence in mobility research and considers the family the unit of analysis. This approach contends that it is the location of the family member with the largest commitment to employment i.e. the man, that should speak for the entire family in the stratification order. The only variation would be if there was no man in the household and in that case women would be considered the household head. A different approach is the ‘dominant occupational position’ takes into account the partner with more income and more prestigious job that provides status to the family (Sorensen 1994). Given the preponderance of the first approach, it became acceptable to use occupational mobility to refer to men’s movement in the labour market while designating to women “marital mobility”, an expression which was originally meant to refer to marriage between two persons of different social standing, but has now come to be associated only with women. This conclusion was arrived at in light of empirical studies that showed that marriage is women’s gendered route to higher social positions and is for women what occupation is for men (Payne and Abbot 1990: 102-3). The position of working women has raised questions in such a case and some concessions have been made for them, particularly if they were the sole breadwinners of their families. But again in this connection, the question of relying on work status as a measurement of social mobility, caused a controversy because not only did it exclude non-working women, but also had the potential of excluding other groups such as retired and unemployed men from the stratification order. For extensive discussions see for example Baxter (1994); Heath and Britten (1984); Leiulfstrud and Woodward (1987); Prandy and Blackburn (1997); Abbot (1987); Dale et al. (1985); Garnsey (1978); Bonney (1988) and Goldthorpe and Payne (1986).

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<sup>6</sup> Papanek (1997: 778) suggested that tasks such as nurturing familial and community relations, caring for children's education, exchanging visits and gifts i.e. the "politics of status production" are essential and cannot be performed by women other than family members. Collins (1991: 68) also suggested that status production becomes a class relational matter as women of lower social strata emulate the "status ideals" of women from the higher classes. However, the former are unable to appear as authentically sophisticated as middle class women and are instead "fixed on reified status symbols and take them literally" (Ibid). Instead of paying attention to the aesthetic aspects of status, they focus, for example, on the meticulous appearance of their houses and the excessive cleanliness and good conduct of their children (see also Bourdieu 1984).

<sup>7</sup> For example, the "caring" professions that have become almost exclusively female dominated, such as nursing and secretarial work, are associated with lower returns and poorer prospects (Crompton and Sanderson 1990: 32- 38). Some of the propositions accounting for problems with women's work see jobs assigned to women jobs on the basis of sex roles and the work they perform in households. Thus, they obtain jobs that are seen as "natural" for them to take and become in fact part of their social identity. These include work such as nurturing and caring and jobs that require particular traits and attributes such as patience, accuracy, nimbleness etc. Those gender-governed caring professions and other jobs of supportive nature, such as lower level secretaries and clerical workers, have different types of status. As they have become women's exclusive domain, they have been associated with lower financial returns and poorer opportunities for advancement (Crompton and Sanderson 1990: 32- 38).

<sup>8</sup> This section implies a critique of the theory of intersectionality which speaks of multiple and simultaneous oppressions of gender and race, but also sexuality and class, experienced mainly by non-white poor women. Among other things, the theory prevents us from depicting some advantage in the intersection of gender and class. In this thesis I examine the intersections of class, gender, age and marital status along women's life course and reach a variety of conclusions. For a critique of intersectionality, see (Nash 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) claims that in situations of "classic patriarchy" the Middle East and North Africa women circumvent oppression by condoning the system. She explains that in situations where women do not know what other alternatives are if the current normative order slips away, and fearing that they would lose the advantages they already have without any empowering alternatives, they claim "protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety" (Ibid 282-3).

<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu has been criticized by feminists, especially post-structuralists, for the over-determinism of gender habitus and insufficient attention to the instability of



gender norms. Using the life course approach, I demonstrate in this thesis that habitus, including gender habitus, is a product of history, open to new experiences, and therefore, not immutable. For a review of the feminist criticism of Bourdieu, see for example (Lovell 2000) and (Macleod 2005).

<sup>11</sup> The same idea has been expressed by some economists (see for example Davies 2002). As a middle ground between mainstream economics that believe in individualist action that is free of social attachment, and heterodox economics that see that when individuals act, they act as members of social groups, this middle ground believes that individuals are socially embedded. That allows us to speak of a collective intentionality (See also Bruni 2008: 3-12).

<sup>12</sup> These are the 1988 Labour Force Sample Survey (LFSS), the 1998 Egyptian Labour Market Survey (ELMS) and the 2006 Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey (ELMPS).

<sup>13</sup> Langsten and Salem (2008) for example, realised that women's economic contribution is often overshadowed by their economically inactive and unrecognised role in the household. They drew attention to problems in the accurate capturing of women's economic contribution by limiting or expanding the definition of work. The technique they devised expanded the questions asked about work and listed specific chores that women did not count as work.

<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of the concept, see (Robinson 1936).

<sup>15</sup> The 1988 LFSS permitted the use of the extended definition of labour force participation only, which included those engaged in production for the market, for barter or for their own consumption. The surveys of 1998 and 2006 applied both the extended and the market definitions of labour force participation. The latter includes those engaged in economic activity for market exchange only (Assaad 2009: 8-9).

<sup>16</sup> Formally the public sector includes 1) government or the bureaucracy i.e. ministries that perform executive functions; 2) local government, 3) public authorities (such as electricity, ports, petroleum) agencies, public sector companies and 4) public sector companies (See Dessouki 1991: 259-60). In this work I have used the four groups interchangeably except for situations when I needed to make a distinction between the first three and public sector companies. As of 1991, the latter have acquired some independence in wage setting and recruitment (see Zaytoun 1991). In some places this has required some distinctions as I explain in Chapter 4.

<sup>17</sup> In my sample CSGs and their husbands were of similar *social class* position. There was one exception which I presented in Chapter 7. However, I do make the point that increasingly, young CSGs marry below their *educational* level (see Chapter 3).

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## 2

## History of Technical Education in Egypt: 1952 Onwards

### 2.1 Introduction

The establishment of a modern educational system goes a way back to Mohamed Ali (1805-1848), the founder of modern Egypt. However, it was not until the 1952 revolution that one could speak of serious endeavours to advance education and expand it to the benefit of larger groups of the population, particularly to men and women who had been deprived of it.

This chapter explains why I have decided to focus on technical education to broach the topic of social mobility. Among the two main streams— general (academic) and technical, the latter has been associated with the 1952 regime’s grand industrialisation project to the extent that it was said that together with illiteracy eradication, it was “the most spectacular educational advance since the revolution” (Mabro 1974 in Hyde 1978: 92). Not only did it flourish on the idea of harnessing the energies of young people – men and women – in support of plans for economic growth and development, but it also reflected the new regime’s vision of a modern and egalitarian society in which women had a place in education and employment and where manual work was valued and status considerations had no place.

In this chapter I trace developments in education to locate it within Egypt’s changing socio-economic and political context. I examine the rise and decline of technical education demonstrating that the vision to modernise education and render it more egalitarian could be enforced so long as economic growth and plans for industrialisation were sustained. Once those faltered, technical education no longer had a place in the country’s industrialisation plans and was relegated to a back position. I further argue that technical school graduates have also been pushed into

a *cul de sac* and government educational policies, particularly those related to higher education, have constrained their opportunities for social advancement through the university route. Within the technical stream the increasingly feminised commercial education appears particularly disadvantaged. Government school admission policies, which have continued to channel students into commercial schools on one hand, and the lack of work opportunities on the other, have exacerbated CSGs dilemma.

## 2.2 Education before 1952 revolution

When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, the educational system was divided between dominant traditional Islamic education in *Kuttab*s (mosque schools) for the large majority of masses, and a thin layer of modern education for the elite (Faksh 1976). Until Egypt obtained its nominal independence in 1922, education was not defined as an area of priority and the British colonisers did not introduce any meaningful changes into the established educational system for fear of any politically destabilising effects. Only the minimum was provided to educate staff to manage the bureaucracy and run the colonial administration and businesses without burdening the state's meagre resources and disrupting the country's accepted norms and traditions (Richards and Waterbury 1993: 122; Shenouda 1967: 293). When Lord Cromer, Britain's chief representative in Egypt left the country in 1907 after twenty-five years of occupation, the overwhelming majority of the population – 92.7 per cent of Egyptians above ten years of age – were illiterate (Shenouda 1967: 237). At that time, the educated were mostly men and a man with a primary school certificate was considered perfectly qualified to take up a government position, was regarded with deference in the circle of his family or village and was given the title *effendi*.<sup>1</sup> The few who had the *kafta* or *tawjihia* (baccalaureat)<sup>2</sup> had good chances of earning higher positions in the government. University graduates constituted the elite and those were few (Mina 1980: 34).

On the women's front, education was not a popular commodity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The school of midwifery established under Mohamed Ali (1805-1848) for women had a hard time recruiting students and had to accept "black slave girls" to fill the empty spaces (Abou Zeid 1970: 3). Even by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a handful of primary schools were opened for women, the number of female students nationwide was

a few thousands (Ibid: 4) catering to some of the upper classes but mostly to the children of middle class of professionals.

In general, the upper classes preferred private education at home for their daughters so they would not have to mix with others. On the other hand, girls from poor families studied in *kuttabs* as poor parents were particularly suspicious of the socially disorienting effect of education on their daughters; they too were reluctant to send their daughters to schools. It was only the small middle class of professionals that were interested in schooling for their daughters and sent them there to attend a few years until the age of 12 or 13 to learn some skills and prepare them for domestic life (Baron 1994: 126).

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century special types of girls' schools were becoming popular which largely overlapped with the extended 13 year school programme. However, the programme of the girls' schools was directed toward a social and domestic life. It took away the time given to academic subjects and focused instead on teaching foreign languages, art, needlework, cookery, hygiene, and child care (Mathews and Akrawi 1949: 62-63). Women's education essentially mirrored the perceived status of women in the family as gendered individuals who depended on men as wives and daughters (Hatem 2000: 40-4).

This line of thinking was also reflected in the major documents that addressed new rules for citizenship and membership of the nation in the aftermath of independence in 1922. The 1923 constitution denied women the rights of citizenship except for one Article – (19) – which stipulated that elementary education was allowed for boys and girls. But the right to more education for girls did not extend to their adult years (Ibid).

Thus, on the eve of the July revolution the educational scene was generally grim with the overwhelming majority of the population illiterate. But it was even grimmer for women. Female illiteracy rate was 91 percent and girls had a negligible share of total school enrollment which was already quite modest (Howard-Merriam 1979: 257).<sup>3</sup>

### 2.3 The 1952 revolution and education

It has been argued that the 1952 revolution did not initially follow a cohesive ideological framework as it did not have a well-defined theory of revolutionary change. However, its egalitarian overtones and guiding

sense of justice were beyond dispute (Dessouki 1982). In the absence of an ideological blueprint, the military junta presented in 1952 the famous six principles which seemed to form the sole basis for socio political action of the new regime. Among these principles was the establishment of social justice.<sup>4</sup> This did not mean the establishment of a classless society, but rather the elimination of class distinctions and redressing the remarkable malformations that characterised the Egyptian society (Abdel-Fadil 1980: 1-2). Ensuring the people's right to health and educational services were among the main goals of the revolution.

It is to be remembered, however, that the establishment of a more egalitarian education system had taken place before the revolution. The decision to render education free and compulsory from the age of 6 to 12 and to open secondary schools to anyone who completed primary education had been issued two years before the revolution (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 119). Technical education too had become part of the formal secondary school system prior to 1952 (Hyde 1978: 2).<sup>5</sup> In fact, in the early years of the revolution, between 1952 and 1956, the new regime did not embark on any major new policies that departed from what had already been in place. Instead, they paid attention to the consolidation of power and independence from Britain.

Thus in the early years of the revolution no ground-breaking policies were launched. The new regime merely continued to improve on the educational achievements already started before the revolution. However, some qualitative improvements were introduced into such areas as curricula, teacher training, educational administration and diversification and upgrading of post-primary education with emphasis on technical education. The latter was envisaged to play a crucial role in the country's development and economic plans (Szyliowicz 1973: 260). Eventually, the 1952 regime launched a massive school building programme, raising the motto "a school everyday" and the number of schools was increasing remarkably. Between 1951 and 1976 primary school enrollment increased four times (Waterbury 1983: 218).

More attention was also given to the organisation of the education system. It became four-tiered with six years of compulsory primary school, followed by three years of preparatory school, three years of secondary school and two, four or more years of tertiary education. At about the age of 12, students entered preparatory school (middle school) if they passed a competitive exam. Another national examination was

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organised at the end of the preparatory stage for entry into secondary school with its two streams: general academic and technical education. The latter comprised: industrial, commercial and agricultural programmes of study. Parallel to the above, Al Azhar (Islamic) pre-university education system was organised, comprising primary, preparatory and secondary levels and special institutes to produce clergymen and religious instructors on the tertiary level (UNDP 1999:35).

In the early years of the revolution, education measures were addressed to both men and women and the latter undoubtedly benefited from the general expansion in education, as the percentage of girls' enrollment at all levels of education increased two or three fold in the two decades following the revolution (Khattab and El Daeiff 1984: 172). But women received no special attention until the regime developed a socialist ideology and gave more consideration to its programme for social justice in the early sixties. The impressive rise in the number of women in education reflected the revolution's input in changing attitudes towards girls' education. Attitudes had travelled a long way since the time when education only offered domestic arts and moral curricula, and when men were concerned about the deterioration of societal morals if women were educated and left their houses un-chaperoned. The main laws that were passed by the new regime clearly indicated that boys and girls should be provided with equal educational opportunities (Hyde 1978: 41).

Indeed, the most notable development with regard to women's education was the progress achieved in higher education. The launching of wide scale national projects and the need for skilled labour to substitute for the large number of expatriate technicians, who had left the country after the Suez Crisis in 1956,<sup>6</sup> pushed the government to pay more attention to women's higher education and to destabilise traditional notions of inappropriateness of certain fields of study and work for women. The public change of attitude was particularly reflected in women's increased entry into university studying science, engineering and medical subjects, as opposed to humanities (Howard-Merriam 1979: 262). Moreover, when university education was rendered free in 1963, families did not have to make decisions whether they should educate sons or daughters and it became feasible for ordinary people to think of educating their daughters to the highest possible level.

In addition to the main public universities in Cairo, public higher education institutions were established in different regions of the country.

University enrollment increased from 35,000 in 1951 to 140,000 in 1969 and an additional 53,000 in Al Azhar and higher institutes (Hopwood 1982: 140). Moreover, Al Azhar Islamic University incorporated secular faculties, in addition to the teaching of Islamic studies. While still retaining its religious scholars, Al Azhar graduates could now compete equally with graduates of other universities over jobs. In order to meet the increasing demand on higher education, the government established institutes of higher education, which were originally intended to give specialised training, but many of them were gradually transformed into regular universities (Sanyal et al 1982: 83).<sup>7</sup>

In what has been dubbed the “Consciousness Phase” of the revolution from 1956-1960 (Ibrahim 1982a: 379), the regime devoted its concerted efforts to enforce equity and redress the long deprivation of disadvantaged groups of basic social services. It was during those years that education acquired different weight and significance. As the revolution had been declared in the name of the people, it was therefore expected that the people would have new and more opportunities (Wheelock 1960). This attitude was in marked contrast to that of governments preceding the July revolution which were distant from the masses. Despite pervasive illiteracy, those chose to focus on the enlightened leadership. Any small education reforms they introduced were undertaken merely to ensure political stability particularly following the restlessness in the post second world war period and the vast migration from the rural to the urban centres that ensued (Faksh 1976; Williamson 1987: 108).

The regime remarkably expanded the middle class and created demand for all the new education institutions to the extent that its role in “class engineering” was claimed to have been much more significant than that of either the British colonial power or Egypt’s previous rulers (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 49). The major re-distribution measures and nationalisations of the late fifties and early sixties of the last century reconfigured Egypt’s class map in major ways resulting in both downwards and upwards mobility. The first movement took place when members of the landed aristocracy lost their land as a result of the land reform law and nationalisation decrees between 1952-6; they largely disappeared and were replaced by small landowners. The vertical movement in the opposite direction took place mainly through the expansion in education and the subsequent enlargement of occupational opportunities in the bureaucracy (Ibid). For the deprived groups before the revolution,

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education in its entirety became associated with the status and opportunities of social mobility it could bring. On its part, the state played an active role in raising people's social expectations when it launched in 1963 a massive employment scheme guaranteeing a job for all university and technical school graduates in the government bureaucracy.

The earlier cohorts of men and women who joined technical schools after the 1952 revolution and were then employed in the public sector were children of the families that were the early beneficiaries of the socialist decrees. Most of their parents had migrated from the rural areas in search of livelihood and pursued the hope to secure work opportunities in the wake of the industrialisation drive in 1960-65. They had a dream to send their children to the army which had already started to open its doors in large numbers to Egyptians (instead of Circassians and Turks) between the two world wars.

Usually it all started with the father, a young adult then, coming to the capital with the hope of joining a public sector factory or company, but because the inflow of rural migrants outweighed the number of available job openings between 1947 and 1966, many of these men ended up in informal jobs in domestic services, as waiters and porters and in jobs that required no particular skills or training (Abdel-Fadil 1980: 24). If they did not marry a cousin or a relative from the home-village, they married one of the young girls who were also sent from their villages to the cities to work as domestic servants in the houses of middle class families during the same period of time (Ibid: 16-19).

But now that education was free and could lead to auspicious employment, these families were adamant to give their children education and open before them the opportunity for clerical work. Egyptians' strong attachment to white collar work and aversion to manual work had been observed by British officials as early as the British occupation of Egypt in 1881 (see Angliker 1935). After the 1952 revolution and despite the strong discourse to improve the image of manual work and instil a sense of national pride in factory workers who carried the banner of industrialisation, and although the 60s marked a remarkable improvement in the standard of living and income of blue collar workers, they remained socially distinct from white collar employees (Abdel-Fadil 1980: 47). Waterbury (1983: 262) reminds us of those subtle differences between different strata of the lower classes emphasising that it has always



been social status, dignity, respect and esteem that came with the white collar job; income was not at stake here.

Upward educational mobility indeed took place and reached its apogee from the mid fifties till the early sixties, the height of the revolutionary phase. In Table 2.1, Ibrahim (1982b:414) summarised the improvement in educational status from the fifties to the 70s in the three upper levels of education: secondary, university and post graduate. He demonstrated that mobility in the three levels of education reached high levels from the 50s to the mid 60s. It continued through the late 60s and 70s but the increase was smaller than the preceding years.

**Table 2.1**  
*Educational attainment in three upper  
educational levels over three time periods in Cairo*

Level of Education	Time period educated (percent)		
	20s, 30s, 40s	50s and 60s	late 60s throughout 70s
Secondary	4.7	16.4	34.7
College	4.4	15.1	16.3
Post graduate	0.6	1.6	2.1
Total	9.7	33.1	53.1

Source: Ibrahim 1982b:414

*Note:* These figures are the results of a survey conducted by Saadeddin Ibrahim in 1979 on a representative sample of 322 heads of households in Cairo. Those in the first column, who studied during the 1920s through 1940s, are the fathers of the respondents (N=318); the middle column who studied during the 1950s and early 1960s are the respondents (all male) themselves (N=318); and the last column who studied in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s are the sons of the respondents (N=190) (Ibrahim 1982: 410-414).

## 2.4 Problems of education: The beginning of inequalities

Nasser's state-led import substitution industrialisation provided the country with a great industrial infrastructure, but there were serious problems with the performance of the public sector. It was criticised for having tried to play the two difficult roles of absorbing the increasing numbers of graduates and providing subsidised commodities at the same time. As a result, the pace of industrialisation slowed down considerably

and the government failed to launch the second five year plan of 1965/66-1969/70 (Hinnebusch 2003: 220). This failure, among other things, immediately jeopardised the position of the large subordinate segments of the lower level state salaried employees, who had the largest stake in the regime's economic and industrialisation plans and were literally lifted by the state from the bottom ranks of the market to the bottom rank of the bureaucratic hierarchy and given a place in the state's development plans. Those were the main losers of the stalled modernisation project.

Moreover, Nasser's redistributive policies were soon inundated by population pressures with population rising from close to 20 million in 1951 to over 30 million in 1970 (CAPMAS 2000). Schools could not keep pace with the increase in number of pupils; they began to operate on a two-shift system and quality of education witnessed serious deterioration (Williamson 1987: 126). The country's meagre resources which were earmarked to services such as education ended up being swamped by population growth and most of the resources went to salaries for the personnel that operated educational facilities.<sup>8</sup>

With the death of Nasser in 1970 and the take-over by Sadat (1970-1981), the latter made a turn to the West which was accompanied by the liberalisation of the Egyptian society and economy in what came to be known as the Open Door Policy (*Infithab*). The opening up implied a re-configuration of the class schema as the regime's constituency changed from the poor and lower classes to the rich. Those now included a variety of individuals from different backgrounds that originated in various historical epochs: the pre 1952 revolution (traditional capitalists), the bureaucratic bourgeoisie of the sixties and the commercial bourgeoisie of the *Infithab* who engaged in financial activities, contracting, import and export and wholesale trading (Imam 1985: 261-71). Within this context, education was gradually transformed into a tool of social distinction and closure which undermined the principles of social justice that had so far characterised it (see Abdel-Fadil 1980). In the following paragraphs I will delineate aspects of education class bias that are most relevant to this study.

#### 2.4.1 A dual system: Private and public education

The first set of pressures on the education system was manifested when around the launch of the Open Door policy in 1973, discussions took

place about opening the first private university in Egypt (Ayubi 1980:407) This was deemed necessary to meet the demand of graduates of private schools with foreign language instruction and better quality education which had already been on the rise (see below). Around the same time in the early 70s, education, the main socio-economic promoter and the channel to auspicious employment in the bureaucracy, was becoming more accessible and useful to children of the privileged classes and less to individuals from lower social strata. Already towards the end of the sixties only about a tenth of university students were children of workers and peasants who represented over 82 percent of the population. In contrast, over 85 percent of the students were children of professionals, white collars and petit bourgeoisie of all sorts who constituted just about 15 percent of the population (Ayubi 1980:417).

Successive governments encouraged private investment in education and the number of “investment schools” rose steadily to meet the demands of returnees from the Gulf countries, among other middle class groups, who came back home in the wake of the Gulf war. In particular, those had been impatient with the slow pace of the educational reforms, and were dismayed by the crowded schools and failure of the system to produce high quality students who could compete in the international labour market. The keenness of middle class families to give their children an educational edge intersected with the willingness of businessmen to produce model schools that combined the modernity and criticality of foreign school curricula with the authenticity of Islamic and Arab culture.<sup>9</sup> The result has been a gamut of public and private schools and many layers of education institutions that catered to different socio-economic levels.<sup>10</sup>

The same fever reached institutions of higher learning when in 1992 Law no. 101 was issued allowing the establishment of private fee paying universities (Ammar 2005) found by the private sector to be an extremely lucrative business. Private universities were springing up like mushrooms to reach 17 in 2007.<sup>11</sup> While still committed *de jure*, to the principle of free education in public universities, the last few decades also witnessed the surge of fee paying foreign language departments in public universities. This has created distinctions not only between fee paying private universities and free public institutions, but also created divisions within the latter. These measures essentially meant that public school pupils who studied in Arabic were channelled into Arabic instruction

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departments in universities, which are less competitive in terms of academic curricula and job advantages.

In the sixties when public schools still functioned relatively well and produced good quality education, the educated middle class sent their children there. Only a few opted for missionary foreign language schools, particularly for daughters, to enhance their marriageability, since knowledge of foreign languages has historically been associated with high culture and social sophistication. Nonetheless, in terms of broad categories, the choice in the recent past was between Al Azhar religious education, public schools and intermediate technical schools. But the rise of differentiated learning institutions has gradually relegated public education institutions and the traditional school actors to a back position. Missionary schools have continued to offer their services so long as they received financial support and subsidies from their respective governments or churches and have thus been able to maintain their good standards and relatively affordable fees. Public schools on the other hand, have seriously deteriorated, suffering poor resources, over-crowdedness and obsolete curricula. Down in the hierarchy, as will be explained below, were technical schools.

#### **2.4.2 Private tutoring**

Private tutoring is an area where inequalities are most flagrant. After the compulsory primary stage, continuing in higher levels of education is contingent upon obtaining high scores. Sheer demographic pressures and poor pedagogic resources have played a significant role in the proliferation of private lessons to allow students to obtain the necessary grades to move up in the system. Overcrowded classrooms and multiple shift systems have resulted in an extremely short school day of about three hours and a lesson of less than half an hour in some schools. Parents have resorted to private lessons in order to make up for the deficient system at school.

In the last couple of decades private tutoring has become so pervasive that it now represents the largest household education expense (World Bank 2005:26). It also constitutes a significant portion of household spending that reaches in the secondary level up to 25 percent of families' annual income (Elbadawy and Assaad 2007: 3). As students approach the general secondary stage, financial mobilisation reaches high levels. The three year secondary school stage climax in the general secondary nation-

al examinations (*Thanaweya Amma*), the scores of which determine students' position vis a vis higher education and the specific faculties in which they can study. Given this build up, the percentage of students taking private lessons tends to increase as students progress from primary to preparatory then secondary education: 45 percent, 60 percent and 62 percent respectively (Elbadawy and Assaad 2007: 11). As expected, students from the highest wealth quintiles are much more likely than those in the lowest wealth quintile to receive private lessons. In urban areas the average tutoring expenditures among the richest are five times more than among the poorest (Ibid: 14).

Private tutoring is de jure an illegal phenomenon but is widely practiced. It takes place in both private and public schools and is often offered by the school teachers themselves. Whereas in the former they are largely determined by the high income of middle class parents and reflect their keenness to provide their children with a competitive education edge, in the latter, they are mostly used as remedial measures to make up for the poor quality of education and lack of interaction between teachers and students in the classrooms.

Private lessons are also resorted to in order to pacify teachers who, in their endeavour to augment their low salaries, put pressure (and sometimes blackmail) students to take private lessons with them, otherwise there is the risk of failing. In a survey of public preparatory schools published in 2000, almost 60 percent of the students felt teachers treated them differentially with 25 percent attributing this treatment to whether or not they took private lessons with them (El-Tawila et al 2000: xvi). Applied rates differ according to the type of school, teachers' competence and status, the importance/technicality of the subject matter, the language of the subject, teacher's judgment of the economic standing of the student's family and finally, negotiations between teachers and parents.<sup>12</sup>

Private lessons ensure a smooth transition in the educational system both in terms of passing the exams and moving up in the educational system, but they have a direct negative impact on learning in the medium and long runs. As students rely on private lessons, they do not feel the need to attend school regularly. On their part, teachers too do not give due attention to classroom instruction since the subject matter will be taught privately. They also use tutoring as a mechanism to put pressure on those who have not yet joined the crowd, to do so. The result is that

students' actual educational performance and attainment may not improve and they may ultimately end up repeating school years at later stages especially if, for financial or other reasons, they do not manage to sustain those private services. Birdsall (1999) noted poor levels of basic literacy and mathematical skills as well as high grade repetition rates among students since the 1980s which ultimately resulted in their failure to move to higher levels of education.

### 2.4.3 School drop out

Many children drop out of school often before completing primary education (Langsten and Hassan 2007) though the drop-out rate has improved. During the period from 1963/4 and 1969/70 drop-out rate ranged between 19.4 percent and 23 percent (Abdel-Fadil 1984: 355). Most recently in 2010, despite diligent government efforts to improve school enrollment and retention, 8.5 percent of young people aged 18-21 dropped out of school before completing compulsory education and 5.1 percent dropped out at later stages (Population Council 2011). Similar to its role in private tutoring, wealth plays an important role in determining school drop out across all levels of schooling. Students from poor households are more than three times as likely to drop out at the end of the primary and preparatory schools as are students from rich households (Suliman and El Kogali 2001). For example, while 14.0 percent of the poorest young people drop out during preparatory, only 0.9 percent of the wealthiest do so (Ibid). Many of the students who drop out of education at the end of the primary stage qualify to be called push-outs rather than drop outs (World Bank 2002: 42). Among primary level leavers frequent grade repetition and inability to pay for school fees and other costs, mainly private tutoring, was cited as the main reason for dropping out, while those who leave school at the later preparatory stage do so because of academic performance (Elbadawy and Assaad 2009: 21).<sup>13</sup>

In particular, girls' ever enrollment and drop out has been claimed to be associated with several gender-related factors. Some attribute it to male siblings' preference in case poor families cannot afford to send all children to school (Sultana 2008). Others claim that as girls reach puberty their mobility, including going to school, is said to be restricted (Ibrahim and Wassef 2000; Mensch et al. 2003). Also costs associated with travelling to school are particularly important and these can also jeopardise girls' education chances as opposed to boys'. A recent study pointed

out that domestic chores could also jeopardise girls' schooling as they may be taken out of school to help with household activities (Assaad et al. 2010). Finally, the labour market – particularly the private sector – is responsible for discouraging female employment due to its non-onducive work environment and salary scales that are more favourable to men (Assaad and Arntz 2005).

#### **2.4.4 Technical education: The “choice” of the poor**

If poor households manage to resist withdrawing their children from schools at the early primary and preparatory stages to send them to the labour market, they get to the decision making point again at the end of the preparatory stage when many of them “opt” to send their children to technical schools (see Chapter 5).

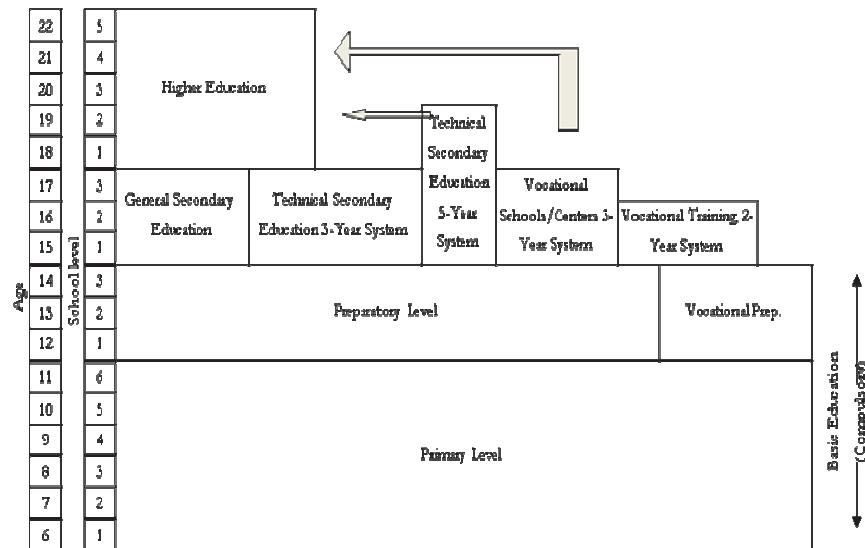
Branching to general secondary school (leading to university) or to commercial, agricultural and industrial technical education (which theoretically offers the chance to go to university and higher institutes), takes place at the end of the three year preparatory (middle) school (see Figure 2.1).<sup>14</sup> Tracking is mainly a function of scores at the last year of preparatory school with those who obtain high grades going to general academic secondary and others with low grades channelled into technical education.

The complexity of determining why pupils drop out of school, or choose short-cuts to technical education has been noted (see for example Assaad et al 2009). A gamut of factors is seen to be responsible for such a decision, including financial resources, student's learning abilities, school environment, access to infrastructure and services, influence of teachers and relationship with peers (see El-Tawila et al. 2000).

Boudon (1974) makes an important contribution that is relevant to the question of tracking. He does not see individuals governed by the “primary effects” of their families' financial situation and class culture throughout their school years. Rather, he sees educational trajectories as a sequence of events. At their early stages of education, children are influenced by primary effects which may affect their performance, but not their aspirations. At later stages in branching points, secondary effects come into play when rational choices are made on the basis of parents' and students' evaluations of benefits and costs and constraints and chances of success; students make different choices appropriate to their

class positions. The poor are concerned about calculating the costs of university education versus the expected social and monetary returns (Becker and Hecken 2009). Thus, they may opt for technical or vocational education or an apprenticeship with direct access to the labour market rather than a more theoretical university education and uncertain prospects of white collar employment (Ibid).

**Figure 2.1**  
*Structure of education system in Egypt*



Source: Ministry of Education 2007

It is certain that at decisive branching points, poor Egyptian families have to make their own calculations giving primary consideration to the availability of financial resources. As indicated above, for Egyptian families children's progress in the educational system could not be guaranteed without private lessons, which is a large extra financial burden. Decisions will also depend on the impact families perceive for education on their child's life and the entire household. For many poor families a child in school is an opportunity lost for earning and income generation for the



entire family. I argue in Chapter 5 that the primary effects of the family, not only in terms of financial resources but also in terms of family habitus that internalises class cultures and mediates between individuals and their social worlds (Bourdieu 1977), continues to play an important role beyond the early stages of education; they are central to our understanding of how decisions are made in branching points.

It is important to remember that many of the problems of technical education are not strictly unique to this stream. Obsolete curricula, poor quality education,<sup>15</sup> the stress on memorisation and rote learning, authoritarianism and lack of interaction in the classroom,<sup>16</sup> ailing structures and high density classrooms<sup>17</sup> are typical of Egyptian public educational system, both general and technical streams. As alluded to above, what mainly distinguishes technical education from other types, is its association with the poor.

**Table 2.2**  
*Preparatory completion and type of secondary school attended  
(among those who have completed preparatory); young people,  
15-19 years of age, Egypt 2006 (percent distribution)*

Wealth Quintile	Completed Preparatory	Sample size	Type of secondary attended given preparatory completion			Total	Sample size
			None	Tech.	General		
Poorest	44.9%	972	6.9%	68.5%	24.6%	100.0	435
2nd	60.5%	894	5.6%	58.9%	35.6%	100.0	540
Middle	65.3%	816	3.8%	58.0%	38.3%	100.0	533
4th	78.4%	638	3.2%	44.0%	52.8%	100.0	500
Richest	87.4%	809	1.3%	23.4%	75.4%	100.0	706
All	65.8%	4129	3.9%	48.3%	47.9%	100.0	2714

Source: ELMPS 2006 (author's calculations)

Regulations of the education system have played a role in reinforcing those inequalities. Once they have followed the technical education route, young people are up against a *cul de sac*, with few opportunities to grow and advance socially and professionally. Technical education provides no option for its students to change from the technical to the general stream although the opposite is possible i.e. general secondary students can always switch to technical education. When they fail and use up their chances to repeat a general secondary school year, general secondary students have the option to “change paths” (*tabweel massar*), almost always to the commercial stream. The social bias and inequality implications of such regulations are obvious: while general secondary students facing difficulty with their studies can still remain in the educational system and obtain a degree, technical school students can only experiment with their own stream. In addition, such a system creates a sense of degradation and dissatisfaction among both groups of students: those who are demoted from general secondary but more importantly for their technical school colleagues who realise that theirs is an undesired stream.

Over the years technical secondary education has expanded in terms of number of schools, classes and students; its growth has been much more significant than the expansion in general academic secondary education. Even as the balance in secondary school enrollment began to shift back toward general secondary (see evolution below), still, in the late 1990s, technical students constituted about 65 to 70 percent of all those enrolled in secondary school (Antoninis 2001; NCERD 2001).

In the 2005/06 school year, with almost 3.5 million students in all types of secondary education,<sup>18</sup> technical education students constituted 56 percent of all secondary school students, while public general secondary school students represented 33 percent, Al Azhar religious education 8 percent and private general secondary 3 percent (Ministry of Education 2006: 273). Paradoxically, in the height of the labour market problems, enrollment in commercial education, the weakest link of the system as will be described below, continues and draws closer to that of the industrial stream (Table 2.3), with girls forming the majority of its students (Table 2.4).

**Table 2.3**  
*Type of technical secondary school attended by year*  
*(percent distribution)*

Programme	Year		
	1991-2	1995-6	1999-2000
Agriculture	12.2	10.2	10.0
Industrial	45.1	45.2	44.7
Commercial	42.7	44.6	45.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	(391,717)	(556,014)	(656,167)

Source: Ministry of Education, Statistics of pre-university education years 1991, 1996, 2000 National Strategic Plan for Pre-university Education Reform 2006: 105.

**Table 2.4**  
*Type of technical secondary school programme attended,*  
*by gender 2005-2006 (percent distribution)*

Programme	Gender			Sample size
	Boys	Girls	Total	
Industrial	62.3	37.7	100.0	992,057
Agricultural	77.1	22.9	100.0	223,386
Commercial	33.8	66.2	100.0	745,719

Source: Ministry of Education, Statistics of pre-university education years 1991, 1996, 2000 National Strategic Plan for Pre-university Education Reform 2006: 105.

In the following paragraphs I will present a historical overview of the development of technical education and introduce the process through which poor families have grown to identify with the technical track.

## 2.5 Technical education: The early years

Efforts to build vocational schools were individual, fragmented and sporadic until Mohamed Ali (1805-1848) implemented education reforms

mainly to serve the building of a modern military institution. The expansion in education was driven by “defensive modernisation” (Faksh 1976: 235) when Egypt’s ruler decided to have a strong army based on knowledge of modern and Western warfare. Alongside the military schools that were attended by non-Egyptians, professional and vocational schools had to be established in order to provide the army with bureaucratic, medical, technical and other services (Ibid). Credit goes to Mohamed Ali for setting up the first industrial school in 1820 (see Khat-tab and El Daeif 1984, Angliker 1935, Shenouda 1967). At the same time, there were the beginnings of a modern schools system that offered a limited secular alternative to the more dominant religious education controlled by Al Azhar, the main Islamic institution in the country. The foundations of this modern education were a function of the educational missions Mohamed Ali sent abroad and came back to open new schools in all kinds of specialisations. While credit goes to him for establishing Egypt’s modern educational system, it was confined to a very thin layer of the Westernised elite and left behind the uneducated masses of poor Egyptians (Faksh 1976).

Mohamed Ali’s education modernisation project was short lived and many of the plans he had had, came to a halt when the country encountered immense financial difficulties. Some years later, the British occupied Egypt in 1882, but even before they did, they had propagated the view that Egypt was intrinsically an agricultural society that lacked the essential components to become an industrial country; they had earlier advised Mohamed Ali to shut down the industrial schools and factories he had built and import, instead, manufactured goods from Britain and other European countries (Shenouda 1967).

Things picked up again and interest in technical education resurfaced with the rise in commercial activities by the 20s of the last century as Egypt participated in the world trade and rose as a supplier of raw cotton and importer of European finished products. Christian missionaries and members of the European communities living in Egypt, who had local business and controlled the country’s major economic and financial activities, started to show interest in advancing private and non-governmental industrial and commercial schools at the turn of the century. First, they opened evening, and then day commercial schools to man their private businesses and improve commercial methods that prevailed among traders in Egypt (Angliker 1935: 57; Shenouda 1967: 285). Earli-

er, in 1910 the government department of technical education (created in 1907) had also entered the field and inaugurated an evening commercial school in Cairo and a similar one in Alexandria. By 1935 there were ten private schools and seven government commercial schools (Angliker 1935: 5). A small number of women ventured to enrol in commercial schools as this kind of education was regarded as the closest to their gendered interests in home economics, needle work, nursing and mid-wifery (Hyde 1978: 39).

But Egyptian families who sent their daughters to commercial schools realised that the road to private business, controlled by members of the numerous foreign communities in the country, was closed before them. Local girls lacked competence in foreign languages: French and English, and could not compete with foreign students who also attended these schools and were given priority in employment in private businesses like banks and commercial firms. Already then government jobs were growing in appeal to the extent that in 1934/5 the government had to discontinue the evening commercial courses in order to reduce demand on government jobs (Angliker 1935; Ahmed and Ali: 1978).

Even then parents were growing impatient and dissatisfied with the employment system as their children had to wait for a long time in order to find a job. If they could afford it, they sent their children to general secondary schools so they could have a professional career (Angliker 1935). Gradually, however, the situation improved with the rise of new industries particularly following the establishment in 1920 of *Banque Misr* the first purely Egyptian bank with Egyptian capital. This revived the general interest in commerce and increased the number of applications for this type of training (Hyde 1978: 92-3). More commercial schools were opened in Cairo and other cities and their number increased rapidly (Angliker 1935: 66).

## 2.6 The honeymoon 1952-1965

Nasser's regime had emphasised the importance of introducing technical and vocational training in order to meet the country's rising needs for skills and know-how as it moved towards industrialisation and modernisation. The plan was to bring technical education within the overall plan for the country's development.

At the time of the 1952 revolution secondary school students were overwhelmingly in the general academic secondary stream that prepared students for university; just 16 percent of the approximately 115 thousand students then enrolled were in technical schools (Szyliowicz 1973). The main challenge faced by the 1952 revolution was to improve the image of technical education. Integrating it into the education system was not easy given what writers observed was a deep-rooted aversion to manual work referred to earlier.<sup>19</sup> It took Nasser and his colleagues' intensive discourse to enhance the value of work and instil pride in manual work by asserting the centrality of factories for the country's industrialisation. They wanted to dispel the colonial legacy that Egypt's strength was in its agriculture, not industry. The regime reiterated its commitment to social justice and people's control over tools of production as well as the need for planning and a vibrant public sector to lead the whole process (Hopwood 1982: 138).

The endeavour to elevate the status of technical education particularly targeted industrial and agricultural education and work as those were more associated with manual activities. Commercial education, on the other hand, posed less of a problem because of the recognition that it prepared graduates for white collar and clerical jobs in the bureaucracy and other commercial institutions. Nonetheless, it too benefited from the general momentum to boost the value and status of non-academic education in preparation for wide scale industrialisation (Metwalli 1989: 132). By 1960 the shift to technical education had begun: just 60 percent of students were in general secondary. By the mid-sixties enrollment in technical secondary schools had increased by four times more than general academic secondary but was still lower than the latter (Faksh 1976: 240). By the late 1960s, as total secondary school enrollment approached 300 thousand, technical education had come to dominate: less than 20 percent of all secondary students were then in the general track (Antoninis 2001; Szyliowicz 1973).

As for women, until the early sixties, domestic roles had still been influencing their education. The "female cultural schools" that targeted girls before the 1952 revolution with their emphasis on learning of "...domestic work with the maximum of economy and good taste, and along up-to-date lines (Boktor 1963: 63) continued to attract women while boys were increasingly encouraged to choose from a variety of educational institutions (Hyde 1978). Gradually, however, within the cli-

mate that emphasised the need for public mobilisation to respond to the exigencies of nation building, women were equally required to take part in the new national project of industrialisation and economic development, while not neglecting their primary task of looking after their families, the first cell in society.

It was becoming clear, by the early 60s, that the revolution was indeed concerned with changing people's attitude towards girls' education (see above). In 1953 only 74 girls were in commercial education and none in the other two technical streams (Abou Zeid 1970: 32). Gradually girls began to shyly enrol in industrial schools. This started in 1959/60 with a modest number of 23 girl students rising to 810 in 1964 and to 13661 in 1979 (Metwalli 1989: 114). Girls enrolled in a limited range of specialisations that were regarded as fitting women's nature and aptitude like fine mechanics, electronics, beautification and leather manufacturing (Ibid: 91-3). Their enrollment in agricultural schools took place much later in 1976/77 with 616 students, rising to 4869 in 1978/1979 (Ibid: 222; Sanyal et al. 1982: 214).

On the other hand, girls were steadily finding their way into commercial schools. Their number rose from 819 girls in 1955-6 to 10,000 in 1961-2 (Boktor 1963: 6) and while in the same year the number of girls attending female cultural secondary schools was five times more than those in commercial secondary schools, by 1961/62 their number in the latter schools was one and half times more than the former (Ibid). Starting 1968/69 the number of girls in commercial education was drawing closer to the number of boys': (49.8 percent for boys; 50.2 percent for girls (Metwalli 1989:166). By 1977/8 girls outnumbered boys in commercial education (51 percent) and from then on, they established the tradition of forming a majority in commercial schools (Sanyal 1982: 214).

Earlier, legislation had been passed to rejuvenate commercial education. Law no. 261 was issued in 1956 to regulate that sector and diversify its curricula by including a variety of subjects. In addition to the Quran and Arabic language, students had to study English, geography and history, as well as commercial subjects such as accounting, book-keeping, the art of selling, and typing both Arabic and English. Commercial schools were provided with "commercial labs", including live samples and templates of documents used in commercial establishments and stock exchanges to familiarise pupils with real work situations. Contacts were made with commercial and financial agencies and government de-

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partments to organise field visits and provide pupils with hands-on training (Metwalli 1989: 144).

At the same time, the five year plan (1960-65) was drawn up resulting in the increase in industrial production and the introduction of a number of important new industries including among others, the iron and steel industry, rubber and pharmaceuticals. These provided work opportunities for a large number of individuals in the industrial sector. On the agricultural front, the invasion of the desert through massive land reclamation and development projects,<sup>20</sup> and the imminent expansion of cultivable land resulting from completion of work on the High Dam, also meant additional work opportunities for most graduates of universities and technical schools (National Planning Institute 1963: 33-4). Work opportunities were abundant for graduates of industrial and agricultural schools; they were absorbed in the new factories and agricultural centres, and worked within the scope of their specialisation which was often not the case before the revolution. By 1959 only 5.7 percent and 5.6 percent of the graduates of the two technical streams, respectively were reported unemployed (Boktor 1963: 65). As for graduates of commercial schools, only 4.9 percent were unemployed. Areas of their employment included accountancy (40 percent) clerical work (24.7 percent) and commerce (5 percent). The rest were in miscellaneous jobs (Ibid: 66). Substantial changes were also taking place in the technical school system which was upgraded, its curriculum updated and its schools formalised so that it could become a cornerstone of technological development and economic growth (Metwalli 1984). Female Cultural Schools for Women gradually lost appeal and phased out. The majority of their graduates became housewives, fulfilling the expectations from this particular type of education: to prepare educated home-makers (Boktor 1963:65-6).

However, as mentioned earlier, the government's economic and development plans eventually stalled and as a result, the overwhelming dominance of technical education came to an end. The following years witnessed the downsizing of the public sector and the privatisation of many companies. By the early 1990s the government moved away from a centrally managed economy, abandoning its role of providing long-term, secure government employment for graduates of higher education and technical schools. The latter, particularly female CSGs who had been recruited for clerical positions faced unemployment (Assaad 1997).



## 2.7 The beginning of the crisis: Who pays the price?

When the government took firm steps towards the enforcement of socialism in the early sixties, its vision was based among other things on linking educational policies with the government's economic development (Ibrahim 1982b: 379; Szyliowicz 1973: 261-2). Although this period witnessed the rise of several of the educational policy and research institutions such as the Supreme Council for National Planning and the National Planning Commission and the Institute of National Planning the country faced a huge lack of educational data and demographic information on population and manpower needs. A shortage in planning experts and lack of coordination between various governmental agencies also became apparent. This implied the inability to link manpower needs with the supply and skills of graduates of the different educational institutions. Avoiding the time lag between the graduation of students and their appointment in the different locations became a matter of great concern (Hyde 1978: 32 -3; Szyliowicz 1973: 262).

At the same time, the codification in 1963 of the principle of open admission to university of all successful general secondary school graduates (see above) meant that higher education came to be considered a right rather than a privilege (Wheelock 1960: 115). Opening the door to universities further encouraged the reluctance of young people to join technical schools. After all, why would they not aspire to go to university if it was now free?

University education continued to be the dream of most young people and their families. Studies have shown that despite inducements and propaganda to send their children to technical education, the overwhelming majority of fathers in both rural and urban areas samples, regardless of their income levels preferred a general rather than any other type of secondary education for their children that would lead up to university (Fahmy 1973 in Hyde, 1978: 93). The demand on university education increased remarkably. University enrollment increased by almost four times from 191,483 students in 1971 to 660,357 students in 1984 (Richards 1992: 27. Also between 1970 and 1979 provincial universities were opened in various Egyptian cities (Cochran 1986: 71).

It is said that 1984 was a watershed year in that the government took fundamental policy decisions to reduce university enrollment. Indeed for several years enrollment fell each year by about -3 percent per year. By 1989 the total number of university students had been reduced by nearly

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100,000, a decline of some 14 percent (Richards 1992: 19). By that time, economic growth rate had also declined and unemployment among the university educated rose to 9.2 percent in 1986 from 6.7 percent in 1976 and 3.1 percent in 1960 (Fathi 1991: 117).

Technical secondary education was looked upon to ease the stampede on universities, limit the number of university graduates and control unemployment. An independent law (No. 139) for technical education was passed in 1981 which provided only some cosmetic changes to streamline technical education so it would cope with the demands of the Open Door policy. The main intention, however, was to prepare it to absorb 70 percent of the secondary school pupils in the 1980s. The main brunt fell on the shoulder of commercial schools which alone were responsible for hosting 60 percent of the graduates of preparatory schools (Specialised National Councils 1980: 34).

It was clear that the plan for commercial schools to absorb excess students was not reached in response to any real demands in the labour market. With the drying up of clerical job opportunities in the public sector and the failure of the Open Door policy to generate sufficient work opportunities for young graduates in the 80s, graduates of commercial schools came out as the main losers; there was clearly no need for additional graduates from that stream.

The decision to continue to channel students into commercial schools was taken on pragmatic grounds. Unlike industrial and agricultural schools, the refurbishing of commercial schools did not entail the high costs of setting up workshops and laboratories and supplying them with expensive machinery and tools. Moreover, among the three streams of technical education, commercial schools have always been the ones that accepted students with the lowest scores.<sup>21</sup> Thus, decision makers, including governors, felt they had more freedom to use this stream to respond to emerging public needs. With increased decentralisation, governors had more autonomy to decide areas of priorities in their governorates and with the availability of commercial education, they had a flexible and inexpensive facility that they could use to fulfil the aspirations of poor families to provide their children with just the level of education qualified them for government jobs. As they realised those practical benefits of commercial schools, governors used their discretionary powers to open new classrooms and even set up new specialisations such

as “commercial services” to absorb incoming students and appease public demand (Metwalli 1989: 171; Specialised National Councils 1980: 35).

The more official government discourse on the other hand, referred to the general slump in the economy and the “imbalance between the three prongs of the development triangle” to justify the deterioration of commercial education (Specialised National Councils 1996/7: 51). They claimed that with the slow pace of industrialisation and agricultural activities, there has been no role for commerce to play in serving the other two components. “Commerce is like the middle man... like the liaison between leaders, planners and policy makers on one hand and implementation and operation on the other... its success depends on the success of these two upper and lower strata” (Ibid). At the same time, educators and labour market observers questioned if there was any real need for commercial education and wondered if it was not time to close this stream altogether. Universities had already been producing large numbers of graduates from the faculty of commerce – the same specialisation as the commercial technical schools – who were out looking for jobs and certainly had more opportunities on the market than graduates of technical schools.<sup>22</sup> However, the situation remained unchanged and no steps were taken at that time to modify commercial education for fear of unfavourable public reaction. Instead, the government adopted some sedative measures by using commercial school graduates to fill gaps in other sectors. For example, ‘transformative training’ was used to re-train female graduates of commercial schools to perform assisting tasks to nurses in medical institutions in areas such as preparing patients’ files, drafting entrance and exit cards etc.<sup>23</sup>

## 2.8 Chronic problems of technical education

The persistent paradox of technical education is that although the system has been generating large numbers of graduates, there were shortages in skilled labour and specific specialisations. Already by the mid-sixties the talk was about a noticeable mismatch between the skills of technical school graduates and the needs of the labour market, a problem that has continued to mar educational and employment policy planning till the present time (Szyliowicz 1973: 269; see also Galal 2002: 6-7). Industrial education for example, offers 114 narrowly specialised trades when industrialisation in Egypt does not require that kind of specific specialisation (ETF and the World Bank 2005: 11). Anecdotally, Richards (1992:

17-8) gives the example of training in the details of aluminium production, when the economic rate of return on this industry is -20 percent. Ironically, the same concern was expressed close to 70 years ago when Hafez Afifi<sup>24</sup> drew attention in 1938 that technical education needed to respond to the needs of local communities.<sup>25</sup>

Instead of one school teaching one or two industries, which are needed by the city or town in which the school is built, they teach everything. Manufacturing furniture, carpet making, mechanics, leather and copper making are all taught in schools regardless of local resources (Afifi 1938: 124).

Along the same lines, Ahmed and Ali (1978: 370) questioned the value of “teaching a boy spinning and weaving in Aswan when there is no textile industry and no cotton and silk there, and teach a boy in Alexandria granite cutting when granite does not exist in Alexandria”. The main problem focused on curricula of technical schools, which the European Training Foundation and the World Bank described as follows

Curricula are not sufficiently related to labour market needs. The supply-driven nature of the system means that finance is allocated ... in a way that takes no account of emerging needs or of the performance of institutions. There are no system-wide criteria to assess the performance of systems. ... Curricula still tend to be outdated and reviewed too infrequently. Training courses are still largely institution-based. ... There is a general lack of practical training opportunities available to TVET students in Egypt. The emphasis remains on theoretical and out-dated teaching methods rather than on practical teaching (ETF and World Bank 2005: 62).

Yet, the repeated complaint is that the opinions and preferences of private sector employers are not considered in the design of programmes of study in technical schools (Specialised National Councils 1980: 8) and as yet, no system has been put in place to coordinate this task. The formal private sector decries the paucity of satisfactory “middle management” personnel. In recent years, large enterprises have been reported to demand a mix of managerial, supervisory and technical skills as well as specific qualifications appropriate to different work sectors. Private manufacturing firms, for example, complain that graduates of technical education, even those who graduate from higher institutes (see below), have neither supervisory nor technical skills. Other sectors, particularly in the area of services and finance who typically deal with graduates of commercial schools, complain about the lack of language skills.<sup>26</sup>

Without responding to these complaints, the technical education system has introduced subtle distinctions between, for example, three and five year technical school students<sup>27</sup> which, theoretically, reflect significant differences in competence and give a spurious impression about major technical nuances, distinct lines of work and opportunities for promotion and advancement between the two. In commercial education, three year programme specialisations are finely divided between general studies, management services, hotels, legal studies, and commercial transactions with some overlap with the curricula of five year schools. On paper, it is stated that the former produces 'skilled technicians' while the latter graduates "top technicians".<sup>28</sup> However, one thing is certain, that for students, all these divisions are meaningless in the labour market and only university education makes a real difference.

Antoninis (2001: 18-9) argues that foreign donors in Egypt have contributed in a major way to the conundrum of technical education through their continued investment in its improvement and upgrading by undertaking infrastructural projects, curriculum development and teachers' training, even when empirical findings were indicating that there was no need for extensive technical education. His view resounds among the public who believe that technical education appeared to be the guinea pig of the educational system, open for the intervention of foreign institutions and donors who take it in disparate and incoherent directions.<sup>29</sup>

At the present time, large scale initiatives have been undertaken by the European Union, the World Bank, the United States Agency for International Development<sup>30</sup> and German Development Aid, among others, to upgrade technical schools, improve quality of education and its governance and instil rigor in its structures. It is the reports of these donor institutions that diagnose and offer solutions for the chronic problems of this education sector.

First, there is major concern about the fragmentation in the governance of technical education which is shared mainly by two ministries (education and higher education) in addition to a multitude of government agencies and other institutions outside the education portfolio.<sup>31</sup> There is also concern about the shortage in funds for training and the fact that the Egyptian government does not allocate budgets based on indicators of training outcomes, but rather on input indicators such as the number of students and teachers, and sometimes also regardless of specialisation (ETF and World Bank 2005).

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In particular, the problem of teachers and trainers in technical education has been a source of worry. Those tend to be hired from among graduates of two year institutes and if their number is not enough to meet the demand, they are recruited from among graduates of universities and higher institutes (Metwalli 1989: 143). Having in many cases followed the same educational and training path, they tend to reproduce the same problems: they lack practical work experience, emphasise the academic components and ultimately fail to enhance the image of technical education and increase its popularity among students. Many of the teachers had had high aspirations for a more remunerative career than teaching students in a poor educational stream. Even with the parallel system of private tutoring to complement government salaries and help students pass their examinations, teachers remain comparatively disadvantaged vis a vis their counterparts in general education as they tend to tutor students from lower socio economic brackets with much lower financial power. The result has been that most teachers demonstrate "...no enthusiasm for their occupation but accept it as a way to survive in a harsh environment. They carry out their tasks mechanically and routinely and show little if any interest in their students" (Szyliowicz 1973: 273; see also Richards and Waterbury 1996: 129).

On the job, they are daunted by the scarcity of resources and the large number of students which prevents them from carrying out their job effectively. Five decades ago Boktor (1963) remarked that teachers had little opportunity to get training and their resources were too limited to allow them to further educate themselves through books and other learning materials. He remarked that "the normal pattern is for teachers and students alike to be granted limited access to the materials, which are considered too precious to be used" (Boktor 1963: 90-3). This observation rings a bell at the present time. Both teachers and students in commercial schools have pointed to the few times in which they laid hands on computers or type-writers. Instead of considering this equipment practical instruments of learning, they considered them "things to keep in custody"<sup>32</sup> to be protected rather than used. Not surprisingly.

Teachers on the whole do not grow. They teach the same thing in the same way and entertain the same ideas and methods to such an extent that they become stagnant, plodding along in the same groove from the time they start teaching until the time they retire" (Ibid).

Mina (1980: 55) summarises the hardship of technical school teachers in his statement that

By all means, legitimate and illegitimate, they try to escape the technical education stream to general education.... The teacher's main concern is how to get out of this school. He feels he is not favoured by the higher authorities. Either because they think he is weak in the subject he teaches or because of a problem he caused, he is banished to technical education.

## 2.9 Options for higher education

But what are the options technical school students have to further their education? To answer this question, it is important to mention that the Egyptian educational system has always opened "back-doors" for university enrollment under the pretext of social equality and equal educational opportunities. For example, starting the 50s, the government applied the system of "external students" (*Entessab*) انتساب whereby public employees who had general or technical school diplomas but did not continue on with their university education immediately after school, were allowed affiliation to the university or higher institutes (see below). They could sit for the examinations and receive the same university degrees but without attending classes as regularly enrolled students. In the past, a large number of employees benefited from this scheme and obtained degrees from the faculties of arts, commerce and law which in 1962-1963 enrolled 30,000 regular and 20,000 external students (Szyliowicz 1973: 284; see also See Ayubi 1980: 380).

In hindsight, the drawback of this system was that students were poorly trained and prepared because its "do-it-yourself" approach to higher education required external students to study for the examinations without any guidance. At the same time, the system raised their aspirations and allowed them to share the expectations of regular university graduates for government employment, despite their poor preparation.<sup>33</sup> This was not a problem in the 60s and 70s when new industrial and agricultural development projects and the expanding bureaucracy were able to meet the work expectations of everyone, both regular and external. Now, however, the situation has changed and access to tertiary education of quality has become increasingly important.

At the present time technical school students have two possible avenues for higher education. The first is to enrol in some branches of pub-

lic universities or get admission in the Open University<sup>34</sup> and the second to join middle and higher institutes (see description of these two systems below). However, according to Table 2.5 neither of the two options offers genuine possibilities for educational advancement for these young people. While the majority of students (88.3 percent) who finish general secondary schools make their way to university, almost exactly the same percentage of students who went to technical schools stop at this level with only 3.8 percent joining university. At the same time, there is virtually no demand on middle and higher institutes from either general or technical school students (only 7.8 percent and 7.0 percent respectively).

**Table 2.5**  
*Type of higher education attended by type of secondary completed, age 25-29 years, Egypt 2006 (percent distribution)*

Type of Higher Education Attended	Type of Secondary Completed		
	General	Technical	Total
None	3.9	89.3	57.8
Institutes	7.8	7.0	7.3
University	88.3	3.8	35.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	805	1378	2183

Source: ELMPS 2006 (author's calculations).

In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to describe the options students in the technical track have and explain why, despite their availability, technical education is a terminal degree.

### 2.9.1 Middle and Higher Institutes

In order to reduce the pressure on university education, the government started in 1957 to establish middle and higher institutes to provide training for technical school graduates in various professional fields including fine arts, music, agriculture, commerce, and industry. In 1971 a large set of higher institutes were added to the previous list to complement the technical schools and accommodate students' steadily increasing enroll-



ments. Middle and higher institutes had about 21 thousand students in 1973, increasing five-fold to about 105 thousand students in 1989 (Richards 1992). Numbers continued to grow, though at a slower pace, to about 164 thousand students in 2006/07 (Hozayin 2007).<sup>35</sup>

Originally these institutes were designed to provide specialised, practical training in areas that were not covered by the universities; it seemed to fare well in the beginning. Missions had been sent to European countries within which students took a year of field work, and some 4,189 students benefited from that scheme between 1956 and 1964 (Szyliowicz 1973: 285). However, more recently institutes have been criticised on the grounds that their fast expansion had serious implications on the quality of what they had to offer. Like technical schools, their increased emphasis on specific rather than general skills weakened the chances of their graduates in the labour market. They soon lost their edge of providing practical training as they were skewed towards theoretical education. The distinction between the institutes and the regular universities has gradually disappeared. With their meagre resources, it seemed like they were mostly used to finance salaries of teaching staff (Lindgren 2005: 89).

Students complain that institutes do not upgrade their knowledge and do not provide anything more than what they had already acquired in their technical secondary schools. They stated that they got 'second class' education in those institutes (Richards 1992: 12). In addition, institutes' teaching staff who wanted to be affiliated to more prestigious institutions have been discontented. Eventually, the situation of higher institutes was examined and recommendations were made to eliminate duplication; some were closed and others upgraded to the status of universities (Ibid).

### 2.9.2 University

The Supreme Council of Universities determines the number of students to be admitted to each university faculty (SCU 2006), while the Ministry of Higher Education specifies targets for higher education admissions in general (Helal 2007). These decisions are operationalised by determining every year the scores needed for admission into different faculties. Those scores change from year to year, but within a general framework that accords high scores for faculties such as medicine, engineering and economics and political science, and lower scores to less prestigious departments such as arts, law and commerce.

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At the end of technical school, if students obtain scores ranging between 70 percent-75 percent they are allowed to enrol in the less prestigious university faculties mentioned above. With the more auspicious faculties – such as engineering for industrial school students – an accreditation (معادلة) examination is required based on additional curricula and study.

In addition to the “regular” route to public university, the “Open University”, inspired by the British model, was opened in different branches of current Egyptian universities between 1990 and 1991 (Heggy 1991). It mainly targets individuals who graduated from technical secondary schools as well as others who obtained low grades from general secondary schools.

The Open University offers a flexible system of study requiring only one day of attendance during the weekend. An eligibility criterion requiring the elapse of five years after the last school degree, ensures seriousness of study intentions and also likelihood that the applicant has obtained a job and can use his/her salary to fund study at the university. The fees amount an average of EP 1400-1800 (US\$ 254-US\$ 327 yearly).<sup>36</sup> These fees from “irregular” avenues to higher education institutions constitute one of the main sources of revenues for universities and in this sense are important for universities to maintain.

Thus, technical school graduates have two options for higher education: through regular enrollment which is difficult but not impossible or the Open University which mainly targets them. As Table 2.5 above underscores, even when the opportunity of the Open University fully exists with the passage of the five year eligibility period after graduation, that opportunity does not change the basic picture. The figures in Table 2.5 challenge the two main assumptions undergirding the rationale behind the Open University: the first is that graduates of technical schools find work within the five years after leaving school and second, that the work they find is lucrative enough that they can afford to pay university tuition.

These observations are confirmed when we examine university enrollment by wealth quintiles (Table 2.6). The overwhelming majority of technical school students in the poorest quintile stop after obtaining their secondary diploma. Only as we move gradually to higher wealth quintiles do they start going to university and higher institutes, although in modest numbers. On the other hand, the opposite is true in the case of general

academic students. Interestingly, we should note that the general academic track invariably leads to university for both poor and rich students (Table 2.6). In Chapter 5, I will examine self-selection and exclusion practiced by students and their families.

**Table 2.6**  
*Type of higher education attended by type of secondary school completed and wealth quintiles, young people 19-23 years Egypt 2006 (percent distribution)*

Wealth Quintile	Type of Secondary Completed: Technical				All
	Upper Inter-mediate	University	None	Total	
Poorest	1.5	0.4	98.2	100.1	274
2 <sup>nd</sup> :	3.2	0.0	96.8	100.0	378
Middle:	4.6	1.4	94.0	100.0	416
4 <sup>th</sup> :	6.9	3.4	89.7	100.0	320
Richest	12.2	8.0	79.7	99.9	237
Total	5.3	2.3	92.4	100.0	1625
Wealth Quintile	Type of Secondary Completed: General				All
	Upper Inter-mediate	University	None	Total	
Poorest	10.3	74.1	15.5	99.9	58
2 <sup>nd</sup> :	16.2	76.6	7.1	99.9	154
Middle:	15.4	76.3	8.3	100.0	169
4 <sup>th</sup> :	17.6	78.2	4.2	100.0	307
Richest	8.2	90.1	1.7	100.0	575
Total	12.5	83.0	4.5	100.0	1263

Source: ELMPS 2006 (author's calculations)

## 2.10 The current situation

In 2007 in the context of the ruling National Democratic party's 9th General Congress, Egypt's former president Hosni Mubarak emphasised the government's awareness that the process of economic restructuring and reform has had a high social price on the poor. He promised that the coming phase would witness more attention to the social dimension of economic restructuring and the introduction of a comprehensive social policy covering the social sectors of housing, health and education (NDP 2007: 4). Under the section on education, special attention was given to areas of chronic weakness: the training of teachers, technical education and open learning. The government declared that as the economic growth rate in Egypt had now risen to 7 percent, work opportunities were expected to expand and the foreseen development could not be sustained without highly trained technical staff. Mubarak was referring to the potential use of the energy of students enrolled in technical education institutions.

On their part, policy makers and businessmen have been complaining that jobs are available but they cannot find competent young people to fill them. Government and business discourse has been lamenting the skill-mismatch between the needs of the labour market and the actual skills generated by technical education. On the other hand, attempts to involve the private sector in solving this problem by providing training and recruiting technical school graduates have understandably been met with little success. Rather than hire individuals with poor skills, it made more sense for private sector employers to design their own on-the-job training and even more sense to hire technicians who might not have gone to school but have learned the trade by working as apprentices, side by side with a master and were more familiar with a wide-range of real life situations (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 128).

One of the few bright examples in the attempt to rejuvenate technical education has been the Mubarak-Kohl project, a successful partnership between the German and Egyptian governments in the area of technical education. It is based on a dual system of practical and pedagogical education combining both theoretical and applied work. According to this system, students attend two days at schools and four days in workshops and private sector companies where they receive hands-on training. The private sector companies takes charge of the training costs while the

German side works with the ministry of education to provide instruction, expertise and school training equipment (Ammar 1997: 416). Because of the close involvement of the private sector in the training of young people, they are able to direct the training in accordance to work needs; they also have a moral responsibility to employ the young trainees once they finish their training. An evaluation study of the project conducted in 2007 indicated that approximately 67 percent of the Mubarak-Kohl project trainees are currently working (GTZ/MKI 2007: 9).

At the same time, based on advice from the World Bank, the Egyptian government has opted for a long term slow process of change to create a balance between general and technical education (50/50 enrollment)<sup>37</sup> mainly by converting commercial schools into general secondary schools and moving towards the total elimination of commercial schools (Ministry of Education 2006: Annex 2: 101).<sup>38</sup> The process was reported to have been met with public resentment. As mentioned earlier, commercial education has always been considered the lowest threshold of education that was relatively inexpensive and did not require private tutoring. As a result of public resistance, the government had to interrupt the process without meeting the target. Out of a total target of 315 schools only 201 schools had been transformed till 2003/4. (Ibid: Annex 2: 102). Until any radical change takes place, some cosmetic modifications, including new teaching technologies and multimedia, are reported to have been introduced in core curricula for both the general and technical tracks (Megahed 2002).<sup>39</sup>

## 2.11 Conclusion

There is no doubt that the 1952 regime had an egalitarian vision in which education played a central role. The expansion of education has benefited some of the disadvantaged groups and many more girls and boys from poor backgrounds have been enrolled in schools and institutes of higher learning in marked contrast to their families. Technical education should be viewed in the context of expanding education and making it accessible to a larger number of disadvantaged population groups. Equally, it should be viewed from the perspective of its envisioned role as the state arm for industrialisation and development and its attempt to impose a new image of a modern society in which individuals acquired their status from their work and their contribution to societal progress. The vision held true for a short period of time when the economy per-

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formed well and when educated individuals could have access to jobs in public sector companies and factories. But once this arrangement could not be sustained, things fell apart. It is in this sense that technical education has reflected the ebb and flow of Egypt's modernisation project.

The state attempts to enhance the image of technical education succeeded only to the extent that the state was behind them, but we cannot say that they succeeded in eliminating social polarisation, status barriers and the manual/non-manual divide. At the same time, the quality of education offered at technical schools and the poor output it produced did not help enhance its public image. Successive governments have failed to present the technical stream as a viable and auspicious alternative to academic education

As indicated earlier, very few technical school graduates go to university. Government policies have reinforced this trend by allowing but making impossible their entry into university. As of now, those who go to technical secondary schools continue to be disproportionately poor (World Bank 2007). Technical education is now offered, not for educational or professional reasons, but rather on social and political grounds – to ease the burden on higher education and as a safety net to ensure at the same time that those who have been deprived entry into general education and then to university are not out on the streets (Gill and Heyne-mann 2000: 402-3).

Within this bleak picture, commercial education, with a majority of female students, has been particularly vulnerable. On one hand, it has been the least prestigious of all three technical streams and the least favourable to employment. On the other hand, among all three streams, it is the one with the most potential to fulfil the non-manual job promise, with its emphasis on theoretical subjects of study and orientation to office work. But to understand what women and their families have come to expect from commercial education, we have to locate it within shifting patterns of employment and marriage. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A Turkish title given to men with elementary education in the bureaucracy.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1928 studies for *kafaa* were for three years after primary school followed by two years of baccalaureat. The system changed in 1935 and studies were for

four years for *thaqafa amma* after the primary certificate followed by one year of *tangibi*. Both baccalaureat and *tangibia* prepared for university (Mina 1980).

<sup>3</sup> The primary enrollment ratio was only 26 percent, secondary enrollment 7 percent, and third-level enrollment 25 percent of eligible students, with the female share of those being 36 percent, 19 percent, and 7 percent (Howard-Merriam 1979: 257).

<sup>4</sup> The other five principles are: elimination of imperialism and traitorous Egyptian collaborators; ending feudalism, ending the monopoly and domination of capital over the government; building a powerful army and establishing a sound democratic system.

<sup>5</sup> Shenouda (1967: 250) believes it was a mistake to make both general and technical education free at the same time before taking the necessary steps to enhance the image of the latter and increase its popularity. Given the interest of Egyptians in government jobs, it was natural for young people to choose to go the general secondary stream that led to university.

<sup>6</sup> By the Suez Crisis is meant the tripartite British, French and Israeli aggression against Egypt in October 1956 following its decision to nationalize the Suez Canal in July of the same year.

<sup>7</sup> Examples are the universities of Banha and Helwan. The latter, established in 1975, comprised a number of institutes of tourism and hotels, physical education, social services, music and art (see Sanyal 1982: 83).

<sup>8</sup> For example in the 1969-70 budget of the ministry of education which amounted to 104 million pounds, 87 millions went to salaries (Waterbury 1983: 219).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.iht.com/articles/1994/02/16/egyptduc.php?page=1>).

<sup>10</sup> 1. Currently schools are divided into: Public governmental 2. government language 3. Arabic private; 4. language private; 5. experimental Arabic; 6. schools that prepare for foreign certificates; 7. cooperative schools; and 8. foreign language schools (Ammar 2005: 163).

<sup>11</sup> Supreme Council of Universities in Egypt <http://www.scu.cun.eg/wps/portal>

<sup>12</sup> According to respondents, the minimum cost of a private lesson was LE 20. Lessons in Arabic, for example, cost EP 80 each month. Most students have seven to eight subjects every year which requires an average of EP 500 (\$ 100) per student every month.

<sup>13</sup> An important observation is that there are no major gender differences when it comes to drop out. Lloyd et al (2003) and Langsten and Hassan (2007) have found that the persistent gender gap in education has to do with girls' ever

enrollment, particularly among the youngest cohorts. But once in school, girls are as likely as boys to continue their education.

<sup>14</sup>An attempt had been made to track students at the end of the primary stage. Law no. 261 of 1956 allowed the setting up of preparatory vocational schools for those who had completed six years of primary education. This decision was grounded in that many pupils failed to pass the competitive exam at the end of the primary stage and therefore tended to remain out of school. In 1966 only about 20 percent of the children aged 12-15 were attending preparatory school (Boktor 1963; Hopwood 1982: 140). But the tracking experiment was short-lived and met by criticism on the ground that at the age of 11, children are immature and cannot decide where their interests really are. In addition, there had been no demand in the labour market on these kinds of inchoate skills, so that such a measure provided neither solid academic foundations nor adequate manual skills. The experiment was dropped (Ammar, 1996: 384; Metwalli 1989: 151). It was decided to have a general and unified preparatory stage, which set the scene for considering preparatory education a compulsory period of education and focused attention on technical education in the secondary stage. The system of vocational preparatory education was applied again in 1988 and continues till the present time. Recent evaluation reports, however, point to severe problems in the functioning of the schools and the poor quality of education they offer. As of recently, two recommendations were made: to close the schools and integrate them within the general preparatory schools, or undertake a major overhaul in school buildings, teaching and curricula so they can offer a proper vocational service (Ministry of Education 2006: 39).

<sup>15</sup> The inability of graduates of technical schools to read and write properly is often pointed out. Under the title “Technical school graduates fail their job entry tests”, it was mentioned that when tested, students were unable to write simple words like “Mubarak”, their own names and some numbers (in thousands) (“After 12 years of education graduates of commercial diplomas in Fayoum fail to write Mubarak’s name or write their own names, *Al Masri al Yom*, issue number 1427 20/5/2008”).

<sup>16</sup> See Herrera et al. (2003).

<sup>17</sup> Even though class density in technical schools is lower than general schools, it is still very high compared to international standards of 20 students in the classroom. The figures in Egypt are: 36.2 in industrial schools, 38.9 in agricultural schools and 40.4 in commercial schools (see Ministry of Education 2006).

<sup>18</sup> This figure includes not just government general and technical students, but also those in private secondary schools and Al-Azhar educational system.

<sup>19</sup> Under the Fatimids (909-1171), children were sent to the *kuttab* (religious schools) at the age of five to learn the Quran and other basic reading skills. At the



age of eight, the child would pursue a trade or a craft if he lacked financial resources, but if he came from a well- to- do family, he could continue in the *Kuttab* till the age of 14. The trend continued till well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century when industrial education became the refuge of children who had problems pursuing the academic stream, as well as outcasts who were expelled from schools and orphans who needed to learn simple crafts and trades to make a living after leaving the orphanage (Shenouda 1967: 292).

<sup>20</sup> For a description of one of the main land reclamation and cultivation projects in the sixties, see (Shakry 2006: 73-98).

<sup>21</sup> Industrial education is the most prestigious, followed by agricultural then commercial.

<sup>22</sup> “Expansion of commercial education must be stopped so it would not become a garage for the half educated” (*Al Akhbar*, 29 February 1984).

<sup>23</sup> “Female graduates of commercial schools perform assisting nursing tasks” (*Al Ahran* 28 October 1988).

<sup>24</sup> Head of royal protocol.

<sup>25</sup> He also noted there that there was a large number of technical schools but the problem was that not many people used the skills they acquired in these schools to obtain a job and many have ended up doing minor clerical work in the government. He attributed the poor quality of education in these schools to the concern with quantity, adding that schools were short of equipment and the teachers were poorly paid (Afifi 1938: 124)

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/skills/hrdr/init/egy1.htm#Introduction>

<sup>27</sup> Law 139 was a unified law for the entire pre-university education system. It divided technical education into three and five years (Metwalli 1989: 156).

<sup>28</sup> This information is taken from the website of the ministry of education’s technical school department. See <http://knowledge.moe.gov.eg/Arabic/Departments/technical/trading/>

<sup>29</sup> “Technical education open to experimentation “(*Al Gomhoury al Hor*, 31 December 2007: 5).

<sup>30</sup> Donors also include the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ), the Italian Don Bosco Foundation and the Canadian Development Cooperation. Most of these organisations also have programmes for the improvement of general academic education See (Integrating TVET: 2005; Egypt ETF 2007; Abrahart 2003 and Assaad and Barsoum 2007).

<sup>31</sup> These are the ministries that have vocational/technical education training centres. They are the ministries of: industry and technological development, housing, manpower, immigration, agriculture, health, culture (World Bank 2005).

<sup>32</sup> The term they used in Arabic was *عهد*

<sup>33</sup> Szyliowicz (1973: 284) says that because students in the “affiliation” system do not attend classes and have little guidance from their professors, they tend to memorise their books by heart in order to pass and the quality of their education is usually poor. At the same time, they represent an added burden to the teaching staff who have to correct their examination papers in addition to those of regular students.

<sup>34</sup> The external students’ system is now being replaced by the Open University system.

<sup>35</sup> In recent years, higher institutes have fallen into disfavour. The share of upper-intermediate institutes in the overall proportion of higher education students has been declining in the recent past. Though this pattern is expected to reverse slightly in the coming 15 years, universities will continue to dominate higher education (Helal 2007).

<sup>36</sup> “Affiliation and Open University: The universities’ means of developing resources”, *Rose El Youssef* p. 6 no. 658, 20.9.2007.

<sup>37</sup> When the plan was first drawn up in 1999, the figures were 35 percent general and 65 percent technical, then they were modified.

<sup>38</sup> During 2002 and 2003, some 201 out of 315 commercial Schools were converted into general secondary schools (Ministry of Education 2006: 279).

<sup>39</sup> There was opposition to the idea of consolidating technical and secondary schools and offering one comprehensive curricula in the two. A World Bank report (1999b: 5) said: “Merging the technical and general streams would be politically infeasible”. With millions of students enrolled in technical and general secondary schools “any major change in the system structure would inevitably affect hundreds of thousands of families and could provoke political resentment similar in its intensity to that following the suspension of some consumer subsidies in 1977) (Richards 1992: 10 in Megahed 2002: 62).

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# 3

## The Changing Context of Women's Technical Education: Employment and Marriage

### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I demonstrated that technical education has increasingly been attracting the poor and noted the feminisation and low status of commercial education, which paradoxically, among the three streams of the technical track, has the highest promise for clerical positions, so important for the elevation of social status for women from working class background. Continuing to follow on this thread of the uneasy relationship between objective realities and subjective aspirations, in this chapter, I seek to further ground the tension in the changing socio-economic context to prepare the reader for changing trajectories and strategies in the following chapters.

The class map of Egypt has changed in many ways in the last few decades to reflect the rise and demise of different social groups. I examine the position of CSGs within this changing class map, the entry of the older generation through education and employment into the middle class, and the challenges they and the younger generation of women have faced and continue to confront in their social locations. I introduce here the competition over who is middle class and show how it is contested over the terrain of status.

The main focus in this chapter is on the changing contexts of employment and marriage. I illuminate the rise and decline of the public sector and the development of two distinct employment trajectories. I also underline how – often within employment trajectories – migration becomes available as a significant resource to enhance families' opportunities for social mobility. Finally, the third topic addresses changing patterns of marriage, notably the delay in age of marriage and its repercus-

sions. I argue that these changes put into question marriage as a gendered route to social mobility.

### 3.2 Urban inequalities

Egypt is a fast growing country with a young population. Over 45 years spanning from 1882 to 1927 population more than doubled and continued to accelerate in the following decades. Between 1990 and 2007 it increased more than 40 percent. By the beginning of 2008, the population expanded again by around one and half million to reach 74.3 million (CAPMAS 2008). In addition, some 23 million (31.7 percent) of the population are under the age of 15 years (OECD 2010: 18). The share of the 15-29 years group has, however, increased by one third in 2006 (Amer 2006). While this could be a demographic dividend, it put pressure on the country's public services, particularly education and employment. In the last century the population was mostly rural, but it has gradually urbanised so that by 2007 the urban population constituted 43 percent compared to 56.9 percent rural. It is predicted that by the year 2015 the urban population will exceed that in the rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years income disparities were mostly focused on the rural/urban divide shifting recently to become a function of geographical regions. The north of Egypt is more prosperous and receives more government attention and a larger share of services. The south which stretches a long way till the borders with Sudan, has historically been more disadvantaged. There is a consensus that Nasser's redistributive measures best represented in the land reform laws, only succeeded to eliminate the stark concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. However, they did not redress inequalities in a radical way, with landless peasants remaining mostly landless. Income distribution worsened after Sadat's Open Door policy with the rise of conspicuous consumption and deterioration in growth and production activities, particularly agriculture. In the 80s incidence and depth of poverty increased rapidly and continued to do so albeit at a slower rate up to the mid 90s, while the depth of poverty remained the same.<sup>2</sup>

Cairo, the capital, alone represents 14 percent of the country's total population (Sanyal 1982: 39) and like Egypt, it too has an expanding population which between 1960 and 1996 more than doubled (see Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1**  
*Population of Cairo, different years*

Census Year	Total
1960	3,348,779
1976	5,074,016
1986	6,067,695
1996	6,800,992
2006	6,758,581

Source: Census data: Various years

In the last five decades or so, Cairo was recognised as the Mecca of migrants from the rural areas in search of livelihood. It witnessed remarkable physical expansion by annexing villages and agricultural lands that eventually developed to become the city's main impoverished neighbourhoods. As they became city dwellers, the rural migrants were no longer involved in agriculture and comprised the capital's unemployed and informal workers. The new neighbourhoods which they occupied, now part and parcel of the city, have themselves become the foci of more migration and settlement of newcomers from the rural areas. The latter built their own informal houses and also squatted cemeteries and rooftops, where they formed families, established a life and sent their children to schools and universities.

This malformed urbanisation led to visible side by side inequalities with two different groups living side by side: an affluent class maintaining its own wealth standards and style of life and not far from them the poor living in squalor under harsh living conditions suffering poor public services and unemployment. According to mild estimates, about 35 percent of the urban population lived below the poverty line in 1975, one year only following the enforcement of the Open Door policy (Ibrahim 1982b). Although trends of poverty in Greater Cairo and the metropolitan areas are claimed to have decreased significantly between 1995 and 2000, some have argued that these figures mask under-calculation of the residents of the slum areas that have grown in the city. Those are claimed to have grown more rapidly than formal Cairo and the areas where they live, grew over 20 times between 1950 and 2000 (Sabry 2009: 15). Slum areas house the majority of Cairo's poor population but it is a

heterogeneous population including some of the peripheral middle class professionals and newly married couples who can no longer afford housing in other parts of the city (Bayat and Denis 2000 in Ibid).

Historically, Cairo has been the country's centre of attention. In 2000 almost one-half of economic and social establishments in the country were based in the two cities of Cairo and Alexandria with Cairo in particular, occupying a special position as the place where things happen and where opportunities exist. The capital has always dominated the urban scene as the main focus of business, international NGOs, diplomatic missions and even public sector offices, with other cities with a lengthy history lagging behind by quite a distance. Economic activities, even those related, for example, to the agricultural public sector, tend to concentrate in the capital and, even in the height of the Open Door policy years, between 1978 and 1982, there was a marked concentration of industries in the urban areas. Again the lion's share of investments went to Cairo in services such as housing, medical care and education not proportionally with its population (Waterbury 1982: 318; Issawy 1982:119).

Many of the issues of direct relevance to this study have been strongly felt in Cairo: Public sector female employment, a central subject in this study, is primarily an urban phenomenon: (21 percent in the rural areas compared to 55 percent in urban areas) (Assaad and Hamidi 2009: 253), with Cairo once more having the lion's share. Along with that, problems of unemployment have been most severely felt in the capital, the only city in which unemployment was persistent between 1998 and 2006, particularly for men (Assaad and Barsoum 2007: 20).

With regard to marriage, the median age at marriage has been increasing in both urban and rural areas but urban women marry at older ages. Among women 25-29 years of age in urban areas the median age of marriage increased from 21.8 years to 22.7 years between 1988 and 2005. In rural areas, over this same period, the increase was from 17.5 years to 20.3 years in the same age group (Egypt DHS 1988, 2005). Along with the delay in marriage, non-conventional *Urfi*<sup>3</sup> marriages have become more pronounced in the urban areas with young people resorting to it, among other reasons, to avoid the cumbersome costs of marriage that hit youth in urban areas more than their counterparts in the rural areas who can still rely on support from their families (Singerman 2007).

But more importantly, given this uneven development within Cairo, it speaks best for the heterogeneity and confounding character of the mid-

dle class which is essentially composed of three strata. The first was in existence when the 1952 revolution took place. It comprised a small and nationalist middle class who obtained for Egypt its nominal independence and drafted its first constitution in 1923. Those were distinguished by their education, the seeds of which had been planted by the British colonial powers who sought to nurture an efficiently educated staff to run its bureaucracy and civil service (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 49). Amin (2009) observes that this small middle class was visible and could be differentiated from the large mass of landless peasants, on one hand, and the small elite of large landowners and industrialists on the other, by the modern attire of its members: shirts, trousers and *tarboush* (the Turkish male head cover) for men and blouse and skirt for females. This middle class – at its core secular and educated – continued to prosper under Nasser and I refer here to its members and their offspring as the old middle class.

The second stratum comprises the new groups – exemplified by the CSGs – that joined the middle class through various re-distribution and nationalisations measures, leading eventually to its remarkable expansion. By the end of the Nasser's era in 1970, there was a broad new stratum of white collar employees representing the newly educated groups from working class backgrounds who occupied the lowest ranks of the bureaucracy. By virtue of their education, public sector employment and peripheral membership in the lowest rank of the middle class, I refer to them here as the lower middle class.

Finally, a new stratum of the middle class emerged in the 70s and 80s, including individuals who migrated to the Gulf states in the aftermath of the oil boom and the commercial bourgeoisie of the *Infitah* era. Those engaged in financial activities encouraged by the state such as contracting, import and export and wholesale trading (Imam 1985: 261-71). Products of this era are often referred to as the new middle class mainly to denote their lack of cultural pedigree and capital.

With the social changes that took place in the last few decades, the middle class has become a mosaic of rural and urban; educated and illiterate; rich and poor. Social distinctions have become more blurred making it hard to tell differences between people the same way Galal Amin (see above) described pre-revolutionary Egypt. Women's dress is often cited as an example of these developments as it was confounded by the rise of the Islamic dress. The Western dress which working women from

lower social background had donned after the revolution to indicate their rise to the status of a working member of the middle class, was soon replaced by the long Islamic dress that often obliterated differences between people and required the sharp eyes of a connoisseur to tell social differences (Rugh 1986: 118-9). Even more confounding is that in the last few decades, women from the old middle class and upper classes have also put on the Islamic dress and adopted the Islamic life-style. This created both common grounds with their counterparts from the lower classes, but at the same time, the need to provide areas of distinction in status, class and femininity (see Chapter 8 “Contesting the dominant middle class”).

In the 90s, following the implementation of the structural adjustment programme and privatisation measures and with the accompanying sale of the public sector, some Egyptian intellectuals and public voices expressed their concern about the death of the middle class and its diminishing role in political and cultural life (Zaki 1997). Others, to the contrary, insisted that the middle class was far from dying and was even ever prospering. They claimed that the middle class now included individuals with a wide range of wages ranging between EP 300 (US\$ 54) and EP 10,000 (US\$ 1818) who represented 45 percent of the Egyptian population (Amin 1998). A recent study by the semi-governmental Cabinet Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC) indicated that economically, the middle class was very much alive. The study used as evidence the increase in the last five years in demand on middle class commodities, including small cars affordable by employees and small professionals, the price of which ranged between EP50,000 to 150,000 (US\$ 9080 to US\$ 2727).<sup>4</sup>

It would certainly be a mistake to continue to monitor the middle class by following it in the public sector employment track, which has largely been weakened. With the rise of the private sector, both formal and informal, the middle classes have gone into different directions, moving between sectors, diversifying relations of production and often occupying contradictory class positions so that instead of the homogeneous full time wage earners of the public sector, the middle classes are now simultaneously employees and employers, exploited by other employers and exploiting others (Abdel-Mo'ty 2006: 96). In recent years, new types of occupations and work arrangements have appeared including jobs for free lancers, researchers, programmers and translators as



well as administrators and professionals in NGOs. Those are giving rise to a new variety of full time and part-time work and consultancy arrangements that take place outside concrete institutional and organisational settings. Individuals engaged in these jobs master the tools of globalisation: they command foreign languages and the use of new technologies, know how to conduct job interviews, have entrepreneurial spirits, understand the rules of the new market and follow higher salaries and work privileges from one place to the other (Abdel-Mo'ty 2002: 326-30).<sup>5</sup>

Given that the middle class in Egypt is not homogenous, the question that arises in this study is who are the CSGs' interlocutors who challenge their middle class status and against whom CSGs strategise? I argue that it is with the old educated and salaried middle class in their capacity as employers, and with their housewives and families that CSGs negotiate class and gender roles in close daily interactions. Despite status differences, the two groups have similar concerns and much in common particularly in terms of the tension they both experience as they endeavour to preserve their middle class identity. Members of the old middle class have been increasingly bitter at their fixed salaries which have constrained them financially, as they watched the new rich who had no cultural capital prosper in recent times (Harik 1997: 150). Like the lower middle class, they too are concerned about the adequacy of economic resources to meet rising consumption needs and seek to protect their social positions. Like CSGs, educated and working old middle class women face the same problems of having to juggle domestic chores with their responsibilities at work, and at the same time, have stake in maintaining social hierarchies and distances.

The old middle class has distinguished itself from other strata by appropriating the notion of *Welad Nass*<sup>6</sup> (literally children of people) which epitomises the combination of status traits or "capitals" that allow one to pass into this social category. The concept encompasses refined culture and manners, good upbringing and solid family background. It is important to remember that class in Egypt recognises economic advantage but does not see narrow economic distinctions as the grounds on which classes are formed. Economic resources are instrumental in putting people on the path towards further educational and occupational advancement, but it is understood that it takes a long time and many strategic moves of targeted education, accumulation of cultural capital, work and marriage into the upper class to build social class (Ibrahim 1994: 21).

This understanding is in line with Collins' (1961: 63) statement that "Culture is materially produced and money is essential for acquiring it. But cultural tastes build up over extended periods of time. It is this time lag in the production of cultural tastes that decouples culture from immediately expressing class position". Unless individuals succeed in converting their economic advantage into cultural and other forms of social and symbolic capital, acquiring social class may not be evident (Devine 2004: 178).

The concept of *Welad Nass* implies that status is achieved by education and successful employment but a large part of it is an ascriptive attribute that emanates from groups and families sharing similar cultural values, habitus and life styles. It is in this sense that Egypt is claimed to have retained important elements of the ascriptive status and power structure of the pre-industrial society (Ibrahim 1982b: 376). Aristocratic titles may be eradicated and landed classes rendered property-less. Similarly new riches may rise and become affluent, but neither the loss of economic fortunes nor its acquisition could affect the core of social class which the notion of *Welad Nass* encompasses. While individuals may add onto or dissipate their economic resources, their cultural capital from good schooling and more significantly the pedigree of family history and socialisation remains a crucial resource for their continued self identification and recognition by others. In fact conspicuous wealth is often decried as an indicator of the material and pretentious aspects of social climbing that overshadows the more immanent moral status characterising the old middle class. In this thesis, I argue that the struggle to define who is *Ibn* (son) or *Bint* (daughter) *Nass* and consequently worthy of advancing socially and professionally, challenges young CSGs dignity and brings to the fore the broader question of how educated people who do not have this combination of cultural capitals can move on and advance in life.

With rapid social change, good education in solid reputable schools along with modernity has remained important markers of an entrenched middle class status (Ambrust 1996: 111) that distinguished the old middle class from the new rich of businessmen and entrepreneurs, the *parvenus* generated by the Open Door policy. These attributes also served to distinguish them from those below them in the social hierarchy, the lower middle class.

The old middle class has been anxiously committed to the education of their children. De Koning (2009) explains how they often have to make difficult decisions to strike a balance between their limited economic resources on one hand, and their aspirations to provide children with an education that would prepare them for the competitive labour market in which knowledge of foreign languages and the middle class cultural capital are essential (Ibid 54-62). Based on her field work in Egypt, De Koning commented on the subtle markers of status that include not only fluency but also accents in foreign languages which are telling of particular places of study and residence and can reflect one's social origins.

Within this changing class and status scene, employment and marriage, the two mediators of CSGs social mobility represented the main sources of tension and anxiety. They too have undergone changes of direct impact on women's personal trajectories.

### 3.3 Employment

Generally speaking, our knowledge about women's work in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is limited by available literature which tended to focus on upper middle class women and paid little attention to ordinary women (See Tucker 1983 and Keddie 1979). What we know about this period of time focuses on the philanthropic and outdoor activities of Egyptian upper class women who were themselves influenced by male liberal nationalist figures educated in the West. Their main contribution was to upgrade the condition of poor women to basically become better mothers and wives through improving their knowledge of hygienic care for themselves and their children (Hatem 2000: 43). The possibility to undertake these activities allowed women from the upper classes a fair degree of mobility and more openness to the public sphere, in contrast to women from the lower classes whose work horizon and mobility were limited (Gran 1977).

There were traditional constraints on women's mobility and work on the grounds that they invited immorality. More importantly, however, there were no jobs in the modern economy for ordinary local women. Those encountered difficulty in finding jobs due to their inability to compete in languages with girls from the foreign communities in Egypt for posts in local European businesses, where the chief opening for

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women was as telephone operators and clerks in hospitals, orphanages and girls' schools (Angliker 1935: 61).<sup>7</sup> Thus local women were mostly isolated and confined to the sphere of reproduction of the labour force and ultimately, it was marriage, not work, that was their source of economic security (Gran 1977: 4). It was the 1952 revolution that heralded a new role for working women in the country's modernisation project.

### 3.3.1 State feminism and the expansion of public sector employment

During the years that immediately followed the 1952 revolution, the government gave no special regard to the position of women or to gender equality. The major redistributive steps it took, including enhanced health care and free education, were meant to redress inequalities in general. But the state's favourable position towards women took concrete shape when the country's first five year plan was drawn up, envisioning a role for women in industrialisation and modernisation. This coincided with the drafting of the 1964 constitution that granted women the right to vote and to run for public office and cleared the ambivalence of the regime towards women's rights<sup>8</sup> (Hatem 2000: 48).

In the constitution, women were spelled out as one of the categories of "the people's working forces" which meant that the state was relying equally on them as it did on men, for state building and development.<sup>9</sup> With the exodus of foreigners after the large wave of nationalisation, there were numerous vacancies that Egyptian personnel could occupy. The doors were open for women to hold public office and they were guaranteed an equal standing to men in the labour force and access to job opportunities. Labour laws were issued that recognised women as workers in the state, provided them with maternity leaves and forbade firing them while on leave. Firms employing 100 female employees or more were required to provide nurseries for their children (Hatem 2000: 50-1). The first woman minister was appointed in the sixties.<sup>10</sup> Attitudes towards women's work changed and society was more permissive of women entering new spheres of work. Popular films depicted young female graduates exploring work in the desert as oil engineers in what was until that time strictly a male domain. Others showed women in senior government positions surpassing their husbands and successfully juggling their work with their home duties.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, however, some (see for example Abu Lughod 1998) saw that “state feminism”, the policy that characterised the early sixties whereby women’s production and reproduction became the Egyptian state’s responsibility, meant a weakening of the role and independence of women’s movements and organisations. They also saw in it “new forms of control” over women’s minds, characters and bodies (Ibid: 13).

Hoodfar (1997: 106-7) interprets Nasser’s encouragement of women’s entry into the labour market as the first “official devaluation” of women’s domestic labour as those responsibilities were considered unproblematically an extension of women’s biological functions as the new socialist ideology did not question women’s domestic roles as home makers and mothers. Supporting her claim, she says that when the National Charter of 1962 strongly encouraged women to free themselves of the shackles that impeded their movement and participation in state building, it largely left them on their own to fight their way through the labour market. Despite state support, women for example, still faced “fraternal public resistance” (Hatem 2000: 51) as some public enterprises for example, made sure not to hire more than 99 women employees in order to avoid the costs of child day care centres stipulated by the Labour Law (No. 91 of 1959) in firms that employed 100 women which undermined women’s participation in paid employment (Ibid: 50-51).

Furthermore, the state stressed the importance of the family as the main unit of society and took it upon itself to safeguard mothering and childbearing (Hatem 1996). On the other hand, neither the day care facilities nor the new educational system was actually designed to genuinely influence the prevailing sexual division of labour. Thus, women’s domestic labour went unrecognised. Equally importantly, channelling women’s employment through the low productivity and low wage public sector, did not help enhance their paid employment.

With the wide-scale nationalisations of foreign business in the fifties and sixties the state became de facto the prime mover of socio-economic development. The public sector was officially declared the leading sector in the national economy (Dessouki 1991:261) and a massive employment drive was launched in 1963 (see Chapter 2) (Assaad 1997: 86-7). The number of administrative units within the public sector and the bureaucracy had grown remarkably from a few dozen units before the revolution to around 1600 in 1969 (Ayubi 1980: 239) in order to handle the new work resulting from the nationalisation of foreign companies. For a

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long time, the bureaucracy absorbed the large number of university and technical school graduates who the government continued to channel into the expanding government offices and state enterprises regardless of the actual needs of these institutions.<sup>12</sup> Eventually the situation led to a serious problem of overstaffing (Palmer et al 1988: 25) and the state was unable to carry this huge employment burden.

The employment conundrum also had other faces. Excess jobs began to appear side by side with job shortage. A study undertaken by the Central Agency for Organisation and Management in 1980 showed that while there was a deficit of 60,000 jobs in specialisations such as advanced nursing and other technical positions, there was a surplus of 310,000 jobs in clerical positions mainly occupied by women (Handoussa 1991: 180). Job specific occupations such as lawyers, accountants, cashiers amounted to less than half the employment in the public sector. The rest, mainly “other clerical staff” and “building superintendents and cleaners” accounted for the rest and constituted a huge amount of surplus labour (Handoussa 1983: 5).

These employment categories that were not job specific reflected the core educational background of public sector workers with lower level education or no education at all. For example, in 1969 the education level of public servants was as follows: 48 percent without qualifications, 37 percent with intermediate qualifications (technical school graduates), 12 percent with university degrees and 2.5 with post graduate degrees (Ayubi 1980: 428). The public sector broadly defined, was becoming a mass-based institution (Palmer et al. 1988: 28). The state -driven employment drive was merely mirroring the improvements in education status and increase in number of both women and men from different educational levels, but mainly from the intermediate level of technical schools (Table 3.2)

The result of excess employees and overstaffing has been visible and concealed underemployment (Fergany 1997, 1998; Radwan 1998: 5).<sup>13</sup> For example, in 1978 the proportion of skilled and productive workers in industry to total employment in the public sector was only 52 percent in 1978 compared to 79 percent in the private sector (Handoussa 1983: 9). Under-productivity and poor work performance was increasingly identified with women. A popular scene in Egyptian films has been that of a pregnant public sector employee sitting at her desk cleaning vegetables and preparing her family meal in the office. The scene spoke of

women's underemployment, but also the advantages of public sector employment that accommodated reproduction.

**Table 3.2**  
*Percent distribution of population 10+ by education status and sex  
1960, 1976, 1986, 1996 and 2006*

Education Status	1960	1976	1986	1996	2006
<b>Males</b>					
Illiterate	58.0	43.0	38.0	29.1	22.3
Read & Write	32.0	29.0	24.0	23.0	14.6
Below Intermediate	2.2	17.0	17.0	20.0	20.8
Intermediate	7.0	8.0	15.5	19.0	28.1
Above Intermediate	0.2	0.4	1.2	2.3	2.8
University	1.2	3.1	5.0	7.1	11.0
Above University	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.3
<b>Females</b>					
Illiterate	85.0	73.0	62.8	50.3	37.3
Read & Write	12.0	13.0	15.0	15.0	11.2
Below Intermediate	1.1	9.2	11.5	16.0	18.0
Intermediate	2.2	4.0	8.5	14.0	23.3
Above Intermediate	0.1	0.3	1.0	2.0	2.2
University	0.2	1.0	1.3	4.0	8.0
Above University	-	-	-	0.1	0.1
<b>Total</b>					
Illiterate	71.3	57.3	50.0	39.4	30.0
Read & Write	22.0	21.0	20.0	19.0	13.0
Below Intermediate	2.0	13.1	14.2	18.0	19.4
Intermediate	4.4	6.0	12.1	16.5	26.0
Above Intermediate	0.1	0.4	1.1	2.0	2.5
University	1.0	2.1	3.0	5.5	9.3
Above University	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2

Source: Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS) Census data: 1960-2006

The public sector quickly became women's largest employer, a tradition that has continued until the present time. Table 3.3 compares census data from 1976 and 1986. It shows that by 1986 the government sector had already become the dominant employer of women, accounting for more than half the female employment. Moreover, the trend towards feminisation was increasingly visible with female employment growing at a rate of 8.7 percent a year compared to 2.4 percent for males. In 1988 nearly 80 percent of the working women were employed in the public sector broadly defined (Assaad 1997: 93).

**Table 3.3**  
*Shifting structure of female and male employment  
1976 and 1986*

Sector	Male employment by sector			Female employment by sector			Female employment as percent of total	
	1976	1986	1976-1986	1976	1986	1976-1986	1976	1986
Government	16.0	18.2	2.4	40.0	55.9	8.7	15.4	25.4
Public enterprises	9.4	10.3	2.0	10.9	10.2	4.9	7.6	10.0
Agric.	50.1	41.7	-0.7	23.0	10.6	-2.2	3.2	2.7
Priv. Non-agric.	24.4	29.9	3.1	25.4	23.3	4.7	6.9	8.0
Total	100	100	1.1	100	100	5.5	6.7	10.0
Total (thousands)	9,430	10,568	n.a.	676	1,176	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Assaad (1997: 95)

### 3.3.2 Women's work in the context of unemployment

By the late 60s, Nasser's state-led import substitution industrialisation championed by the public sector had failed. The following years witnessed attempts to redress the exhaustion of the import substitute industrialisation through the enforcement of more liberal economic open door policies. Unemployment had risen and Nasser's successors, Sadat (1971-1980) and Mubarak (1980-2011) were caught between the desire to please their allies in the West, appease the Islamists and also deal with



Nasser's welfare legacy. In this context, women's employment was the subject of wide scale controversy.

Under Sadat, the state used a dual strategy to deal with women. On one hand, it sought to improve their personal status. Law 44 of 1979 gave the wife the right to keep the family home after divorce, the right of the first wife to be informed in case of the husband's marriage to another woman, and her right to demand divorce in that case (Fawzy 2004: 36). On the other hand, the government enforced segregationist employment strategy to exclude women from the public arena. These attempts were in full force as the state mediated and mobilised its resources towards the patriarchal interests of different actors in society (Walby 1986). Sadat used the Islamic *Shari'a* in a restrictive way to limit women's equality with men in the public sphere (Hatem 1996: 242). He issued laws that restricted women's economic opportunities and granted them the right to work outside home only if the family's economic circumstances made it necessary, and provided they were observing rules and principles of the *Shari'a* (Ibid).

With rising unemployment, the state reiterated calls for keeping women at home as wives and mothers and began to encourage them to take a leave of absence to look after their homes and raise children. Heated debates with Islamist overtones took place about the desirability of women's work and an Islamist discourse prevailed about the negative effect of women's work on families and the psychological problems that befell children of working mothers. Working women were held responsible for crowded transportation and streets and for taking away men's jobs (Hatem 1996: 235). In clinics affiliated to mosques, women were persuaded by clinic personnel to reject the use of contraceptives which were regarded as un-Islamic, and were encouraged to return to their domestic roles as mothers and wives (Karam 1998:165).

When the state withdrew its commitment to gender equality and the protection of working women, it particularly disadvantaged middle class women who had to work for economic reasons (see Hatem 1996). But those continued to work anyway either because the income of two individuals was needed to make ends meet, or for financial security in case of divorce or widowhood (Hatem 1996: 237). It is important, however, to understand how gender and economic ideology of the lower middle class works and affects the relationship between women and work (see Macleod 1991, Rugh 1985b and Hoodfar 1997).

Generally speaking, men from the lower class are responsible for providing for their families. This is regarded as a natural “God’s arrangement” that is not questioned by men. The implication is that often women, especially those with no or little education and with few skills to engage in income generating activities, become dependent on their husbands for living (Hoodfar 1997: 142). Some women at this level still engaged in income generating activities to help their husbands fulfil their financial responsibility to the household or for an ad hoc purpose. However, it is rare that women would want to continue their employment after they have had the things they thought were important and needed (Ibid).

But when education is introduced, the situation becomes more complex. Education has entitled those women to access government jobs, ideal in terms of their secure social and work environment, pay, flexibility and amount of work. But more importantly, employment has been essential in providing women with material comfort that allowed them to actualise their economic aspirations.

Educated women representing the lower middle class share aspects of two social worlds: on one hand their social origins and families are in the working class, while their education and employment has qualified them to occupy positions on the periphery of the middle class. They are clearly conscious about this limbo situation and differences between those above them and those below them; they try to preserve the fine line separating them from these two other worlds by creating a niche and maintaining their own identity. On one hand, they do not wish to fully emulate upper class women as they perceive them to be too liberal and not abiding by social norms, but at the same time, they view women below them as too traditional and unable to cope with modernity and fashion (see Macleod 1991). This distinction is exemplified by their choice of dress. They have donned the Western dress (as opposed to their parents’ traditional clothes), while at the same time have taken on the veil and adhered to the Islamic code of modesty in what they wear.

Women recognise the material advantages work brings them. Without the exposure and income that comes with work, they cannot maintain their middle class status and consumption assertiveness demonstrated by the procurement of durable and modern commodities such as televisions, cellular phones and refrigerators, and most notably, the education of children.

This does not mean that those arrangements have been without tension. Working women face a conflict in that they still attach great value to their roles as mothers and wives and the pride they derive from it (Ibid). This gender ideology is very much part of the cultural repository of women from the lower classes and easily invoked. Following the implementation of the Open Door policy in the seventies and eighties when costs of living soared and salaries diminished, the longing for domesticity resurfaced. After calculating the cost of transportation, clothing and other work related expenses, women found that not much was left to contribute to the household or save for the family. The question of staying at home and revoking the traditional roles and legal traditions that held men responsible for their households and their families became once again attractive for some women (Hoodfar 1997).

CSGs worked in the bureaucracy which continued to grow in size during the Open Door years under Sadat but in a context of demoralisation due to rising inequalities. The market was flooded with consumerist commodities which only the new groups were able to enjoy. Bankers and joint venture staff of the *Infitah* as well as professionals who were receiving high wages, the “parasitic” non-productive commercial lumpen groups found their way into the circles of wealth from the disparate sources of commissions and illegal activities and from work with the new joint venture companies. In addition, individuals who worked in the Gulf as a result of the oil boom of the 70s and early 80s sent remittances to their homes and also accumulated wealth. This left the low level government employees living on their fixed salaries; their real wages were hit by inflation and continued to decrease. Struggling to make ends meet, some of them sought to leave the public sector for the private sector or the Gulf. Many of the middle and high level staff had done the same, thus depleting the Egyptian bureaucracy of its good elements and exacerbating its problems (Palmer et al 1988). But lower level employees did not have an edge abroad and tended to return to their public sector jobs, as will be discussed in Chapter 4.

In general, the work possibilities generated by the Open Door in joint venture companies were not appropriate for the ordinary people. The new activities of joint ventures and consultancy firms necessitated large amounts of secretarial assistance – the type of work CSGs could do – but were mainly open to and occupied by women from the upper classes who were university graduates and had knowledge of foreign languages.

But even with their lucrative financial compensation, these jobs were by and large clerical positions with limited prospects of promotion or advancement. They served to maintain the sexual division of labour enforced in foreign firms even at this level (Gran 1977: 3-6). The real success of the economic opening, some argue, was in unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit of some segments of the population such as merchants, contractors and importers and real-estate personnel; it unfettered their individual initiatives with all sorts of possibilities for upward mobility (Dessouki 1982: 76).

### 3.3.3 The decline of the public sector

The 80s and 90s witnessed the diminished capacity of the Egyptian government to sustain the redistributive measures and its attempts to jettison the residues of the 'social contract' of the earlier years. A full-fledged economic crisis became apparent resulting mainly from the downfall in the prices of oil, return of migrants from the rich oil producing countries after the Gulf war and shrinking remittances. By the 1980s the role of the public sector in the economy had been open to a wide public controversy and the ensuing debates questioned its *raison d'être* and economic value. The poor performance of the public sector, due, among other reasons to its inability to play both the welfare and development roles, in addition to the corruption of its managers was a central theme in the debates.

Based on the strong recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the government had to begin the process of privatising the public sector companies. In a watershed move towards privatisation in 1991, a small number of 27, then 17, sectoral holding companies were formed under Law no. 203 to replace 314 public sector enterprises. The heads of the new companies were given the freedom to undertake whatever measures they deemed necessary to rectify conditions and enhance profit making. This included more freedom with hiring and firing, recruitment of consultants from the private sector and sale of assets or liquidation of companies (Weiss and Wurzel 1998: 115-6; Abdel-Hafiz 2009: 32; Badr 2007: 42). This greatly curtailed employment particularly in the state owned public sector enterprises which witnessed a significant decline.<sup>14</sup>

In the following years Egypt launched an economic stabilisation programme which involved cuts in subsidies and reduction in public ex-

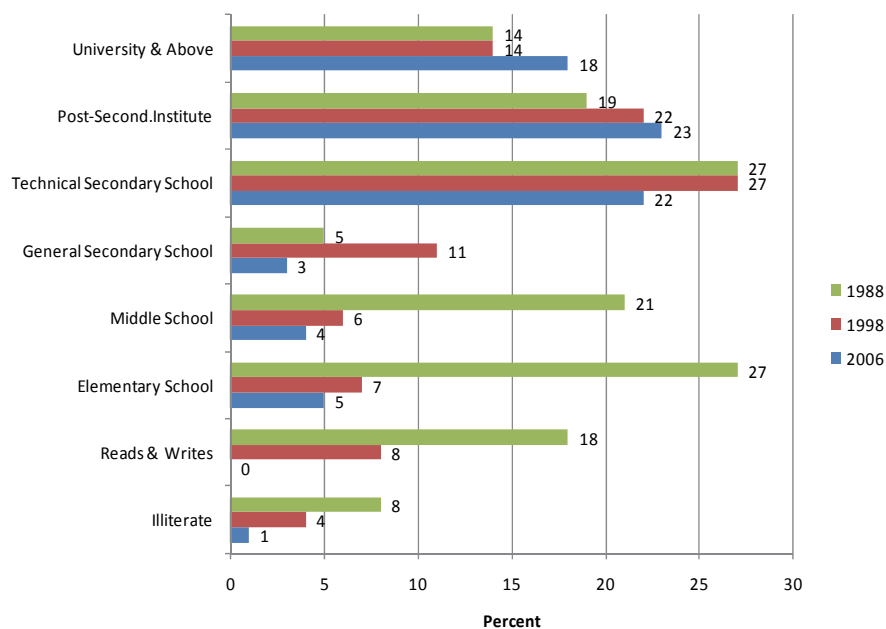
penditures. Fiscal reform and trade liberalisation were initiated, laying the foundations for more formal deregulation of the economy. These measures were resorted to in order – among other things – to encourage the growth of the private sector and employment creation. Nearly half the public sector firms were sold off by 2001 and the private sector was given a more important role in the economy (Hinnebusch 2003: 220). Privatisation measures have singlehandedly resulted in the lay-off of public sector employees, close to 40 percent of whom were below 50 years of age (El-Issawi 2007: 520). Alone those contributed to 25 percent of the unemployed in Egypt (Ibid: 519).

With the turn to economic liberalisation, the government's educational and employment schemes were now all geared towards limiting the future demand of young graduates on public sector jobs. Several policies were adopted in this respect. First, the government limited university enrollment, which declined from 33 percent in 1983 to 27 percent in 1991, and shifted emphasis to technical specialisations that would be more relevant to industrialisation (Assaad 1997: 90). This implied the growth of industrial technical education and investing in post-secondary technical institutes. Another policy was for the government to prolong the waiting period for government employment. By 1984 the waiting period had been extended to three and half years (instead of two) for university graduates and four years (instead of three) for technical school graduates. By 1987 the waiting period was extended again to five and six years, respectively (Handoussa 1989).<sup>15</sup> In reality, some graduates had to wait for as long as 13 years before they could get a government job.

Despite these measures, the supply of labour force exceeded growth of employment and the official unemployment rate in 1993 was reported to be 10 percent and 13 percent according to World Bank figures (Radwan 1998: 6). Unemployment was low among women with low levels of education and rose significantly among the educated who would have had a chance to join the public sector if it had continued to employ new graduates. Typically, these were the female CSGs who could no longer find jobs in the government (Figure 3.1) (see also Assaad 1997: 95).

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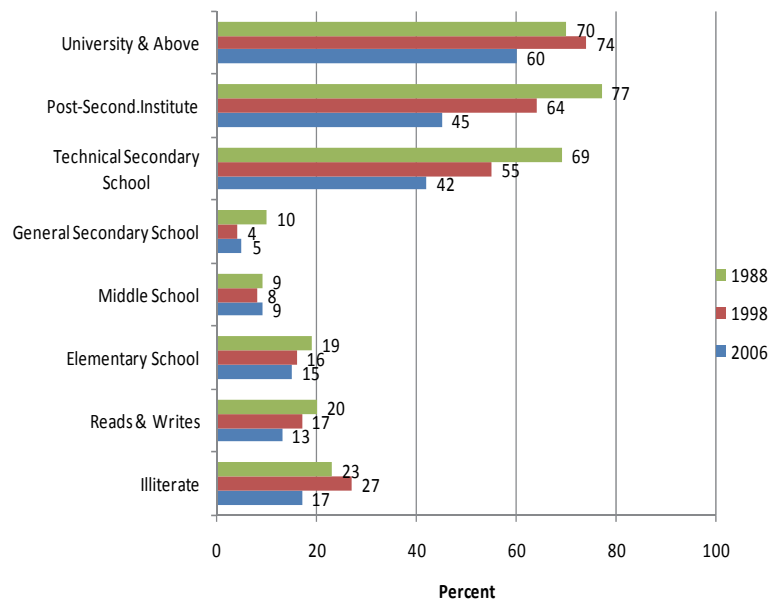
**Figure 3.1**  
*Female unemployment rates by education attainment,  
 urban areas, ages 15-64 (Years 1988, 1998 and 2006)*



Source: Assaad (2009: 32)

Female participation rates also declined for all educational categories between 1988 and 2006. For technical school graduates the decrease was from 69 percent in 1988 to 55 percent in 1998 and 42 percent in 2006 (Figure 3.2).

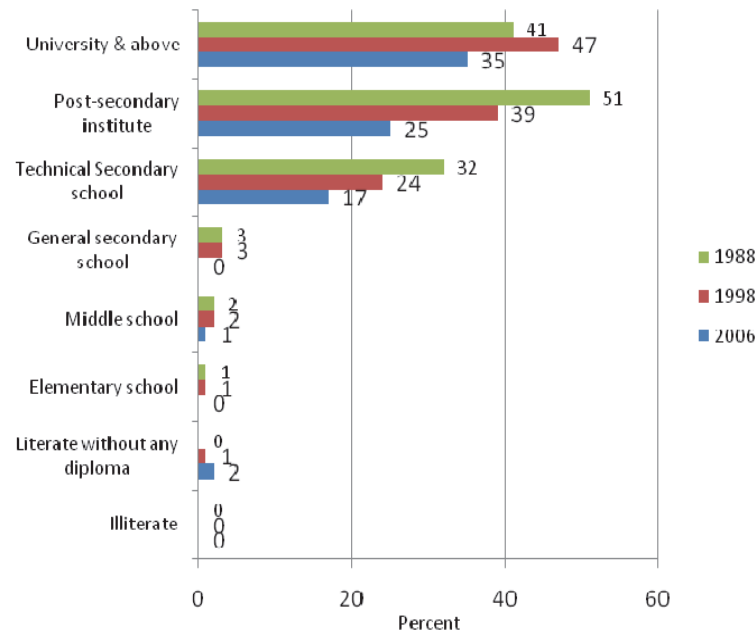
**Figure 3.2**  
*Female labour force participation rates by educational attainment among urban females (Years 1988, 1998, 2006)*



Source: Assaad (2009: 18)

Comparing female participation rates (Figure 3.2) with government employment by educational level (Figure 3.3), we observe that both fell significantly between 1988 and 2006. The proportion of technical school graduates employed in the government decreased from 32 percent in 1988 to 24 percent in 1998 and 17 percent in 2006. Falling government employment was accompanied by decreasing participation rates and employment in non-government sectors (10 percent, 4 percent and 3 percent respectively). This meant that women who were typically employed in the government were withdrawing from the labour force. Thus, the story of female technical school graduates with employment can be summarised in the rise and decline of the public sector.

**Figure 3.3**  
*Proportion of employment of female population in government  
 by educational attainment, urban women  
 (Years 1988, 1998, 2006)*



Source: Assaad (2006: 26)

It is important to note, however, that the government still represents the largest employer of women, but this is mainly because of the large presence of women in the older age groups who have held on to their government jobs and did not withdraw from the workforce. For example, while among working female graduates of technical schools in the age group 46-55, 66 percent are employed in the public sector, only 3 percent of the women in the age group 18-25 are.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.3.4 The shift towards the private sector

To further enhance de-regulation, the government had to gradually forego the life-time job security provisions in the old Labour Law no. 183 of



1981. It concluded a tacit agreement with private sector employers for more flexibility in hiring and dismissing procedures with new entrants. This had started earlier within the context of the privatisation process when the government turned a blind eye to the private sector's violations, avoidance of executing the labour code and its lack of respect to workers' contractual rights. Eventually, the government eliminated altogether the structural rigidities that seemed to discourage private investments from contributing more forcefully to the market.

With the issuance of the current Labour Law No. 12 of 2003, a great amount of flexibility was provided in hiring workers and terminating their contracts. Among other things, the law allowed the renewal of work contracts with definite durations for an indefinite number of times, which made it highly unlikely for any temporary worker to get permanent or long term secure employment (Posusney 2002: 53-4).<sup>17</sup> Ten years earlier, in 1993, the government had introduced the early retirement programme for women aged 45-58 years and for men between 50-58 years (Badr 2007: 48). The programme offered a full pension option for some workers and a severance package for others so they could use it to open private business. As the negotiations for the new law had been going on, many workers decided to take the package and leave, for fear that the new law might deprive them of, or reduce their right to compensation (Ibid: 56).

The new labour law continued to include special "benefits" for women, prohibiting them from taking night shifts and taking up jobs that may be harmful to their health. Women still have a 90 day maternity leave that they are entitled to two times during their service for a particular employer. In addition, women who worked in establishments with more than 50 female employees are entitled to unpaid leave of up to two years to look after their children and could use this entitlement up to two times during their service. Firms hiring a hundred women or more were required to establish a nursery for the children of their employees (Articles 91, 94 and 96). But at the same time, the new law restricted women's work in ten industries in addition to the 20 that had already been banned on grounds of concern for their safety (El-Tawil 2009: 55).

In view of the restrictions and extra costs involved in hiring women and at the same time, the abundant supply of male workers, private employers refrained from hiring them. Concurrently, the little demand on women's work has also been met by increasing reluctance on their part

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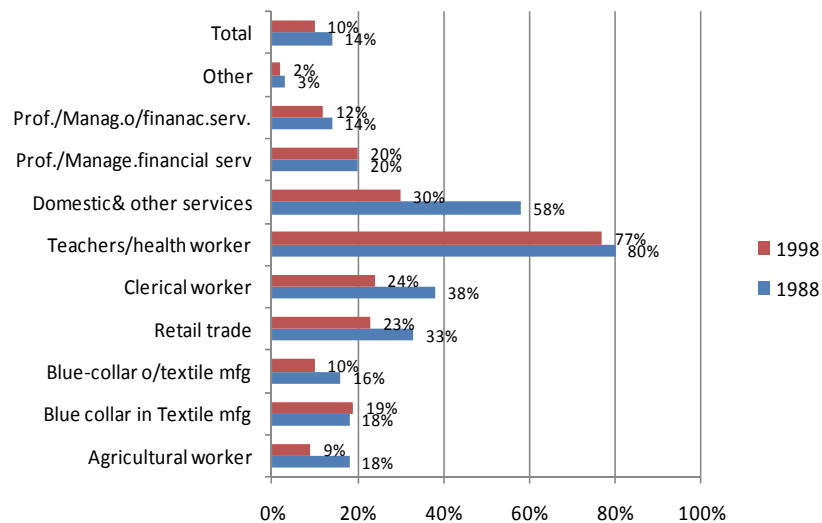
to approach the private sector as it was viewed as demanding and not providing flexible working hours. They continued to desire the public sector jobs – even when they did not exist anymore.

Indeed figures have reflected this increasingly lukewarm relationship between women and the private sector with the transition to the market led economy and the demise of the public sector, their main employer. While educated young males were going more and more to casual jobs and to the private sector between 1988 and 1998 with their public sector employment falling significantly from 50 percent to 36 percent (Assaad et al. 2000: 13), the same could not be said about women. Like males, women's employment rates in the government had fallen significantly between 1988 and 2006 (employment rates of technical school graduates fell from 30 percent in 1988 to 23 percent in 1998 and 15 percent in 2006 (Assaad 2007: 20). Nonetheless, women's proportion in private sector employment remained unchanged. Between 1988 and 1998 when work opportunities in the public sector were becoming limited, female unemployment rose. When it later on became clear that work in the government was no longer evident, many women gave up and stopped queuing for jobs. They shifted their status as mentioned earlier, from unemployed to out of the labour force (Assaad and El Hamidi 2009: 253).

Unlike the trend towards feminisation of employment<sup>18</sup> witnessed in many parts of the world as a result of the focus on export-oriented industrialisation, starting 1988, Egypt showed a trend towards defeminisation. This was due to the fact that Egypt did not witness an increase in the manufacturing of tradable, labour intensive textiles manufacturing – a traditional domain for women. Instead, it owed the surge in its foreign exchange revenues instead, to improvements in international tourism (Assaad 2004).

In nine job types that captured women's non-governmental paid work in 1988 and 1998, Assaad and Arntz (2005: 441) demonstrated a pattern of defeminisation with the exception of blue collar workers in textile manufacturing and managerial workers in financial services (Figure 3.4). There is evidence, however, that with some of the government measures to increase exports, the defeminisation trend has been slightly reversed between 1998 and 2006.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3.4**  
*Share of female employees in various kinds  
of non-governmental wage employment 1988 and 1998*



Source: Assaad and Arntz (2005: 441)

Females have a larger share in agriculture than males (this share decreased from 39.0 percent in 1998 to 36.7 percent in 2006 compared to 26.4 percent and 24.3 percent for males in the same years).<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, as Table 3.4 shows, with the exception of the education sector and public administration, where women are more present than men, women are less represented in almost all other sectors and are virtually non-existent in sectors such as construction.

**Table 3.4**  
*Main sectors of economic activity by gender*  
*ages 15-64, Egypt 2006 (percent distribution)*

Economic Sector	Male	Female	All
Manufacturing	20.7	13.9	19.3
Construction	13.1	.6	10.6
Trade	20.4	20.3	20.4
Other services	26.0	21.9	25.1
Public administration	11.2	13.5	11.7
Education	8.7	29.9	12.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ELMPS 2006 (author's calculations)

Gender segmentation has had obvious implications on wages. Generally speaking, there are fewer disparities in wages in the public sector relative to the private sector mainly because of the legacy of the government guaranteed employment scheme in which jobs correspond to different educational levels (see Chapter 4). On the other hand, disparities are obvious outside the public sector even in non-manual positions. Women tend to concentrate in large numbers in the lowest paying jobs in the clerical categories and receive half the wages received by men. The only exceptions are typists and interpreters where women enjoy higher pay relative to men. Other than that, women are under-represented in most of the skilled and highly remunerated manual occupations and their wages are even depressed in the manual occupations which have a high rate of female participation such as food processing and tailoring (Zaytoun 1991: 240).

### 3.3.5 From formality to informality

In Egypt, the retreat of the public sector should in no way imply that the private sector took over the responsibility of employing entrants into the labour market. Despite the momentum given to it, and some noticeable growth (7.4 percent per annum in urban areas and 8.7 percent in rural areas in 2006 (Assaad 2007: 21), it has not been able to meet employment demands given the large population of over 70 million by the end

of the 90s which produced an economically active population of 16 million (out of a total of 30 million over the age of 15). While the share of the private sector rose, most of what it was able to offer was informal types of work.

It was not by chance that the continued decline of public sector employment over the following years coincided with the rise of the informal sector. At the time when public sector employment dropped to 25 percent in 1998 from 60-70 percent in the 70s, the share of new entrants in the labour market whose first job was informal rose from less than 20 percent in the 70s to 60 percent in the 90s (Radwan 2007: 42). At the same time, the share of female technical school graduates' of public sector employment declined from nearly 100 percent in the mid- 70s to less than 20 percent in the early years of the millennium (Amer 2009: 210).

Beneria (2001: 37) argues that with the introduction of neo-liberal policies, the deepening and deregulation of markets blurred the boundaries between formal and informal sectors particularly with the former resorting to informal market practices such as outsourcing and subcontracting. The informal sector is no longer seen as the "anomaly that will eventually be absorbed by the "modern sector"; in fact it has been rendered more attractive due to its low production costs and for becoming the source of livelihood for many families. Taking this a step further, Elyachar (2003: 586-7) explains how in recent years the concept of informality has acquired a positive meaning in Egypt, when international organisations began to link it to micro-enterprises, and recognised those as engines of production and economic growth and when 'survival strategies' began to be valued for their role in poverty alleviation. In this context, she explains that NGOs have acquired a new role in the country's new political economy, not only filling in for the absent role of the state by providing welfare services, but also by becoming the representatives of the people and the communities which the World Bank and other donors are now supporting. NGOs are now contributing to the new development agenda by helping people to survive without the help of the state (Elyachar 2002: 496-500). Nevertheless, questions are raised about their real ability to create jobs and become genuine agents of social development given their reliance on donor funds and project funding structures (Bayat 2006, 150-1 and Abdel-Rahman 2007; see also Alan 1992 and Karshenas and Moghadam 2006: 20).

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Informality is used here to describe employment activities linked to industrial and service work in settings in which the job holders are not “recognised, supported, or regulated by the government and even when they are registered, and respect certain aspects of the law, they are almost invariably beyond social protection, labour legislation, and protective measures at the workplace” (Mokhtar and Wahba 2002: 133). This informal sector which now constitutes 55 percent of the Egyptian labour force (World Bank 2003: 81), has been non-dynamic, lacking growth potentials and unable to generate decent work for the young, the majority of whom are graduates of technical schools who undertake survival activities (Radwan 2007).

**Table 3.5**  
*Male mobility between first and current employment statuses,  
ages 15-29 in 2006*

First employ- ment status after school	Current Employment Status in 2006						Total	Sample size
	Public	Private formal	Private informal	Unpaid family worker	Un- employed	Out of LF		
Public	91.0	3.7	4.2	0.0	1.3	0.0	100	132
Private Formal	7.2	85.0	4.1	0.4	1.2	2.3	100	157
Private Informal	4.0	6.4	80.1	1.0	2.0	7.0	100	991
Unpaid Family Worker	2.2	6.0	22.5	62.0	1.0	6.4	100	603
Unemployed	10.1	11.0	22.1	2.0	49.0	6.0	100	642
Out of LF	9.0	14.0	29.0	7.0	1.5	40.0	100	703
Total	9.4	13.0	40.3	14.3	10.1	13.1	100	3,228

Source: Amer (2009: 193)

More worrying, however, is that informality has not been a temporary situation and those who have had an informal first job to begin with did not transition into formal employment: 95 percent of those who were employed in informal jobs in 1990 were still in informal jobs in 1998 (Mokhtar and Wahba 2002 cited in World Bank 2003: 83). The following two tables point to the persistence of work status. For both males and

females, those whose first work was in the formal public and private sectors, mostly stayed there. Also, while men in informal jobs do not transition into formal jobs (Table 3.5), the same cannot be said about women. Almost half the women who started in the informal sector left it to exit the labour force all-together. For women, unpaid family work is also a persistent status and those who begin their life after school in this category, mostly remain there (Table 3.6).

**Table 3.6**  
*Female mobility between first and current employment statuses, ages 15-29 in 2006*

First employment status after school	Current Employment Status in 2006						Total	Sample size
	Public	Private formal	Private informal	Unpaid family worker	Unemployed	Out of LF		
Public	77.1	0	0	3.5	1.0	18.4	100	159
Private formal	4.0	65.0	0	3.05	1.1	27.0	100	51
Private informal	3.0	1.5	54.1	9.0	7.4	25.4	100	165
Unpaid family worker	0	0	1.0	98.3	0	1.01	100	653
Unemployed	11.0	5.0	6.5	1.0	61.0	16.0	100	657
Out of LF	1.1	0.5	2.0	3.0	0.1	93.3	100	1804
Total	6.0	2.3	5.0	23.2	11.1	52.3	100	3,489

Source: Amer (2009: 194)

### 3.4 Alternative livelihoods: Migration

I discussed in the introduction (Chapter 1) the role of internal migration as a force that shaped the pursuit of better lives for earlier cohorts of rural individuals' and families' when they moved into the capital city in the early sixties. In the following paragraphs I will address temporary international migration as a project within employment trajectories, which has also shaped individuals' aspirations for social mobility. In the next paragraphs I will describe the three phases of migration in the last few decades, indicating their relevance to women.

International migration from Egypt has gone through at least three phases marked by particular socio-economic and political orientations of the regime. The first wave of migration took place in the fifties and early sixties when Egyptian professionals and high income groups migrated to Europe and North America in expression of disagreement with the new socialist regime. Those were largely considered permanent migrants and have been, at least from the economic perspective, of less interest to successive governments because their remittances were withheld. Although their average income was high, they did not send their savings back home and deposited them instead in banks in their countries of residence (ESCWA 1993: 31).

Other than this migration for political and ideological reasons, the Egyptian government did not encourage migration before the mid sixties, favouring instead to keep the talent and skills of Egyptians in the country and use them for its own plans of economic growth and industrialisation. The exception was when, from an Arab nationalist standpoint, the government encouraged organised official secondment to the newly independent Arab countries and sent Egyptian professionals, mainly teachers, engineers and doctors to help them set up their institutions and train local professionals. Secondment was for a specified period of time after which employees returned to their jobs in Egypt (Lesch 1990: 93). Other than that, restrictions were imposed on travel and arduous permits had to be obtained before one could leave the country.

In contrast to the earlier group of migrants, manual workers, peasants, skilled and semi-skilled labour and lower level professionals championed the second wave of migration in the 70s. That wave attracted the interest of policy makers and academics alike. It is true that the average earnings and consequently savings of this group have been less than those of professionals, but their remittances were one of the main sources of revenue for the Egyptian government during the seventies and early eighties.

The second wave of migration was a result of the interaction of external and internal factors. The oil boom of the 70s created new conditions that affected all the Arab countries: those who produced oil and other neighbouring countries which benefited from it, such as Egypt (Ibrahim 1982a). It enabled the Gulf countries to undertake investment and development programmes that required large numbers of workers. This coincided with Egypt's adoption of the Open Door policy which not



only meant economic and political measures of liberalisation, but also recuperation from earlier years of closure and isolation. Dispatching Egyptian labourers to the Arab countries was an important antecedent and tactical step preceding the implementation of the economic *Infitah*. The government reconciled the oil producing countries' need for labour to launch new industrial and agricultural development projects, using oil revenues, with its own deteriorating economic situation. By "exporting Egyptians" (Fergany: 1983: 52) it sought to rid itself of some of its surplus population and ease the problems of unemployment.

A deluge of laws was passed in the early 70s to facilitate the migration of Egyptians (Ibrahim 1982a: 68). Most notably Article 52 of the 1971 Constitution stipulated the right of citizens to immigrate and return home at their will. Later in the same year, Law 73 gave public sector employees the right to return to their jobs within one year of resignation which was then extended to two years (Zohry and Harrel-Bond 2003). Application procedures also reflected the leniency of the state in allowing labour to leave the country. The only requirement for leaving was the submission of a work contract. What came to be known as Egypt's first 'temporary migrants' covered a large variety of individuals ranging from unskilled and medium skilled labour and domestic servants to civil servants, senior professionals and university professors (Ibrahim 1982a: 73; Amin 2000: 16; Ramzy Zaki: 1982.<sup>21</sup>

In the early eighties they migrants around 2 millions (out of a population of 42 million) predominantly male in the age group 25-50 who represented 10 percent of the male population and 15 percent of males of working age (Fergany 1983: 57). When women appeared in the picture, they accompanied male migrants as wives or daughters. The number of single female migrants was limited. For example, single women who migrated to Saudi Arabia in 1979 numbered 7817, which represented 6 percent of all Egyptian workers hired in Saudi Arabia that year. For the Egyptian society, for young women to travel alone without husbands and split from their families was a new phenomenon (Ibrahim 1982a: 92-3).

Migrants experienced high income rates, remarkably higher than what they used to earn in Egypt. A professor earned in four years twice as much as would be earned in thirty years of career (Ibrahim 1982a).<sup>22</sup> Remittances increased from 180 million dollars in 1974 to 755 millions in 1976 (Hansen and Radwan 1982: 82. Savings also increased and were used for daily expenses such as food, clothing, and health care of fami-

lies, followed by procuring permanent housing and education (Zohry 2002; Eurostat 2000). Funds were used to repay debts, perform pilgrimage and save as liquid money. Very little (6 percent) was put towards direct productive purposes i.e. activities with multiplier effects in terms of income and employment creation (Abdel-Fadil 1984). Migrants simply responded to the general new consumerist orientation that prevailed in Egypt during the *Infitah* years.

Migration trend started to decrease in 1985 when the prices of oil witnessed a large decline due to the Iraq-Iran war. Egyptian workers were forced to leave their jobs and return home. Those who had been working in Iraq were encouraged to deposit their savings in local Iraqi banks. When the war erupted, they left in a rush, leaving behind their personal belongings and savings. Some have not been able to recover their savings while others are still queuing up till this point in time before banks in Cairo and the provinces to try to recuperate them.

When they had a government job to return to, migrants resumed work upon their return home. Those, however, who had precarious jobs or were self-employed faced high rates of unemployment, reaching 17.2 percent compared to 4.9 percent among non migrants (Fergany 1988:148). With the exception of some of the skilled workers and professionals, the migration experience did not contribute a great deal to building new skills and capacities. Ibrahim (1982a) contrasted the lack of capacity building among Egyptian workers to immigrants from North African countries and Turkey in the fifties and sixties who acquired new occupational skills in their countries of destination that enabled them to move from low to high productive activities in their home countries. In the Gulf, Egyptians accepted jobs that were much below their skill levels but had high pay. Ibrahim (1982a) reported that only 16.4 percent said they learned a new skill and only 15.6 percent of those said they used this skill when they came back. In this particular regard, lower level clerks were disadvantaged, for neither did they enjoy the financial privileges of skilled workers or other professionals, nor did they learn any special skills to market when they returned to Egypt.

Back in Egypt, returnees used up their savings until they found new employment. The main challenge during this period of transition was for them to reconcile the standard of living they had been used to in the Gulf with their diminishing resources back home. Because of their encounter with superior goods and generous purchasing habits afforded by

their high income in the countries of migration, they continued to favour consumer goods. This happened even after the situation changed and their budgets became much lower when they returned home. They attempted to find a place within the new consumer society which had been prospering as a result of the Open door policy, even at the expense of satisfying basic needs such as food. They created their own “internal migration” at home systematically withdrawing from productive activities to the more lucrative parasitic activities in the open sector such as brokerage and petty services (Abdel-Fadil 1975: 55-6). At the same time, the returning migrants have been held responsible for bringing back conservative Islamic customs of dress and behaviour which they picked up in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. They were accused of bringing home poor cultural tastes in dress, music and arts and promoting non-Egyptian dialects and food tastes.

The third wave of migration, still unfolding, is irregular or clandestine migration by young men. It has been a source of concern to the government and policy makers mainly because of the challenge it has posed to the government’s efforts at combating unemployment and its claims about the remarkable growth of the private sector and small credit enterprises that generate employment opportunities.<sup>23</sup> In the fall of 2007 as I was doing field-work in Cairo, the Egyptian street was once more grieving the death of 162 young men who were involved in attempts of clandestine migration to Europe in insecure boats arranged by illegal brokers. Later in the same year, the government foiled the migration attempt of another 670 individuals who were on their way to Europe without legal work contracts. The government finally began to trace the activities of organised purveyors of clandestine migration who had been left uncontrolled for years. Clandestine migration to Europe had become a repeated event that seldom took place in the past when the government was responsible for employing its young graduates. The accounts of poverty, responsibility for large families and limited hope for the future were shared by the young men who survived, a significant number of whom were graduates of technical schools.<sup>24</sup>

A survey conducted by the Emigration Sector of the Ministry of Manpower and Emigration in cooperation with Italia Cooperation and the International Organisation for Migration revealed that graduates of technical schools constituted 42.3 percent of clandestine migrants, followed by university graduates at 23.6 percent, while those who had no

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education formed only one tenth of the sample (Zohry 2006a: 18). Once more, statistics confirm the negative private returns of secondary education (Nassar 2005).

The survey showed that while the average monthly income of survey respondents was EP 527.7 (US\$ 90) more than 50 percent of the respondents' monthly income was less than EP 400 (US\$ 72) (Zohry 2006a: 17). All the significant reasons respondents gave for their migration were financial and economic speaking to their inability to secure employment: 53 percent claimed that income was not adequate, 53 percent complained about the poor living conditions and 37 percent stated that there were no job opportunities in the country (Ibid: 30).

Graduates with secondary technical certificate and university degrees expressed intense frustration at their inability to find work suited to their level of education in their home country. They were depressed and despondent about their employment prospects; their desperate conditions made them prefer to take the risk of illegal migration – including the probability of dying – than to stay in Egypt without any source of income (Zohry 2006b: 21).

While they were aware of the hazard entailed in the process of migration to Europe in an insecure and overloaded boat, and the risk of death or at least deportation and bad treatment, young men were ready to invest an average amount of EP 15,000 (US\$ 2727) and repeat the attempt in order to reach a European destination (Ibid 22).

My focus in this study is on the second and third waves of international migration. The first of these two will be addressed mainly as a resource within the public sector employment. The second – clandestine migration – will be presented as a gendered path undertaken by young males.

### 3.5 Marriage: Gendered patterns of social mobility

The data on employment above indicated that many women with technical secondary education are now outside the labour force. Expectations that marriage contributes to their withdrawal are of relevance here given its centrality for family formation and experiencing sexual activities and parenthood in a socially acceptable manner (Hoodfar 1979: 52; Rugh 1985a).

ELMPS 2006 has shown the contradictory role marriage plays in determining women's public participation. On one hand, delayed marriage and education play a significant role in increasing women's economic participation rate; on the other, the biggest drop in women's workforce participation rates occurs at marriage (rather than childbearing) (Assaad and Hamidi 2009).<sup>25</sup>

These findings are further qualified by the relationship between marriage and the type of female employment. When the public sector was alone responsible for hiring 88 percent of the married women in the older age groups who are now approaching their sixties, it has hired only one third of the never married younger women (Ibid 238). The rest have been employed in the informal sector (Ibid 228). Such an orientation is in line with families' understanding that the public sector is more compatible with women's roles as wives and mothers and is further confirmed by the attitude of female workers themselves: Those employed in the public sector were the most confident about their ability to combine work with marriage and in fact managed to do so, while women in the informal sector were the least confident, and women in the formal private sector falling between the two (Ibid 246). These attitudes were essentially the same as those of female workers' husbands (Ibid 242).

In a recent study in Cairo's informal private sector in-depth interviews with young single women confirmed their views that work in general has a positive influence on their marriage prospects and enhances their marriageability. Rather than being an alternative to marriage, they viewed work as a step towards a better marriage (El-Kogali and Bassusi 2001: 49). Young women also have a generally favourable attitude towards continued work after marriage, but again this attitude was specifically related to the economic sector of work, and followed the same trend above: the public sector is more compatible with marriage (Assaad and Hamidi 2009: 244). The women who participated in the study conducted by Kogali and Bassusi believed that work conditions in the informal private sector were harsh. They were ready to abandon work once they got married (El-Kogali and Bassusi 2001: 49).

It is clear from the above that both married and single women recognise that work for the public sector is easily reconcilable with marriage but it is also the case that young single women are open to the idea of combining work – even in the informal sector – with marriage and do not rule it out. In my study, it has certainly been the case that women

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managed to combine work with marriage, often at a big price, as will be shown in the following chapters.<sup>26</sup>

However, recent demographic trends in marriage have pointed to new conditions which have created a distance between young women and their marriage prospects. Those cannot be reduced to the question of employment alone. Studies have pointed to delayed marriage and reduced fertility as well as to a growing move towards nuclear family formation. Marriage patterns are shifting and generating new insights about its gendered role in promoting women's class mobility.

The discussion of new marriage patterns is especially important to examine, particularly in light of the significant changes that have taken place in personal status, marriage and family laws in the last decade. Women have been granted more rights derived from a progressive pro-women's interpretation of the Islamic *Shari'a*. The first victory was the approval in 2000 of the marriage contract that gave married couples the opportunity to provide specific stipulations before their marriage, including, for example, the wife's right to education or work after marriage as well as her right to initiate divorce. The second was the issuance of Law no. 1 of 2000 with three flagship stipulations: a) giving women the right to *Khul'* i.e. to divorce herself after returning to the husband the bride price paid to her upon marriage and forfeiting her own financial rights, but not her children's (Article 20), b) the right to obtain divorce in cases of *Urfi* marriages (Article 17) and finally c) the right of the wife to travel without obtaining the permission of her husband (Article 26). These critical steps opened the way to the discussion and eventually promulgation of Law 10 of 2004 establishing Family Courts, with the aim of unifying the legal system relevant to personal status laws in one legal family code, and reducing the judicial and legal hurdles pertaining to this type of litigation (see Sharmani 2007 and Bernard-Maugiron 2010 for a detailed discussion).

The above gains are expected to empower women and facilitate marriage procedures.<sup>27</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, demographic and social exigencies have in the meantime imposed new conditions that need to be taken into account.

### 3.5.1 Marriage delay

Several Arab countries, including Egypt, have been moving away from the early (and universal) pattern of marriage (the non-European model) that used to prevail at the turn of the century and found its justification in the prevalence of agrarian production systems and family organisations. Men and women married at a young age because they could rely on financial resources provided by their families.<sup>28</sup>

While marriage is still universal in Egypt so that almost all women over 30 are married, young women are experiencing delay in marriage. In the generation born in 1950, 65 percent of the women were married by the age of 20 against 40 percent only in the generation born in 1970 (Fargues 2003: 3). Moreover, among women in the age group 25-29, 13.5 percent were never married in 1988, rising to 15.6 percent in 1995, 16.2 percent in 2000 and to 18.7 percent in 2005 (Egypt DHS 1988, 2000, 2005).

In a national study conducted in 2004, Egyptian youth life tables estimates (El-Tawila et al: 2002: xiii) indicated that 37 percent of all young males and 18 percent of all females were likely candidate to face late marriage beyond the age of 30. Even among young females with low education or residents of rural areas, 10-12 percent were expected to remain single until age 30. Around 60 percent and 47 percent of males and females with post secondary education were estimated to continue in the single state until at least age 30.

Yet, despite the potential for continuing in a single state, young people made no indication that never marrying was an option for them (Ibid). In fact, when this possibility was raised, it was met with “astonishment, disapproval and unanimous condemnation” (Ibid 49). The connotation of celibacy was negative implying sexual impotency for males, gross educational ambitions among females and inevitable sexual deviancy among both (Ibid). Young people have indicated that while marriage could be delayed for education or work or any other family circumstance, the idea of remaining single by choice was ruled out. In Egypt as in many other parts of the Arab world, individuals cannot see themselves living alone by choice (Rugh: 1985a).

While increased female education and employment are seen as contributing in a major way to the new phenomena, new research has been

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exploring the role of economic factors in the delay of marriage, the social cost of the delay and the rise of alternative ways of co-habitation.

There is evidence that cost of marriage has been increasing and the burden is particularly heavy on poor households (Singerman and Ibrahim 2003:80-83; Singerman 2007). There is also evidence that soaring marriage costs along with unsatisfied sexual desires are contributing in significant ways to the rise of *Urfi* (customary or common) marriage. A national study on youth aged 18-30 estimated that 4 percent of the population and 6 percent of university students are involved in *Urfi* relationships (El-Tawila et al 2002: xiii).

These figures warn us that in the next years, we may in fact be facing a new group of women – single or secretly married – who fall outside the traditional norms and legal framework. While educated and/or working women may obviate traditional stereotypes and use their education and professions to impose social advancement and acceptability, the problem will be more severe in the case of less or uneducated and/or unemployed women, who are not financially independent (Rashad et al. 2005: 7).

Another implication relates to whether ‘single women’ might challenge or help sustain patriarchal structures. On one hand, the delay of age at marriage may be a sign of increasing emancipation of women as singlehood could be spent in the accumulation of knowledge, skills and competence. On the other hand, we may face an incomplete emancipation because often these women live with their parents in their family homes and continue to be subject to the patriarchy of their fathers or brothers (Fargues 2003: 2). Given the state of uncertainty that characterises marriage waithood for women, isn’t it possible that the fear of delayed marriage or spinsterhood – a much abhorred status for women – could result in compromises?

### 3.5.2 “Waithood” and marriage compromises

Among other connotations, youth “waithood” has been used to describe the prolonged periods of time after leaving school, that young people spend in transition, waiting to join adulthood. Because of increased unemployment, constrained finances and consequently the inability to get married, waithood is often an ambivalent and unpleasant period of time. It implies among other things, continued dependence on parents for



money and general support and stalling of young people's aspirations for an independent adult life (Singerman 2007: 6).

My interviews have shown the need to delve more into some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about marriage dynamics and the pursuit of compatibility, particularly in view of the delay in marriage discussed above. Rugh (1983: xi) who observed marriage in Egypt, remarked that it was a much celebrated ritual that involved a great deal of politics and negotiations. She noted that the seeming "incidental" appearance of the choice of marriage partners among women from the lower class, masked behind it both an extensive and reflexive process in which families weighed advantages and disadvantages and in which negotiations extended over financial responsibilities and division of tasks between families and safeguards against divorce and maintenance.

To what extent do such strategies still hold given recent demographic changes in the marriage scene? A recent study on female litigants in Egyptian family courts revealed that many of the personal status lawsuits before courts are a result of marriage decisions reached without sufficient deliberations and not built on solid emotional or material foundations or guarantees of compatibility.<sup>29</sup> The study warned that women make significant compromises in the choice of marriage partners to obviate family constraints, relieve the family of some financial burden or to avoid the social stigma of spinsterhood (Sharmani 2007: 55).

Recent figures have pointed to some significant trends with regard to the education of married couples in some Arab countries, including Egypt. While the increase of school enrollments for both boys and girls in the Arab world has meant a noticeable decrease in the percentage of marriages in which both the husband and the wife are uneducated, more married couples in Arab societies now feature women with similar or higher levels of education compared with their husbands (Rashad et al. 2005:4). In Egypt, a little more than one third of the wives have higher education than their husbands as indicated in Table 3.7.<sup>30</sup>

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**Table 3.7**  
*Percent distribution of ever married women  
 by inter spousal educational difference in some Arab countries*

Country	Year	Education of husband compared to wife			
		H>W	H=W (no education)	H=W some education	H<W
Egypt	1995	15.8	9.7	36.4	38.1
Algeria	1992	23.6	12.2	26.7	37.5
Sudan	1992/3	22.0	16.8	21.0	40.2
Tunisia	1988	9.2	10.7	34.1	46.0
Yemen	1991/2	8.7	23.1	6.5	61.7

Source: Rashad and Osman (2001: 33)

In the case of female technical school graduates, Table 3.8 demonstrates that educational compromises have been increasing over time.<sup>31</sup> In the older age group of 40-49 among whom women were likely to have been employed in the public sector, 28 percent married men with higher educational degrees and only 14 percent married below their own educational degree. As we move to younger age groups, more women are marrying below them and fewer above them.

**Table 3.8**  
*Husband's educational status by age group of female technical school graduates aged 20-49 (percent distribution)*

Educational status of husband	Women's age group			
	20-29	30-39	40-49	All
Less than technical	22.4	19.1	14.4	20.0
Technical secondary	63.0	62.3	57.7	61.9
Higher than technical	14.6	18.5	27.9	18.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size N	(637)	(470)	(215)	1,322

Source: ELMPS 2006 (author's calculations)

### 3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I sought to locate CSGs within the changing socio-economic scene in the last few decades. My objective has been to establish the case – that will become clearer in the following chapters – that we are now addressing two distinct groups of women, with two different life trajectories, who have had to negotiate their social status, employment and marriage under different circumstances.

A central source of tension has to do with the older group of CSGs as new comers into the middle class and their endeavour to find a niche and maintain the place they have acquired through education and public sector employment, in a situation of competition with other groups – particularly the old middle class – over what constitutes a middle class. I have argued that the claim of the old middle class to their position – which is not tension free either – is ensconced within their possession of status and cultural capital embodied in the concept of *Welad Nass*. The competition takes place on the terrain of education and employment that they both share and struggle to maintain.

On their part, CSGs as members of the lower middle class are selective in the middle class features they want to adopt. They are interested in middle class consumerist behaviour and material comfort, but have their own gender and economic ideology which gives them pride in their homes and families and places on men the main financial responsibility of bread-winning. They realise that education and work are their only way to achieve these gains and that work in the public sector allows them to do so at a minimum cost to their families.

In the discussion of the role of employment in mediating social mobility, a central remark has been the neat line dividing women's employment trajectories between the public sector and post public sector era. The older age group of CSGs represents the first phase while the younger generation moving into the informal sector represents later stages. These two distinct employment routes have had different implications on women's occupational advancement and marriage choices. While the case has been made for the older CSGs, the situation is not as clear for the younger generation of CSGs. Now with a diploma that has little value in the labour market and declining state role in employment, they have to rely on themselves in securing a place in the social map. Some of the older women in the younger group have been out of school long

enough to recount their experience with employment and marriage. However, for the younger women in their early 20s, this is still a process in the making.

Within employment trajectories, I have focused on migration as a potential project for social mobility. I discussed three waves of migration, two of which were sponsored by the state while the third has been an individual – specifically a male-gendered – path to social mobility. These migration projects also reflect the changing contexts of employment and largely correspond to the role of state in regulating this area, with an increasing trend towards individualisation of migration and social mobility projects.

In the above migration waves, women appeared in their capacities as wives and as single migrants, while they have been absent from the recent clandestine migration scene. Their participation in migration projects at various stages of their life course, as will be explained later on, has had different implications on their life trajectories and provides insights about various aspects of their agency. Moreover, the success, but particularly the failure, of the migration project has inevitably created tensions with far reaching impact on the entire family. As will be shown in the following chapters, with many husband unemployed upon return home, wives had to adopt new strategies to adjust the family to new living conditions and some of them were pushed to the labour market. Some of the narratives in the following chapters also show that the failure of the husband or father to elevate the family status and improve its financial situation through migration has had a direct impact on children's education decisions, pushing them for example, to choose the less costly technical education route when they could have gone into the general stream leading to university.

Finally, marriage is an institution of central importance but recently it has been subject to some significant changes that undermine some of the claims made in its name in the past. Recent trends of marriage delays raise immediate questions about how women experience waithood when neither marriage nor work comes through and about the kind of compromises they have to strike in order to get married. It also pushes us to further explore the relationship between marriage and work, which this chapter has shown, is complex. Young women favour combining work with marriage but find it hard to do so when the job – typically in the informal sector – is exhausting and unrewarding. This suggests that nei-

ther work nor marriage provides easy answers to the question of social mobility. In the following chapter, I will discuss the experience of employment and marriage of the first of the two groups: women employed in the public sector.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/habrdd/conditions/nafrica/egypt.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.icsw.org/copenhagen\\_implementation/copenhagen\\_papers/paper2/egypt.htm](http://www.icsw.org/copenhagen_implementation/copenhagen_papers/paper2/egypt.htm)

<sup>3</sup> *Urfi* marriage is a marriage which is not concluded by a state representative and is not registered.

<sup>4</sup> “The current regime is biased towards the poor”- An Interview with Director of the IDSC (*Al Shorouk*, No. 235, Wednesday 23 September 20: 8).

<sup>5</sup> Abdel Mo'ty (2002: 330) argues that NGOs staff represents a group “for itself”; they are driven by a global mission and values and are virtually linked to other similarly globalised groups; they are conscious of the reasons of their functioning, defend their presence and struggle against the state for legitimacy and elimination of restrictive laws. At the same time, they work from within the system and are opposed to radical solutions and violence. At times, the middle class is local and pre capitalist; at other times it is virtually linked to other globalized groups (Ibid 2002: 96).

<sup>6</sup> See Barsoum (2002: 52-54) for an elaborate description of the concept and its different uses.

<sup>7</sup> Since most European business enterprises in Egypt which employed clerks operated on a bi- or trilingual basis, it was necessary to prepare pupils in at least two languages (Angliker 1935: 67).

<sup>8</sup> The military was suspicious of the aristocratic women's movement before the revolution and concerned whether their support to them would undermine the support they would obtain from the middle classes. Thus, there were no women representatives in the constituent committee to draft the new constitution of 1958 (Hatem 2000).

<sup>9</sup> People's working forces included: peasants, workers and national capitalists.

<sup>10</sup> Hikmat Abu Zeid, minister of social affairs in 1962.

<sup>11</sup> The first is *lil regal fakat* (for men only) and the second *merati mudir aam* (my wife is a general manager).

<sup>12</sup> For example, a report of the National Council for Education and Scientific Research and Technology<sup>12</sup> stated that in 1975 the ministry of manpower (the state agency in charge of employment) asked the ministry of agriculture – in its

capacity as the main employer of graduates of the faculty of agriculture – to determine its needs of new graduates appoint (out of a total of 8000 graduates that year) that it was going to appoint. The ministry indicated its need for 297 graduates only while the government was responsible to find jobs for the remaining 7703 young men and women (in Heggy 1991: 437).

<sup>13</sup> Underemployment is visible when carried out work is less than normal or desired standards; it is concealed when productivity or use of capacities or skills is low – the other side of the mismatch between education systems and the needs of the labour market. Fergany (1998) claims that this is the most difficult to measure; in the eighties, it ranged between 10 percent and two thirds of employment (see Fergany 1998: 5-6 and Fergany 1997: 12-13).

<sup>14</sup> Employment in public sector state owned enterprises contributed a negative share of growth (-7percent) as well as a negative average annual rate of growth (-2.6) out of the total employment growth in Egypt in the early nineties (Afifi 2001: 13-4).

<sup>15</sup> Hiring through the centralised labour force allocation system of the Ministry of Manpower has been suspended but not formally abolished. As of 1995 the last cohorts of graduates who were offered appointments were the 1983 university graduates and the 1982 technical secondary and technical institute graduates (Assaad 1998).

<sup>16</sup> ELMPS 2006 - author's calculations.

<sup>17</sup> The new Labour Law gives employers the right to adjust the work force according to economic conditions and dismiss workers. All workers must be employed under written contract with permanent or specified duration. However, the law widens the range of serious worker infractions for which employers are entitled to break a contract. And employers are empowered for economic reasons to force workers to resign or alternatively, they can lower contractual wage or ask them to perform a different job (Psousney 2002: 53-4).

<sup>18</sup> In the discussion of feminisation and de-feminisation I rely on Assaad (2004) and Assaad and Arntz (2005) grouping of industries and occupations where women are clustered and in which women tend to be disproportionately represented, mainly in the area of tradable goods such as textiles and garments. Assaad also refers to Standing (1989, 1999) in that structural adjustments measures have resulted in the feminization of work “by generating pressures to cut costs in tradable goods sectors, leading to the substitution of cheap female [sic] labor for more expensive male labor”. See also (Chhachhi and Pittin 1996) for a discussion of types of feminisation.

<sup>19</sup> Feminisation indeed took place in some limited jobs such as textiles and garments manufacturing, food processing, white collar work outside trade and to

some extent in domestic and personal service. The most dramatic increase took place in the textiles and garments sector. All other job types such as agricultural wage work, other manufacturing, jobs in trade, professional and managers and “other” continued their defeminisation trend through 2006 (Assaad and Hamidi 2009: 249).

<sup>20</sup> ELMPS 2006 (author’s calculations).

<sup>21</sup> According to Ramzy Zaki (1982: 388), in 1980 half the migrants were top professionals, one sixth were clerks and less than one quarter were unskilled workers. There was also more migration from the government than the private sector.

<sup>22</sup> The exodus of some of the country’s best workers, such as construction workers and university professors, was eventually severely felt as it created a huge shortage in Egypt. It was claimed that the migration of university professor has had a noticeable impact on the deterioration of the quality of education in Egyptian universities (Ibrahim 1982a: 80-1).

<sup>23</sup> A controversy ensued when some people claimed that the young men who died in boats in the process of migration should carry the status of martyrs, since they died while pursuing work. Thereafter, the grand sheikh of al Azhar issued a *fatwa* (legal pronouncement) claiming that they were not martyrs because their migration was driven by greed. He said that since the young men were able to come up with the money needed for the sea adventure, then they were not poor and could have used it to set up their own enterprise (Adventurers for money are not martyrs”, *Al Masry Al Youm*, no. 1244 9 November 2007:1) .

<sup>24</sup> See “Conspiracies for killing Egyptian youth”, *Al Mossamar* no. 4335, 9 November 2007: 12-4).

<sup>25</sup> The majority of husbands (90 percent) supported women’s continued work if they were in the public sector, going down to 83 percent in case wives worked in the formal private sector, and 63 percent if they worked for wages in the informal sector (Assaad and Hamidi 2009: 242).

<sup>26</sup> I did not include in my study working women who withdrew from the labour force because of my interest in examining the interplay between employment and marriage as the main factors mediating social mobility. See my remarks under “The Sample” in the Introduction.

<sup>27</sup> Despite these gains, it is still the case that many women are not able to make full use of their rights either because they do not know their legal rights or are intimidated by the intricacies and bureaucracy of the legal system and prohibitive legal costs. Poor women also faced the uncertainty of life after obtaining a divorce and feared stigmatisation in the family and community associated with divorce. Nonetheless, social and economic pressures portend that more marriage

arrangements are likely to be questioned and more women will indeed recourse to the legal system to resolve marital disputes or find other ways to exit a bad marriage. In fact, one of the main male objections to the *Kbul'* law was that it empowered women to question and challenge the discrepancy between the ideal Muslim family in which men enjoy superiority derived from their full responsibility for their families on one hand, and socio-economic realities on the other hand, including the increase in cost of living and male unemployment, which have undermined the role of males and pushed women to the labour market (see Sharmani n.d. for discussion).

<sup>28</sup> There are three distinctive patterns of marriage: 1) a Western model characterised by late marriage and high permanent celibacy i.e. the Western model; 2) early and universal marriage (the non-European model); 3) delayed marriage and high marriage prevalence (Rashad and Osman 2001: 21).

<sup>29</sup> Sharmani n.d. (<http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/Familycourts.pdf>), p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Table 3.7 does not explain what constitutes a couple. Significantly, it does not explain how polygamous marriages are recorded: what happens when one man is married to several women with different education levels. However, in most of the countries represented in the table, there is not a lot of polygamy. Another factor to consider is that as Table 3.2 shows, males generally have more education than females. For example, in 2006 the proportion of men with educational levels of intermediate or above equals 42.0 percent; for women this proportion is only 33.4 percent. At the same time, education for both males and females has been increasing rapidly, and women generally marry men who are older. It is not uncommon for husbands to be 5-10 years older than their wives. If we therefore compare male educational levels in 1996 with female levels in 2006, we find that the percent of females with intermediate and above (33.6 percent) is greater than that of males (28.6 percent). Thus the findings that, in a cross-section, males have more education than females, but that females tend to marry males with less education, are not inconsistent.

<sup>31</sup> I am making a cautious inference here and am aware of the limitation of the data presented in this table. ELMPS 2006 only asked presently married women what the education level of their present husbands was. This did not include women who were married in the past but are now divorced or widowed. The lower percentage in the first row may be due to the higher mortality of spouses with less than technical education, and not to education compromises increasing over time. Moreover, the women in the 40-49 age cohort in the table are women who survived up to that age. Not all women of that birth cohort have survived and these might have included a higher proportion of women married to men with educational status of "less than technical". At the same time, any



differences in mortality by education are unlikely to have a material effect on the conclusions drawn from Table 3.8.

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## 4

## CSGs in the Public Sector: Homogeneity and Status Consolidation

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I examine the life trajectory of the older generation of CSGs aged 40-60, who have been employed in the public sector. Some of the older women in this group have spent their entire career in the public sector and when I met them, they were getting ready for retirement. Few of young CSGs joined the public sector around the mid 80s at a time when the future of this important economic and employment sector was becoming uncertain. In view of the following downsizing and the shift towards informality as discussed in the previous chapter, this group of younger women probably includes the last cohort of female employees to join the public sector in a formal capacity and enjoy the benefits of a life secure job. With their retirement, the entire experience of public sector employment-reflecting the magnitude and momentum of the employment drive of the sixties – will be history.

In this chapter the older CSGs narrate their history and share events that took place many years ago. As I indicated in the introduction, the interview process was not flawless mainly because I was interested in some of exactly the same areas they wanted to put behind them. My questions essentially challenged their current status as state employees. But once we got over this hurdle (see “Interviews” in Chapter 1), and proceeded with interviews, their narratives fell neatly into three main phases, which I attempt to cover in this chapter: education and the transition to work, marriage and family life and the impact of employment on them, and finally, what it means to work in the public sector and the rules and culture of the place.

I argue that the public sector work experience met the expectations of women and their families. It has offered CSGs the opportunity to build and consolidate their status as members of the middle class. I also argue that as an institutional structure with its formal and informal rules, the public sector has played an important role in shaping women's understanding of occupational and social advancement and determining their course of action. They initiate tactics to achieve small gains on the job but they also engage in strategies of collective closures defining what the acceptable gender and class norms are, hence contributing to the consolidation of a safe and protected work environment.

#### **4.2 Education and the transition to work: Public sector as upward mobility**

Rasmiya (56) is the eldest of her five siblings. She worked in a factory as a blue collar worker at the early age of 12 in order to help her father with family expenses. She kept her factory job while attending school. Factory owners were sympathetic to her circumstances, admired her perseverance and allowed her to work shorter days. The last employer even permitted her to use her office space to study when there was no work pressure. She continued to work in the factory after she got her commercial diploma for one more year until both she and the factory owner thought it was time for her to move on to the government job she was entitled to. She applied to the ministry of manpower and received the letter of appointment six months later in 1972 – the same year she got married. In her new work in the public sector, she was given a higher salary as she had now been performing a clerical job. She tried to combine her insurance payments from the previous period of work in the factory but was not allowed to do so because these were two different lines of work. She had now been promoted to a white collar position in one of the state owned enterprises. She did not argue about it because moving up from a blue collar to a white collar job was in itself indeed a turning point in her life. She got back the insurance payments that were saved in her name from the factory work and used them to cover some costs related to her delivery. A few months later, she put her baby in a nearby nursery and set enthusiastically to work for the public sector. The measure she adopted is a marker for public sector employment in this era.

Rasmiya could have continued to work in the factory as a blue collar worker. After all, she was provided with social and medical insurance

and was generally pleased with her employer. But both she and her employer realised that with her commercial degree, she was now entitled to make a qualitative leap into the white collar world. The government too was on the same wave length. Despite the efforts of the Nasserist state to eliminate status differences between manual and non-manual jobs, the latter remained of a higher status and even the government rules drew a distinction between blue and white collar work, which could not be combined in terms of social insurance payments. Commercial education was recognised as a tool of social mobility for women like Rasmiya.

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The first job Salwa (49) was offered after graduating from commercial school in 1980 was a high paying job as a maid in a private home. But her family was determined not to let this happen. Her father, was an uneducated door keeper in a middle class Cairo neighbourhood for whom free education meant that he could send all his seven children to public and then to technical schools. Through the years, he and his wife had been protecting the girls from requests of the building tenants to have them work as domestic servants in their houses. On the other hand, from the point of view of old middle class tenants, nothing had changed and Salwa was still the daughter of the doorman. In fact, now with their diplomas, young women like Salwa were even more attractive candidates for baby-sitting work for the tenants' children.

But the old door-keeper insisted that as his daughters now had their diplomas, none of them was to render any more services to the tenants – no more running errands, helping with cleaning or cooking, which they often did for little money before graduation. At this transition while Salwa and her sisters were applying for public sector jobs, a young mother who lived in the building promised that if Salwa babysat for her son, she would find her a job as a clerk in the public university where she herself worked. Salwa agreed to take the babysitting job just until the woman found another baby sitter and on the condition that she would “sit on the sofa with the child and not do any house work”. Seven months later a job competition was announced and the young mother kept her promise. She arranged for Salwa to take a formal job entrance exam in which she had mobilised all her connections to ensure that she would face no competition. Salwa recalls that all she was asked was her name and her address and then she was sent home knowing that she got the job.

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Salwa's case shows that the rites of passage into the public sector meant that CSGs had to redefine themselves in accordance to their new social status as credentialed and employable women. As they became candidates for government jobs, they had to measure up to the new status and send messages that things have changed and they were not to be looked down upon. In this case, Salwa forced the middle class tenant to recognise her; she had been adamant about using the white collar position to draw a line between her past and her present. However, as the case shows, CSGs were not alone in defining this status as there was always another group of women and men more entrenched in their middle class positions with whom they had to negotiate.

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Doria (58) is one among six siblings to an illiterate couple – a blue collar worker and his home-maker wife. All children attended free public technical schools so they could all get the same education and yet, even with free education, she recalls that educating six children was not easy in financial terms. She could not forget their joy when they all sat before the television of their neighbour (as they did not have one) to watch President Nasser present gifts to and shake hands with the top ranking pupils in Egyptian public schools. They could tell that many of them had come from simple families like theirs. If it had not been for Nasser, Doria would not have stepped into a school, she realises. As soon as she graduated from her commercial school, it was understood that, she, like her older siblings, would submit her papers to the ministry of manpower, which was in charge of government appointments.

Work was not a subject of discussion in Doria's family. Her parents and siblings had been all for it: "For us work was the natural thing to do. I studied and made effort so that at the end I would work. Otherwise, why did I study? Work was the expected thing to do; my parents expected me to work and would have been disappointed if I had not. All the women in my generation were expected to work".

She heard back from the ministry six months later and her first appointment was in the headquarters of the prestigious ministry of war in Cairo. Even though her parents were pleased with the news, they would not allow her to live alone in Cairo, as the family had been living in a small town 50 km. away from the city. To expedite the process, she had to finalise her marriage to her fiancé who had also graduated from a technical industrial school, and move with him as a married couple to the

capital. They were both to work for the public sector and agreed to form their family on the basis of two incomes instead of one. She said: “The salary I earned was essential because it allowed the whole family to live well; instead of one salary for my husband, there were two”.

Doria continued to work in the same job until she had her twin children. As the family was expanding, they had to move into a larger flat, which was far from her work place. She had to think about changing jobs. At that time, in the 70s, changing government jobs was not a problem as they were in abundance. Describing the government’s generosity with jobs, Doria said “If three people had applied to the same job, they would just take all three”. The ministry of manpower often offered applicants several jobs to select from. Job applicants made their choices on the basis of the proximity of place of work to their residence, among other considerations. Doria and her husband decided that it would be best for her to work in the same company with him. When she applied for a job there, they asked her why she wanted to be transferred and she explained that it had to do with “unifying the family”. Her application was immediately approved and she was offered a clerical position in the same company with her husband. The company offered transportation for its employees as well as a nursery for children where she could leave her son and daughter.

Doria’s story demonstrates state encouragement of women’s work while paying special attention to the family. Families too were adamant about their daughters’ employment in the public sector. However, work exigencies did not completely break the fetters of gender norms. Doria’s family, although excited about her work prospects, was still concerned that she should not live alone in the capital; the solution was to provide her with the protection she needed for the move by sending her as a married woman. At that time, jobs were abundant and the state could accommodate the choices of couples.

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Rasmiya, Salwa and Doria are three of the numerous CSGs of working class background with fathers who had unskilled/manual jobs and could barely read and write. They were all witness of a time when technical education was a promising area of specialisation and offered good and appropriate education for the needs of the market. Almost all the women in this sub-sample had attended public schools in their earlier stages of primary and preparatory education. During that time, public

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schools particularly in urban areas were largely *the* main institutions of pre-university learning. They enjoyed a solid reputation in marked contrast to the subsequent deterioration. This group of older women basically faced no significant hassles with their education and had a smooth progressive transition into technical secondary schools until they graduated. At that time, education was genuinely free of charge and expenditure related to schooling was minimal.

Their families had a strong desire to secure their daughters high status jobs and counted on a better future for their children that did not commit them to manual and unskilled work. But it is also important to remember that these families had also “opted” to send their daughters to technical education and did not consider general (academic) secondary leading to university. As mentioned in Chapter 2, education had remarkably expanded after the 1952 revolution, but inequalities persisted and became particularly evident towards the end of the sixties. Thus, I underscore that poor families’ identification with technical education had started early on but the main contrast with the following years (which will be discussed in the following chapter), is that the decision to choose it was not taken in a context of demoralisation and helplessness. A diploma from a technical school guaranteed meaningful and remunerative employment and certified completion of 12 years of education, an achievement that had a special meaning for students from poor families in the recent past.

As Doria stated, work for women of her generation was the “natural” course of action and also the “right” given to them by the state. Women benefitted from the government’s employment scheme and state encouragement to take up public work. At the same time, as mentioned in Chapter 3, the state took it upon itself to enable women to also meet their obligations towards their families by providing transportation and child care services for its employees.

Families did not have to make hard choices. Starting the sixties, the public sector was the place to go. Not only was the private sector practically non-existent, but it was also not to be trusted. The government employment legacy continued to reinforce the popular adage “if you miss the government job, roll in the dust it stirs”.<sup>1</sup> This attachment and distrust continued well into the 80s, even when wages in the public sector dwindled and the private sector was rejuvenated under the Open Door Policy offering higher salaries and a more entrepreneurial future.

Parents still restrained their daughters from leaving the government. They feared the daughters would be lured by the “fake glimmer” of the private sector and suffer its vicissitudes. A senior government employee with a commercial degree, who had next to his government job a successful but demanding business in an Open Door joint venture that took up most of his afternoons, was on the brink of giving up his government job. However, he was reminded by his parents that his public sector job was an “investment for his children” and his private business for himself. What they meant was that the prestige, pension and medical security his government job provided was going to remain for his wife and children after he died, whereas private business was unpredictable and could not be trusted. The same advice was given to CSGs during the wave of migration to the oil rich countries in the 70s and 80s. With all the dreams of making money and returning home wealthy, they were keen on severing all relations with the government jobs had it not been for parents who insisted that they should seek secondment or a leave without pay instead of resigning, in case they might want to come back to the government job. The value of this advice will be demonstrated in the section on “migration” below.

### 4.3 Negotiating marriage, family life and public sector employment

Married couples were on a revolutionary mission being the product of the same ideological era which had faith that with their energy and productivity, economic growth could be pushed forward. Almost all respondents in the public sector sub-sample were married to men of working class background with the same or slightly higher level of education and most of the husbands had similar public sector trajectories.

The life of working couples has been organised around daily work routine and schedule. Generally, the work day began at 8:30am and ended at 2:30pm. When children were little, they were put in nurseries or left with grandparents and brought home during weekends while older kids followed school schedules. Keys to the home were left with close neighbours so that when they returned home from school, children would have a small meal prepared by their mother before both parents returned home from work.



For husbands the public sector was the ideal place for a wife's work. They were reassured that because of the formal and impersonal rules applicable in the bureaucracy, nothing could place their wives in a position that would require them to make moral compromises. The notion was that "you get your work and promotion without having to move out of your desk. There is no competition or brown-nosing and preferential treatment does not apply".

For women in the public sector, work advertised a new and different earning power and prestige based on educational achievement. It also projected an image of a working woman who was organised, capable of juggling work and domestic chores successfully and had no idle time to spend gossiping with neighbours or waking up with the "noon call for prayers", an image that working women associated with indolent housewives. Women invoked their education-work achievement in their social milieu and reminded their families of their distinction when necessary. Karima (40) explains how she asserted her status as an educated government employee with her sister-in-law who lived with her in the same family house

She was jealous of me because she is not educated. She often told my daughter: 'lucky you; your mother is educated and a state employee' يا بختك بأهلك عشان هي متعلمة وموظفة. When we argued and in order to tease her, I told her: It is not my problem that her parents did not educate you.

On the other hand, women are also selective about when and with whom to invoke their advantaged educational and work status. In some cases, they could not take their achievement or luck too complacently. After all, they came from families in which their own fathers were still manual workers and where some siblings had not been educated to the same level, were unemployed or had a low level job. They often recounted the story of their sisters or brothers with the same passion they narrated their own

I was lucky to be in the public sector. None of my younger siblings have had the same opportunity. My sister graduated seven years ago from law school and wanted to work in the university even with her *Thanaveya Amma* (high school diploma) but she has not been able to. My brother applied to work in many places. When he worked as a lawyer in a lawyer's office, he earned EP 100 and had to run to courts and buy papers from his own pocket, so he quit. Now he sells tea in a small open place on the street –

not even a proper coffee shop نصبة شای. He makes just enough money to buy his own cigarettes and keep some pocket money. My other brother works as a security guard in the evening and earns EP 200. In the morning he goes to work as a sales person in the private sector.

Working CSGs sometimes longed for the more relaxed pace housewives in their community and neighbourhood enjoyed. But the social distinctions that the government job allowed them to uphold through financial benefits and promotions, made them endure their mixed feelings about work and the pressures of having to perform the dual role of housewives and government employees. Government employment has been their only way to continued status enhancement. Their future and that of their children depended on their continued professional advancement.

At a minimum, interacting with colleagues and the public opened their minds to what was going on in the world. A woman said: “Even if I did nothing all day, at least when I went to work I read the newspaper to find out what was happening in the world”. But the job also made possible some concrete material possibilities to enhance family living conditions. Married couples held house upgrading to be of central importance. The need to “move up” into better neighbourhoods and larger flats, more appropriate for their educated and government-employed status, was deemed necessary and also seen as an investment for a better life for their children. Better housing always strengthened their commitment to work and guided family expenditures and savings. Shahinaz, now in her late 40s, clearly articulates this

Of course my job has helped us a lot to move upwards. I have always wanted to move from the flat in the ground floor to the one upstairs to avoid sewage water and feeling that I am on the same level like the passers-by and all the shops. What would people say if they came to that ugly flat of ours when it is time to propose to [daughter]? In the past this was impossible because we were paid very little, but I have been able to save over time. You see, even if moving into a new flat costs a lot of money, we can do it through saving groups and things. I can also take a loan from work. That’s what I did in order to get a flat for my son.

Gender wage gaps are almost non-existent in the government.<sup>2</sup> Wages in the public sector comprise basic salaries set in accordance with educational degree,<sup>3</sup> augmented by regular and periodic raises based on seniori-

ty, usually in the amount of 5 percent of the basic salary. Several other amounts are added monthly to the basic salary that increase it substantively, such as work incentives for up to 25 percent of the basic salary as well as additional amounts for “exceptional” efforts. In specific work situations, employees can also receive allowances for, for example, hazardous work or accommodation.<sup>4</sup> There are, in addition, bonuses on national and religious occasions that could reach the equivalent of five-month salary every year as well as overtime payments given on individual basis to encourage higher productivity. While many of these payments are given on individual merit based, in practice they have become de facto entitlements that go to all employees for considerations of “social justice” and form a regular part of their salaries.

Through their work, women have access to economic housing opportunities and subsidised durable goods sold at reasonable prices and flexible repayment schedules. Several of the study respondents indicated how useful those services have been when, for example, they married off their children. Faten (54) is a senior government employee. For as long as she remembered, she has been procuring subsidised services offered by her job and did not recall that she was ever paid a full salary because there were always deductions to be made. For example, she now earns EP 1100 (US\$ 200) of which about half goes towards the payment of instalments due on the goods she had bought for her youngest son’s marriage. Just before this loan, she had had an earlier loan which allowed her to go on a government-organised pilgrimage to Mecca, a dream for many Muslims. Faten could not have afforded the pilgrimage otherwise. After all instalments are paid, salaries of husbands and wives are pooled together. In Faten’s case the amount remaining from her salary in addition to her husband’s salary of EP 800 (US \$ 180) from his job as security guard in a private sector mall, allows them to get by the month relatively comfortably.

Children’s education is another area of priority for public sector families and both their financial security and connectedness to the outside world makes possible some nuanced educational choices aimed at enhancing children’s future. Most families still placed their children in public schools known to offer better quality education, or in experimental schools (see Chapter 2 for types of schools) or even in affordable private schools that offered good foreign language instruction. Older women in the sub-sample whose children successfully advanced along various stag-

es of education recalled that the main family expenditure went to private lessons. Even though the women and their husbands were educated and could help their children with their studies, they were often personally challenged by the fact that children's educational level surpassed their own. Again work colleagues were helpful in this respect. When Aisha's (44) children asked her questions that were too difficult for her to answer, she took the queries to her colleagues at work, and brought back answers to her children the following day.

Public sector women could see that with the material opportunities they were able to offer their children, the latter were developing differently from children of uneducated housewives who had no similar exposure to the outside world. Women proudly told stories about neighbours commending their children for their *Welad Zawat* (aristocratic) looks. They also described how the latter refused to play with cousins who were "unclean" because their "uneducated" mothers neglected them. Children's physical appearance, what they dressed and the quality of their clothes also differentiated them from other kids. Government employees proudly explained how their children insisted on having nothing short of designers' brands and "plenty of clothes". Repeatedly they claimed that their main concern when children were young was to buy enough clothes for them to last one or two years so that regardless of the family's financial situation, kids would always have nice and presentable clothes to wear.

Although the public sector offers the highest financial rewards for education, public sector wages have been subject to fluctuations, rising considerably during the oil boom of the 70s and early 80s and declining remarkably thereafter. This trend continued into the 90s's (Said 2002:83; Assaad 1997: 92). With the consolidation of the structural adjustment programmes in the 90s, female white collar technical school graduates in particular witnessed declines in return for their education (Said 2002: 83).

Several CSGs in the younger group of public sector employees' sub-sample were married to men who were not employed in the public sector and had less stable jobs outside it. Those women did not manage with their family income as well as the older group of women did. While they had the same aspirations and financial obligations, if not more, the income they earned was much less and they had fewer work-related advantages. Shahira (40) earns a net salary of EP 540 (US\$ 98). Her husband works as a security guard with a private company and earns a

similar amount of money, but his work has not been regular and he suffered long patches of unemployment. They have two children who go to an experimental school and live in a flat in one of the new housing projects on the outskirts of the city. Rent consumes one fifth of their combined salary. Shahira finds their income barely enough to finish the month and even though she is aware of the subsidised goods and services that her job offers, she does not have any surplus in her income to pay instalments. To make ends meet, she has found herself an additional job selling make-up items. The job does not interfere with her schedule in the public sector nor does it take from family time in the afternoon, as she markets the products among her work colleagues and circle of friends and acquaintances.

The above review shows that the salaries CSGs earned have been no luxury. They have been indispensable for daily necessities and running of households as well as for production and continued consolidation of the newly acquired status on the periphery of the middle class. All of this could not be achieved by relying on husbands as sole breadwinners. The latter admitted that their income was barely enough to manage their households and without their wives' financial contribution the family could not have managed to maintain middle class standards. Women too have been aware of the importance of their financial contribution and often used their financial role as leverage in marital disputes. Several women pushed "un-ambitious" husbands to find additional lucrative work next to the government jobs and threatened or pretended to leave work to test their husbands' ability to shoulder alone the financial responsibility of the household. In all the cases husbands urged their wives to resume their work so that the household could regain their salaries.

#### **4.4 Production and reproduction of class and gender in the work-place**

##### **4.4.1 Physical layout: The Panopticon**

Typical public service offices (affiliated to ministries) are rooms of varying sizes located in down market run-down buildings. The rooms are occupied by numerous employees who sit at desks closely lined up near each other with just enough space to allow a person to squeeze between them. Piles of paper and files stand in room corners. Public sector enterprises, on the other hand, particularly those that were privatised in the

90s in accordance to Law 203 of 1991 (see Chapter 3) are on average more prosperous in physical appearance, less cramped and slightly more luxurious. Some of them are even situated in up market neighbourhoods.

Invariably, employees who form specific departments are seated together to fit into one or two adjacent rooms. These seating arrangements largely coincide with educational groupings or professional specialisations. One would find entire rooms with university graduates and others with technical school graduates, a third occupied by senior technical staff, like engineers, and a fourth by accountants. The group supervisor sits in the same room with his/her supervisees. In all the cases I examined, CSGs' direct supervisors were also graduates of technical schools. To distinguish supervisors from their subordinates, department heads are given a slightly bigger desk or a larger distance is kept between their desks and other employees'. From their strategically located desks, supervisors could have a Panopticon<sup>5</sup> view of all the employees and observe them in the open space. This state of "permanent visibility" in the public sector has served to control employees' mind and body and has been internalised by employees themselves so that each of them acts as their "own jailer" as will be discussed below (see Foucault 1975: 63.)

The spatial arrangements emphasise a sense of solidarity and monitoring, but also incarceration and departmental containment. In general, the world of lower level clerks at work is confined mostly to their work space – their office – and to colleagues sharing it. They have little direct contact with other departments, do not usually interact with their senior management and their knowledge of senior officials is often transmitted through gossip and snippets relayed by others. This sense of incarceration became particularly apparent – in hindsight – to employees who left the public sector on secondment to work, for example, in NGOs. Makram (male 44) who had worked for the public sector then moved to an NGO said:

In the public sector relations are limited to the departments and staff you work with. I left the public sector and I did not know anyone there except the people in my room but with [NGO], my circle of contacts has enormously widened. The way things are organised requires that you leave your desk and move and speak to people.

Parallel to the supervisors' official authority, there is a considerable sense of within-department informality and understanding. Given, for

example, the slow pace of work in departments, some have devised a semi-official system whereby each staff member could have a day off, in addition to Friday, so they could run their errands to avoid going out during office hours the rest of the week days. Moreover, in general, there are no social barriers in interaction between direct supervisors and employees. It is quite common to see everybody sharing a simple lunch or getting down to the financial details of who will be paid first in the *Gam'iya* (saving group), in which the supervisor is a regular participant. It is also not unusual to see employees displaying signs of affinity and intimacy, joking and patting each other on the shoulder confirming that the supervisor "is one of us". An understanding supervisor is one who has compassion for the early domestic chores women had to accomplish before coming to work to ensure that food was ready at home when children came back from school, and who showed understanding for coming to work late because of crammed transportation for those who have to deliver children at kindergartens or hastily leave them with grandparents.

#### 4.4.2 Labour process and gender: Norms and gender bending

Macleod (1991: 68) describes work in government bureaucracy as "simple, repetitive and fairly boring". Underemployment is not a vice that public sector employees try to conceal. The nature of the paper-pushing jobs that most employees of intermediate type of education are engaged in follows a routine that peaks peaking at specific moments of the work day and eases off the rest of the time. The first couple of hours in a work day are a busy time for public sector employees. By 11am, work is mostly done and employees are chatting, eating, drinking tea or just doing their business. Walking into an office around noon one would immediately notes the clean and orderly desks and relaxed atmosphere. Supervisors basically see that their job is to keep 'their kids' disciplined and under control. They proudly explained that their responsibility was to make sure that their supervisees finished their assignments early in the day, so they could channel their paper work to other departments, sit freely and not have to worry about delaying the flow of work.

The attitude of public sector employees towards work shows their understanding of the administrative structure and rules governing their employment which apply largely irrespective of their performance. Promotion and evaluation procedures on which basis employees advance to

higher grades take place automatically for employees in lower levels. Moreover, generally there is no investment in CSGs human capital. Because technical school graduates are not entitled to occupy leadership positions,<sup>6</sup> they seldom receive training.<sup>7</sup>

In general, work is fragmented and divided up into small paper pushing routine tasks so that everyone will have something little to do. Nagia (54), who has been working for the state prosecution since 1976 and will be retiring at the senior clerk level in a few years, explained that for all the years she has spent at work she has been receiving incoming mail, registering it in her books, and giving it to the office helper to distribute to addressees. The job of her colleague sitting next to her is to receive all outgoing mail and stamp it before it leaves the office for distribution. All her colleagues in the same room have similar segmented tasks that do not take more than half an hour to finish. Nagia does not remember that in all her years of work she has had assignments to fill up all her seven hours at the office.

A few CSGs who performed simple paper pushing tasks questioned the value of what seemed like puny tasks and their contribution to the entire work process. For example, Ola (58) who works for a public sector company that specialises in irrigation works and equipment, explained that after years of boredom with her work, she realised the importance of the list of prices of the spare-parts in the company's warehouses that she was in charge of.

My work seemed like routine and often I was bored doing it. But the truth is it is quite important. If someone wants to buy a part, I give him the price and keep track of what has been sold. At the end of the month, I figure out how many parts we sold. This is the beginning of knowing costs and revenues which are so important to my company.

Other CSGs have found ways to make their routine jobs more exciting by creating more challenging tasks and new work responsibilities. Noha's (44) job entailed disbursing overtime payments, which meant that she could just sit in her office and wait for employees to show up to get their money. She explained how she decided to make her work more exciting and break the monotony of her day

My job was to monitor overtime payments. I worked very hard and did not waste a minute although I had the choice not to. I used to open the files and look for work – find out who was entitled to money and send



him/her early notice so they can come on time. I was the laughing stock of the office because I invented work and kept myself busy. My colleagues used to dump their work on me because they saw how ready I was to take on more.

As some women broke the monotony of work, they also broke some gender rules. Abla (47) started out as an Arabic typist in a public sector company. She was also asked to type in English but as she did not understand English and therefore did not understand what she typed, she did not enjoy the job. She was able to convince her boss to send her to the company's warehouses, which were confined to men.

There I was not a typist anymore. I prepared cards for each product we had in the warehouses which carried numbers and quantities of what was left in store. It was simple to learn but important for all other departments. I went up to the senior colleague in charge who was about to retire and asked him to teach me how to do things efficiently. These were large warehouses and had many employees. Men worked on the technical aspects while women were secretaries. I used to spend hours in the warehouse with the men acquiring hands-on experience. It was hard in the beginning because they were not sure what a woman like me was doing in the midst of all the men, but as time went by, they accepted me. My (male) boss was amused watching me doing my work and showing up in men's rooms.

More men than women complained that they were doing work outside their area of specialisation or what they studied. Specifically this applied to male employees who studied in the male-dominated industrial stream with its emphasis on manual strength and openness to innovation. The public sector has been indiscriminately employing a large number of holders of industrial and agricultural diploma in clerical jobs that had little to do with their study specialisation. This trend has continued into the present time. In 2007, the ministry of industry, one of the few ministries which by definition has been more receptive to hiring individuals in technical and manual positions, complained that it was providing administrative, not technical jobs and that the percentage of graduates of industrial technical schools who were appointed in administrative positions reached 50 percent when this should not have exceeded 10-15 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Emad, male (42) is one of the men who made little use of his industrial education and skills. The following quote shows the absence of endeavours to match skills and interests with education and abilities. It demonstrates how job misplacement in the public sector stifled individual potentials as well as the resistance employees face when they attempt to give a different twist to their work in order to render it more exciting. He described how his work path in the public sector progressed, as follows

In the company, I never worked with my diploma. First I was put in charge of a warehouse. Then I wished I had a commercial diploma because there it would have been very helpful. For months I did not understand what I was doing there. They were giving me papers to study and I felt without any value and a failure. I had not even visited the warehouse and did not know what I was doing. I was sitting in one office and the warehouses were somewhere else until one morning I went into the warehouse and started bringing down the stuff from the racks to clean them and read their names. I did all of that on his own initiative. My boss used to come to work everyday and put his head on the desk and go into deep sleep. He was even upset when I started to dig into things the way I did and people could see that I was active. Starting then, I began to like my work and enjoy it like I enjoyed football. Time would pass and I would not feel it. I would still be in the warehouses when they were honking the bus hoes wanting us to go home.

After that I developed a good reputation and departments competed over me. When they asked me to leave the warehouse, I felt as though I was a child and they were taking me away from my mother. I was very attached to the place. I had been working there for 11 years and when I used to walk into the company, I did not wait to eat breakfast and immediately took off my clothes and put a uniform to go to the warehouse. I would clean and lubricate the equipment and put it back on the shelves. I made sure to put in a place that allows easy inventory and others would find out at a glimpse what was missing and what was there and what for big machines and what for small ones.

People thought I was very promising and talked about a great future waiting for me – like head of a warehouses department, but then they moved me to the operations department which meant going back to clerical work. My new job was to give permission to people who wanted to repair spare parts. Most of the time there was no work for me. I stayed there for one year then came to the procurement department here a year ago.

That was the last straw. The most dramatic move in my life happened when I came here – when I stopped doing anything with my own hands with the workers. I have been really worried since I moved here. I announce bids and receive bids and correspond with the bidders and examine offers. It is routine work that has no innovation.

#### 4.4.3 Labour process and gender: The intersection of class and gender in social relations

Women's pervasive donning of the Islamic dress was associated with the active resistance of the Islamists to Sadat's Open Door policy, which they perceived as an opening that went beyond economic liberalisation to new cultural and moral exposures. It was claimed to have led to the rise of a consumerist culture and the importation of Western ideas which challenged social and moral standards, breeding both moral corruption as well as social inequities (El Guindy 1981; Amin 2000, 2004, 2009). In those years, as growing inflation and spiralling prices pushed more women from the lower classes to seek gainful employment, it also made it imperative on them to take on the simple and modest Islamic dress code. For one thing, the Islamic dress spared them the huge expenses of maintaining a rich wardrobe with a variety of clothes and the expenses related to hairdressing. At the same time, the modest Islamic attire empowered women to break into the public sphere by, among other things, projecting an image of womanhood that encompassed honour, virtue, respect and dignity; it injected a clear statement that the woman abiding by the Islamic attire is a good Muslim capable of working while preserving decorum and inviting respect (See Macleod 1991; Hatem 1992 and El Guindy 1981).

With a majority of Muslim employees, and its unfailingly Islamic appearance and general conduct, the public sector has its own habitus. In addition to the remarkable sense of uniformity in dress and attire with women conservatively dressed in longish garbs while men informally dressed in plain trousers and shirts, work is interrupted by the loud call for prayers by one of the male employees after which many male and female staff leave their desks to perform prayers individually or in groups. It is in light of this uniformity that we need to examine how institutions are able to generate "controlling relations" or disciplining power that determines what is normal from what is abnormal. On the basis of this distinction, mechanisms are employed to discipline and regulate

the abnormal and bring them in line or exclude them altogether (Foucault 1975: 198-9). In such an atmosphere, social distinctions are easily depicted and what seems like a deviation from accepted gender and class norms, is collectively reprimanded by employees who internalise surrounding structures and engage in reproducing them.

During my interviews in one of the government agencies I met Amira, a 52-year old female employee who was seconded from this same office I had been visiting to an NGO. While she was there on an assignment related to her current job in the NGO, she stopped by the office of her former colleagues to greet them. It was a cordial encounter during which everyone seemed pleased to see her and exchange news.

Amira was among the few CSGs in this public sector company who had a different social background. Her father had served in a clerical position in an Italian company operating in Egypt before the revolution. As he mixed with the foreign owners, he learned their language and acquired some of their habits and values. He was encouraged to send his daughters to an English missionary school, where they stayed until they finished the primary stage. Amira then went into commercial education, which was highly recommended by her own father at that time. He believed that with her English language and the secretarial skills she would pick up in school, he would be able to find her a good job in the same foreign company where he worked. But her father died before any of this could happen and Amira had to follow the normal employment course of applying to the ministry of manpower. She was given the choice of work in two ministries and she chose the ministry of social affairs which was closer to her home.

Amira was a hard-worker and her work was appreciated by her immediate female boss. Nonetheless, she was having a hard time adjusting to the work environment in the government office. She had had a socially liberal upbringing and did not observe the conservative dress code. This was enough to be identified as a “different” woman and put her under the microscope particularly when gradually over the years, a more conservative Islamist influence was finding its way into people’s conduct and appearance at work. Amira said:

When I first went to the Ministry I used to wear sleeveless clothes, then gradually I wore short sleeves then long sleeves because both the men and women there gave me nasty looks. Even though the veil had not yet spread, my women colleagues asked me to dress more conservatively and

modestly and encouraged me to put on the *hegab*. They said that at work one did not dress the way I did, and that I should keep my nice clothes for my family and my middle class neighbourhood. It was a bad social milieu for me. They had conservative mentalities. If you laugh, then they think you are loose and immoral. I loved to laugh and they used to complain about my conduct to my boss.

The situation deteriorated quickly threatening a crisis. To show their dismay, Amira's conservative male colleagues boycotted her. She said: "They wanted to kick me out of my office. I felt I was suffocating there. It was a dead end for me. I prayed God that I would leave the government and work in a better social environment".

Amira also articulated these developments in terms of differences in social class:

The government brings people from here and there *الحكومة بتلم*. Social milieu is very important. In the government they were vulgar; they used to have bad arguments and yell at each other. They come from Boulaq (popular neighbourhood) and other areas like this. Only the managers come from Mohandessin and Zamalek. In Mogamaa (the largest bureaucracy compound in Egypt) where I worked, I never knew how to argue back *متعرفيش تغلبهم فى الرد*.

Abiding by the bureaucracy's gender rules and modesty of dress and conduct is implicitly understood to be among the public sector job requirements. By those standards, Amira was "abnormal" and had to be disciplined. However, her colleagues realised that her oblivion to the subscribed gender norms were not malicious. They did not identify her conduct as "deliberately" immoral; otherwise they would have taken a different, possibly legal, course of action to discipline her. Rather they diagnosed her conduct as one of "misplacement": a woman from a different social class background in the wrong work place. They understood that she was not expected to understand how to abide by applicable gender and class rules, and was therefore excused. Her colleagues applied to her the same rules they applied to Coptic female co-workers, for while they too are expected to abide by the general gender norms of modesty in the work place, Muslim employees did not have the very same expectations of them, nor the authority to enforce those rules, as they would of each other as Muslims. There was no strict gender or class accounta-

bility from “different” colleagues (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1995).

Amira’s female colleagues gave her strong sisterly advice to put on the veil, which she was not ready for. Her female boss quickly realised that Amira did not fit and “the government was not the right place for her”. She helped her get secondment to an NGO that worked under the auspices of their office affiliated to the ministry of social affairs. When she met Amira’s new boss at the NGO, she made sure to assure him that Amira was an impeccable employee, that the move was not related to her work performance and it was “a force majeure and against her own will” that she was letting Amira go. She assured the new boss that Amira was a woman “worth 100 men”, that she would miss her hard work but that she knew that Amira would have better opportunities in another more “open” place.

Amira was now warmly received by her former colleagues when she paid them social visits. Some of her male colleagues, who had stopped shaking hands with her when she was their co-worker, were now friendly and back to their normal selves. This is a situation in which “the constraints of power” of the work place are inscribed upon the employees

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection (Foucault 1975: 203).

Indeed, Amira believed that her occupational life improved considerably after moving to the NGO: “No one cares to look at what you are wearing or how short your sleeves are”. Moreover, it was only when she went to see the undersecretary of the ministry in order to have his approval on her secondment to the NGO that she got to personally see him, although he was her ultimate boss and his room was on the same floor in her office building. She has been working for the NGO for nine years and although she has not been promoted to a senior level, her salary has been raised a number of times

At the NGO my work diversified and expanded. I am now the personal secretary of the second man here and his work is very demanding. He required me to take computer courses and French lessons and encouraged me to do new things.

Amira's main concern now was that the secondment was soon coming to an end and she dreaded the thought of going back to her old government job.

#### 4.4.4 CSGs and status consolidation

My initial impression was that work colleagues had intimate and extensive knowledge about each other's social and family circumstances. However, this turned out to be inaccurate. Notwithstanding the high degree of uniformity in inter-department educational and therefore social background, there were also subtle status issues that CSGs felt needed not be disclosed. Despite the close work environment, women did not entirely expose themselves and preferred to engage in what I refer to as status consolidation. Bahira (54), for example, who has been sharing her office with more or less the same group of colleagues for over thirty years, has managed not to tell them that her mother was a domestic maid. She explained that there has always been an implicit understanding that they were not to address their social origin in any detail.

As an upwardly mobile person, she faced the stigma of her origin (see Goffman 1963). Bahira grew up in the house of a middle class family where her mother worked as a domestic servant. Her mother had been living in a small town in Upper Egypt, when she bore Bahira illegitimately. Fearing that her pregnancy would show and not knowing what to do, she left her town and ended up working as a maid for the family of a senior government official in Cairo. The family provided her with shelter and protected her against the scandal of adultery. Later on they forced the man to marry her and recognise his daughter, Bahira. A few months after the marriage was concluded, he divorced Bahira's mother and both Bahira and her mother lived in with that family.

The master who had two children in the age of school, insisted that Bahira's mother return to her home village and obtain a birth certificate for her daughter in order to enrol her in school. The little girl ended up in a public school in that solid middle class neighbourhood with other middle class children including some of the kids her mother served. Eventually, Bahira's mother was able to rent a small 2 x 2 m street-level room that had been kept for storage purposes in the building next to her master's. Having been shut for years and close to sewage network and water pipes the room was soaking in humidity. With a low ceiling one had to stoop in order to enter it. The room had nothing but one bed and

a small table on which they had a small burner and some kitchen utensils. They shared a bathroom with four other families who had similar accommodation.

After the master's children grew up and became adults, Bahira's mother started to look for other and more lucrative work opportunities. She worked as a domestic servant in Libya. Bahira went to live with her father, her step-mother and half siblings but always kept good relations with the old middle class family which hosted her in her early years. At her father's place she met her present husband. He was the neighbour across the street. She got engaged and obtained her commercial diploma in 1974. A year later, a competition was announced in the papers for clerical positions in the public prosecutor's office. Once more, the former master used his connections and clout to ensure that Bahira got the job.

Bahira realises that her situation was precarious and if it had not been for the family her mother served, she might not have found her way to school, not to mention the government job. She might have ended up being a domestic servant like her mother. But now that she was in a stable and prestigious government job, she wanted to maintain that fine line between her past and present. She certainly did not want her colleagues to know her story and was critical of her mother who and was in fact proud of her achievements and struggle in life as a single mother. She found no compunction in telling other people her story. Bahira said

What hurt me most was that my mother wanted the whole world to know what her job was. My children were affected by that. She was proud of us but we were not proud of her. She wanted my son's friends to know that she was his grandmother and spent all her time sitting with the owner of the grocery shop downstairs telling her about her history and life. The grocer told my son "your grandmother sends her greetings" insinuating that he found out the truth. The woman who sold vegetables across the street once told me: Why don't you keep your mother at home and let her stop working? Mother on the other hand said: What is wrong with work? I am not doing anything *haram* (religiously forbidden); I am not stealing. She discloses all our secrets to our neighbours. You want me to tell my colleagues that my mother works like that? Of course not. No one should know that. I don't like to be viewed with pity by anybody. And now I am nearing the top grade at work. What a scandal this would be if anyone found out.



Although Bahira was always appreciative of the old middle class family that took care of her, their relationship was not without strain. Notwithstanding that she was welcome at their house, it was mostly there that she was reminded of her lower status when the lady of the house – an old woman now – insisted on giving her money – a gratuity – in the presence of Bahira's children.<sup>9</sup> In another incident in the past few years, Bahira's relationship with her mother reached a point of crisis and the latter left the house and found shelter again with the middle class woman she had once served. Angry at Bahira's ingratitude and lack of compassion towards her mother, the lady of the house knew what would hurt Bahira most. She threatened to call Bahira's office and expose her by telling her superior and colleagues the entire story, an attempt that Bahira was able to foil at the last minute. Bahira always felt threatened and although happy at work, she was impatiently waiting for the day when she could retire and close this chapter in her life.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.4.5 Hierarchies among CSGs

In state-owned public sector enterprises (as opposed to the government) there is a general concern over the performance of managers. This preoccupation has a history related to the development of the public sector. Upon launching the public sector in 1962, its leadership was recruited from among army officers who were appointed in managerial levels after undergoing a period of civic education in different universities. Nasser's regime had also been interested in nurturing the newly educated technical staff. Those predominantly comprised individuals of urban lower middle class background who benefitted from free higher education and academic fellowships abroad. In addition to those, was the middle management stratum of graduates of technical schools and technical institutes whose number witnessed a remarkable rise after the revolution (Abdel-Malek 175-177).

The years that followed the death of President Nasser witnessed a shift to the West and increasing liberalisation of the economy. The trend was to downsize the public sector and give a larger and more vibrant role to the private sector. In the transition, public sector companies were collapsed into a small number of holding companies whose managers were given the responsibility of determining the fate of their companies and prepare them for the privatisation process (see Chapter 3).

With the resulting lay-off of employees within the privatisation scheme and the emphasis on rationalisation of costs and maximisation of profits, employees who remained in their jobs started to pay more attention to the performance of their companies. The revenues and profits the companies made now had a direct impact on employees' own incomes and profit sharing in the form of end of year bonuses they accrued. Employees in the state-owned enterprises I visited were closely following up their companies' financial position and management performance, comparing their production now with previous years and employees' current state of wellbeing with the past. Corrupt practices, power games, inter-senior staff differences, cliques and bribery in addition to the power and intervention of trade unions and what they could do to improve work conditions and employees' benefits were popular topics.

Female clerks, who formed the bulk of senior staff secretariat, were considered part of the companies' "kitchen" and close to the centre of decision making and power. By virtue of their privileged positions, they also enjoyed preferential financial privileges. A female CSG secretary said

I worked in the secretariat of the chairman of the board. It was a central position and everything came back to us. My salary was increasing steadily and I was given preferential benefits and financial incentives. Because I was in the secretariat of the chairman, any senior official responsible for a work sector made sure to include the name of the chairman in incentives and bonuses lists. Automatically that applied to the staff who worked for him/her. So our names were always on the pay rolls of all the other departments.

But while the manager's secretariat included several women at different work grades (which a senior female employee described as the "harem of the general manager"), not all secretaries had the same benefits and usually one only stood out as the confidante of the senior staff member. One of these personal secretaries said

My work entailed clerical tasks, but also fixing his appointments and visits and making arrangements for press conferences etc... I knew everything about our company from him – all the ins and outs and all the conspiracies. I knew who would get promoted and who would be fired. In most of the other departments, employees were falling asleep on their desks because of lack of work or they would work for a couple of hours and sleep again, but in my position, I was working with the head of the pyramid. I was busy and always had to be around. I did not have an idle minute and

could not disappear from his sight for five minutes. He lost his mind if he did not find me at my desk because I knew all his plans and steps.

Nonetheless, despite the prestige, benefits and possible opportunities for advancement, for many female employees, getting close to the circle of upper management was not necessarily an attractive path to pursue. Several senior CSGs stated that over their work trajectory in the public sector, they had some opportunities to rise in ways that might have put into question their integrity as respectable women before their colleagues and the company at large.

Gihan is a clerk in her late 50s who worked all her life in a public sector company that was eventually privatised. After spending years moving between departments, she finally served in the secretariat of the chair of the board. She found herself with a large number of women, all holders of commercial school diplomas, doing puny and compartmentalised tasks. For many years her job was to organise the mail into inward and outward documents and when she was promoted to a higher rank she was put in charge of the incoming mail for the entire company.

All women of Gihan's educational level were supervised by a middle class tri-lingual, smart-looking woman, brought by the board chairman to be the presentable face of the company, receive guests, and answer his personal telephone. Although Gihan got her regular promotions without delays doing the same kind of work, she was having second thoughts about a promotion that would bring her closer to the chairman. On one hand, she could be doing more important work that would open new horizons and contacts for her, but on the other, such a job would require taking on a more "feminine" role that was more akin to the "manager's wife" rather than his secretary.

After some reflection, she decided to make it clear to all her colleagues that the personal secretary's job was not a line she wanted to pursue. To put an end to the discussion, she decided to put on the veil, which was a clear message that she was not interested in a higher status position that would place her in the entourage of the chairman. In retrospect, she said

I had been thinking about the veil and wanting to put it on for various reasons, but once I took the decision I felt much more peaceful at work. I felt much stronger to continue to do the same kind of work I had been doing. After all, on pay day, she [the chairman's secretary] and I queue in the line

to cash our salaries at the end of the month, and in front of all other employees in the company, I was still a staff member of the chairman's secretariat, but that's how far I wanted to go.

Gihan continued to do this kind of work until the age of 58. When I met her, she had been seeking early retirement.

Fadila (48) had a different experience that indeed could have jeopardised her entire employment. She was the personal secretary to the board chairman and he implicated her in corrupt practices by training her to manipulate accounts and workers' bonuses in ways that would allow him and her to make money in the end.

It was a lot of work and huge responsibility and he would have only me do it. Bonuses were the only thing he could manipulate. He could not tamper with workers' salaries because they were fixed, but the bonus was based on production. Sometimes the factory made 150 percent profits but he would have me calculate the bonus on the basis of 100 percent, the rest he would distribute at his own discretion to himself and to his close circles and of course to me. I helped him find loopholes and see how they could work in our interest. The first thing we always did was to give an amount to the manager of the factory so he would not talk – buy him off, then distribute the rest to us, and record these as miscellaneous expenses – food and whatever.

Fadila continued to do this for many years. On one hand, she felt she could not reveal the fraud because her work was her source of livelihood *أكل عيشي* and she was afraid of the consequences of her personal implication. On the other hand, although the source was illegal, she used her "feminine resources" and much of the money she made towards what she called "good purposes" that ultimately enhanced her own advancement and social and human capital. First, she tried to minimise the harm done to workers and, whenever she could, reverse it to their benefit.

First I tried as much as I could to reduce the amount he sought to take away from the workers and I used to fight for their other rights to medical insurance and other payments. Employees recognised that I was a doer and always looked for me to solve their problems. Since I knew his vulnerability *كاسرة عينه* negotiating with him was easy. I always presented the problem and offered the solution at the same time. I made him think of himself as the patriarch. I used to tell him "you are our father in this company. Who else do we go to? Hosni Mubarak?"

The other thing she did was convince the management to contribute to her higher education in the Open University. Fadila was the only woman in the public sector sample who obtained a BA in commerce and at a quite late point in her life work career, no less. Earlier she had made several attempts to continue her university studies that were met by resistance from her father who insisted that she should pay attention to her family and children. Once she had enough money from her “illegal” activities and with the company’s contribution, she was also able to convince her younger sister, also with a commercial degree, to get admission into university by making use of the rule that waived tuition fees for one applicant if two applied from the same family.

The BA enhanced Fadila’s negotiating position in her side activities

Negotiating with the manager with a commercial diploma was something and talking to him with a BA was something else. I talked with confidence and courage and was able to increase my share from profits.

It was also a turning point in her personal and professional life

With a BA you suddenly find yourself a real employee. You are treated differently. You deal with people who are more educated and knowledgeable. As a secretary I used to sit on meetings but no one ever noticed me. Now with a BA I had a substantial promotion and sat on important meetings which included all work departments and all technical staff. Now I was also able to grasp much of what they said. In the past I always felt below them. Now I was dealing with all kinds of senior employees and was given more interesting work and huge responsibilities.

But as time went by, her feelings of guilt and vulnerability were increasing. She was concerned about her family and children if they found out

I made good money and benefited a lot from this, but I started to wonder what if my children found out, and what if it was discovered even though I was a subordinate and not the main decision maker. The manager was clever enough to realise that I had lots of aspiration. That is why I had given my conscience a break راحة ضميرك but it was really day light robbery. I felt I was taking away from the workers’ rights. I told him if he really liked me, he should let me go.

At the age of 58, Fadila insisted on applying for early retirement despite the manager’s pleas for her to continue. He allowed her to go on

the condition that she works as a consultant for a few days around pay time, so she can still “do the monthly calculations”. She agreed.

Since she left, Fadila used the money she made in the public sector and the social capital she accumulated there to open her own NGO for social services in her poor working class neighbourhood south west of Cairo. After retirement, her “official” pay was severely cut down from EP 800 (US\$ 145) to EP 230 (US\$ 42) and even though she was still involved in the monthly fraud which brought in additional money, the “weight of wrong deeds had eased off”, as she was able to balance it with healthy and constructive community work.

In the above section on female public sector employees I have drawn a picture of their family life and labour processes they engaged in, all geared towards a particular image of social mobility in which the public sector, as a particular type of institution with its own habitus has been instrumental in nurturing. Starting with the physical layout of the work place, moving on to interpersonal social relations and labour processes, the above demonstrates how CSGs view social mobility and ways in which they use their employment in this institution to consolidate their status as members of the middle class. While they have limited freedom to define their jobs, they have more power to undertake inclusionary and exclusionary measures to determine who fits and who does not within the institution. They also exercise collective and individual agency in abiding by explicit and implicit rules in accordance to internalised gender and class norms that ultimately maintain the system.

#### **4.5 Migration: Alternative livelihoods as route for social mobility**

Among the respondents in my public sector sub-sample, three women migrated to different Arab countries between the late 70s and the early 80s at some point in their work career. The first was a single woman who worked in Libya and got married there to an upper middle class husband. When she finally returned home with her family, she realised that she did not fit in her husband’s social milieu and years after her marriage she still felt she did not belong to the middle class. In her case, immigration did not lead to an improved professional career though it did facilitate cross-class marriage, with a new set of tensions to be discussed in the final chapter.

The two other women accompanied their husbands. The latter had had contracts to work in public sector companies in Iraq in the late 70s and early 80s, but were hoping to find work once their husbands had settled in jobs. Although the husbands' salaries were higher than what they had earned in Egypt, they were not the same amounts they had expected them to be. One of the two couples, for example, found that they had no housing benefits and had to rent a room in a flat with other Egyptian families. Once they started receiving their salaries, the first few monthly amounts were devoted to repayment of debts – money they had borrowed to prepare for their relocation. As one of them said, what enabled them to save some money in Iraq was that they had no family or friends and no social life to spend their money on.

Safia (48) had married her husband in a rush. They had no flat and none of the essential requirements for a house. They had attached aspirations to the Iraq adventure so they could procure all the house equipment they did not have the resources to obtain while in Egypt. She took a leave without pay from her public sector company and joined her husband. Shortly after their arrival in Baghdad, Safia found a job in the same government department where her husband worked, but the arrangement did not work well as the local staff complained that too many Egyptians were taking the place of locals. She was forced to quit and stay at home. She had her first child in Iraq but as she had plans to work, she sent her two month daughter back to Cairo with an Egyptian friend to be taken care of by her family. Then she had a second daughter who stayed with her there.

Eventually, when her husband's two-year contract came to an end, it was not renewed. The Iraqi authorities deported him upon discovering that he had had Hepatitis A. They returned home in a rush with just enough savings to buy a car that her husband operated as a taxi in the afternoon so they would have an additional income to help with his morning job in the government which he resumed.

As for Safia, instead of resuming her work in the government, she spent the following two years nursing her husband who suffered health complications and eventually died. During his illness, Safia had to sell the taxi, their only booty from the Iraq years and spent its price on his medical expenses. When he died, and because they had two daughters and no male son, her husband's family was entitled to a big portion of their modest payments from the government. Safia had to quickly resolve her

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family problems and resume her job in the government so she could go back to the routine of a monthly income. In the year before, she and her daughters had been living off charity. Because of the years she spent away from her job, her promotions had been delayed, but at least now she had a job to go back to.

Fatema (50) too had a somewhat similar experience accompanying her husband first to Iraq then to Saudi Arabia. She tried to obtain a leave without pay, but was not allowed, so she resigned. However, she was quick to sense that her husband was rather restless and a trouble maker; their plans for social mobility were in jeopardy. She insisted on returning back home and tried to return to her job, but it was too late and no longer possible. She had to take up some small jobs as a cashier in a store, while mobilising all her contacts to help her regain her position in the government which she finally managed to do. Her premonition also came true and her husband was eventually expelled from his job in the host country and returned home.

During the year she spent with her husband in the Gulf, Fatema managed to give private lessons to primary school pupils at her home and was able to save a small amount of money. However, she was greatly disappointed that their migration project was short-lived and not long enough to make a significant difference to their life. When she returned home and while looking for a job, she used her savings until the money was depleted. She also had to repay debts. Years after she returned to her job in the government, she still had not been able to tally her income with her family's needs and expenditures. She explained that while thankful that at least she had the government job to come back to, she felt betrayed by the return home without having made enough savings to live off their interests or use to build a small enterprise that would generate income. She was not even been able to move out of their impoverished neighbourhood where sewage water made it impossible to walk in the street and where it took her at least half an hour to get to the nearest means of transportation to reach work.

To solve her financial problems, she has been making business out of the government subsidised commodities that employees are entitled to buy by virtue of their public sector positions. She sells the goods she obtains on credit for cash money to other people to resolve her immediate financial crunch. But that also has meant that she had to allocate a large chunk of her salary for monthly premiums, which she has not able to do.



The result is that she defaulted a number of times and was exposed to imprisonment.

In the two cases discussed here, lower level clerks returned home without having achieved the goals they had delineated for themselves; they went back to their public sector jobs not having learned any new skills that would raise their capacities or ensure moving into better or higher productivity jobs upon their return (Ibrahim 1982a: 86). Their home-coming coincided with the end of the post seventies euphoria in the Arab region and the winding down of the *Infitah* years at home following considerable flux and confusion and a general feeling that it did not deliver its promises.

Egypt's economic situation began to deteriorate as the sources of revenues that cushioned it in the 70s such as revenues from oil, remittances from workers abroad, Suez Canal revenues, taxes and tourism, dried up. The employment creating sectors were saturated and the services sector was not creating enough jobs. The unemployment problem became more complex than ever before reaching by the early 90s new heights of 10 percent (Radwan 1998: 6). Moreover, as the government had started to abandon the job guarantees, public sector jobs were becoming a scarce commodity. Female CSGs looking for employment took up casual and often manual factory work while standing in long queues waiting for the appointment from the ministry of manpower. When Sanaa (42) applied for a job in 1986, the bureaucrat curtly told her off: "Go get married and have children first, then come and look for your appointment". Sanaa says: "And that was exactly what happened. I got married, had my two children then I received my appointment letter in 1995. This was 13 years after my graduation".

#### 4.6 Conclusion

Public sector employment has been important in mediating the old generation of CSGs' social mobility. The role of commercial education in leading to dignified employment should be understood in light of the particular experience of state engineered employment. The main objective of this chapter has been to understand the contours of this social advancement. I started with the expectations of CSGs and their families and how the state fulfilled those expectations, and then moved to the level of the married couples and described how they organised their lives

around their public sector employment, at a time when both men and women were expected to work and be productive. Women's work has been indispensable, not only for the material improvements it has been making possible, but also because it marked the new social status in which education and employment were central. I focused in this chapter on inherent sources of tension that run at the levels of family and work. I have explained that both inside and outside the work setting, the new social status has been vulnerable and in need of consolidation and protection. Also CSGs had to be selective on where and with whom to brag about their new social status among many family who are not educated and still have manual jobs. Moreover, this status had to be recognised and re-negotiated by other strata of the old middle class who still have in mind the image of CSGs as disadvantaged working class women.

The public sector has rules and prescribes well-defined steps for limited occupational advancement. Individual initiatives are not expected nor are they necessarily rewarded. Usually they are mainstreamed into the system and overcome by bureaucratic rules, but tactics are initiated all the same for self-satisfaction and overcoming boredom resulting from work monotony and fragmentation. However, the public sector also has an institutional culture with its own gender and class norms. These are largely internalised and applied by employees in a collective strategy of exercising closure, containment and drawing boundaries that reproduce the system. Within this context, some windows appear for exceptional upward occupational advancement that violate applicable gender and class rules. These challenge CSGs and push them to take decisions. Women exercise agency, as the narratives demonstrate, when they reject risky prospects for social advancement that challenge their gender and class norms; they opt instead for safer and more socially acceptable behaviour.

The prospects of migration as a route to social mobility for public sector employees further confirms some of the points made above. First, migration in this case begins from an initially weak position of modest educational credentials and low bargaining power and ends in a failed project that does not fulfil the dreams of families. If anything, the narratives show that migration raised their expectations, only to find after their failure that they had no place to go to but to return again to the public sector. The second point pertains to the role of CSGs as dependents on their migrant husbands without much choice, but to follow

them, hoping that migration would provide them with material comfort and lift the social status of the family. CSGs' agency becomes apparent when they perceive failure, make crucial decisions to return, go back to work and find other ways to put back their families on track.

Earlier I claimed that public sector employment whereby commercial education was rewarded by remunerative and respectable employment has set a precedent for the younger generation of women and in this sense, contributed to the tension they later felt. In the following two chapters I address how the younger generation makes decision about their education and work.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The metaphor is that the government job is a moving vehicle that stirs up dust as it drives on. If you miss the actual vehicle, you can at least catch the dust it stirs up and roll in it. ان فائك الميرى اتمرغ فى ترابه

<sup>2</sup> However, wage gaps have been steadily rising in public enterprises as they moved away from centralised wage setting to a more private sector type of compensation practices (Said 2002: 83; Assaad 2003: 130).

<sup>3</sup> The Law of the Price List of Educational Certificates of 1951.

<sup>4</sup> The public compensation system is laid out in articles 40 and 41 of the Civil Servants Law 47 of 1978 and amended in Law 115 of 1983. See also (Zaytoun 1991) for a full description of the wage structure.

<sup>5</sup> To emphasise how conformity works, I use, literally and metaphorically, Foucault's (1975) notion of the invisible and pervasive power of organisations under modernity and the discipline it exercises over individuals, through the Panopticon. Foucault develops the notion of the model prison where, from their prison cells, inmates may always be seen but never know when they are being looked at any point in time (Ibid 201). In anticipation of being monitored at any moment, individuals learn to discipline themselves and each other (Ibid 202). Foucault explains that in organisations and state institutions, power and surveillance become so pervasive and permanent that their effect continues even after the actual act has stopped. Power relations are sustained independently of the person who creates them in this sense power is always there.

<sup>6</sup> In the public sector there are nine work grades outlined by Decree no. 134 of 1978 commensurate to each level of education. An employee can advance to a higher grade if he/she has worked a minimum number of years at the previous level. University graduates are appointed at the third level and can progress to reach the "distinguished" level which is equal to the rank of a minister. Unlike

them, however, graduates of technical schools and upper intermediate institutes are appointed at a lower level, the fourth, and can only reach the position of general manager, which in their case is given the title “senior clerk”. A debate had ensued on whether holders of the positions of “senior specialists”, “senior technicians” or “senior clerks” should be considered for “senior leadership positions” and become entitled therefore to move on to the highest levels. The controversy was settled by a decision of the State Council that was not in the favour of technical school graduates. In some work places the situation created ill feelings of inequality among technical school graduates particularly as senior positions were given to younger employees with less experience but who had university degrees (Interview with Safwat El Nahhas, Central Agency for Organisation and Management).

<sup>7</sup> As employees become candidates for “leadership positions”, attending and passing training rounds successfully becomes a condition for promotion (Abdel-Hafiz 2009: 26). However, in general, rules for training in the public sector are a mystery that is not clear to most employees. Foremost, there is the basic claim that training is not a state priority and has no independent financial allocations in state budget. For example, in the 1987-92 five- year plan, training funds were included under a fluid category titled “educational services and scientific research” which meant in fact that the funds could be used for a variety of non-training purposes (see Badreddin 1991: 264-71 for a discussion). In addition, there is no data on employees’ skills and capacities or the needs of the public sector and no assessments to evaluate the impact of training on employees’ performance or evidence that it has been made use of in improving their work (Ibid). None of the respondents had ever had any training for skill up-grading.

<sup>8</sup> “Towards an Ideal System of Technical Education”, Al-Ahram-29 August 2007: 3).

<sup>9</sup> Interestingly Bahira said she actually takes - and would take - the money if she was alone, but found it embarrassing to take it in the presence of her kids.

<sup>10</sup> During my visits to public sector companies, employees insinuated similar ‘hidden’ stories and some in fact tried to push me towards women who would be potential informants. In general, however, respondents were reluctant to reveal much about their lives. Bahira was among the few women who - over several sessions and informal talks-opened up to me.

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## 5

# Family Strategies for Education: Intra-household Decision-making for the Younger Generation of CSGs

## 5.1 Introduction

I have argued in the previous chapter that education was a recognised route to social mobility for the older generation of women in the public sector and the government was capable of meeting the expectations of the women and their families. The task of CSGs was to use their employment to in the public sector for status consolidation and entrenchment in the middle class.

In this and the following chapter I will focus on the younger generation of women who have had the same commercial diploma but ended up in the informal sector. As we move away from the public sector route, the picture becomes more complex and bleak. I mentioned earlier that the scene has been changing and the labour and marriage markets have been sending signs that young people might not be able to rely on state support for assistance in regulating their lives. In this chapter I demonstrate, through the narratives of young women at the present time, that for them the process of reflection about the future started at an earlier stage of schooling and took concrete shape in the branching point at the end of preparatory school. I argue that education decision making is not an individual but a collective process that involves the entire family, heeds its economic resources and reflects its habitus. Families and children weigh their economic resources against what they realistically believe their future chances are, and bring in their repository of resources to the decision making process. The chapter focuses on intra-household decision making dynamics. I alluded earlier to poor families' growing identification with technical education. In this chapter I describe

how this takes place and the process of identification among the young generation of women who constitute 55 of the total sample.

The point about the internalisation of class habitus transmitted by the family is evident in the choices made by parents for their children in the early stages of schooling which the latter accept in most cases without much resistance. At later stages at branching points, we have two groups of women: Those who performed poorly in the preparatory school leaving exams and did not obtain the scores that would qualify them to join the general academic stream, and those who performed well and had the choice to study in the academic stream, yet decided not to do so. In this chapter I describe how both end up in the commercial track.

First I start by women recounting early decisions of education based on what they believed was the perspective and attitude of their parents towards education and gender roles. Then I examine women's own experience with schooling in which parents remained central actors, in addition to the school environment and children's own performance. In the last part, I illuminate cases of respondents who have been able to enrol in university and discuss conditions that made it possible.

## 5.2 Background to the families

Examining the background of the families, one is struck by the inertia and absence of change. One would expect that with the continued expansion in education, the younger generation of women would have parents and siblings with more education than those of the last generation. But that was not the case. Table 5.1 provides some basic background information that *pertains specifically to the respondents' families*; it indicates that the manual, illiterate background of fathers is overwhelming. The majority of respondents' mothers were housewives. The younger women in the group aged between 20 and 25 did report, however, that their mothers worked in the recent past as domestic servants and owners of small private business. Very few had clerical positions in the government.

**Table 5.1**  
*Parents' education and work status (younger cohort of women)*

Fathers' work status		Father's educational status		Mother's educational status	
Door keeper, office helper etc.	63%	Illiterate	82%	Illiterate	86%
Craftsman (works in or owns a small shop)	21%	Can read and write	14%	Can read and write	13%
Low level clerk	3%	Has a tertiary degree	4%	Has a tertiary degree	1%
No particular work	13%				

The education of respondents' siblings shows a variety of trajectories that cover almost all the educational spectrum (Table 5.2). Technical education represents the main destination. However, a few siblings graduated from university or were still studying there. There are as well drop outs and younger siblings in early stages of education.

**Table 5.2**  
*Siblings' educational status*

Status	Percentage
Are/were in technical schools	72
Dropped out of school	4
Still in school/no decision yet	8
University	6

In my interviews with women, they indicated that none of the adult members in their families earned more than EP 350 (US\$ 64) a month on average. If we imagine a family of six working adults, the total income of the family would be EP 2100 (US\$ 382).<sup>1</sup> This is equivalent to what one fresh graduate of a public university would earn in a formal private sector job, and half the amount a graduate of the American University would earn immediately after graduation. With this picture in mind, we

can understand the financial parameters within which decisions had to be made.

The younger generation of women reported that household expenditure, including education of children – which now comprised a sizeable amount of private tutoring (see Chapter 2) – was a function of financial contributions of all adult members regardless of their sex, and pooling of collective resources according to family members' ability. This took place even if the father was still actively earning income but particularly if he was dead or absent. Young children worked in the summer to save for their private lessons and adult working children contributed in substantial ways to the household – in money or in kind – an average of EP 50 (Less than US\$ 10) on regular or semi-regular basis. They also contributed to the education of younger brothers and sisters. Despite these collective financial contributions, uncanny work situation and extended spells of unemployment often placed the educational process of the young in jeopardy.

With the above background in mind, I will discuss in the sections below parents' attitude towards children's education.

### 5.3 Parental attitude towards education

In studying the position of parents towards the education of their children, we need to examine the interplay between their gender norms and attitudes and financial constraints.

#### 5.3.1 Choice of marriage versus employment

In general, Egyptian parents have a positive attitude towards girls' education and their continued investment in daughters' education has been repeatedly observed. The ASCE survey (El-Tawila et al 2000) showed that families of Egyptian girls in preparatory school were likely to invest in girls' education – particularly private tutoring for their daughters – so that the latter were considerably more likely than boys to have been tutored: 75 percent of girls and 59 percent of boys (See also Elbadawy and Assaad 2007: 23). Lloyd (2003: 463) also found that schooling exit for girls did not appear to be influenced by the family's socioeconomic status unlike the case of boys where the family's economic conditions and educational status affected the drop out decision.



These observations have been particularly puzzling given women's modest participation in the labour force, which has encouraged researchers to look for answers in the comparative edge girls' education give women in the marriage, not the employment market, the latter being essentially the realm of men. It is believed that education enhances women's possibility to marry richer and more educated men, and might even help reduce parents' financial responsibilities towards their daughters' marriage (Elbadawy and Assaad 2006; Lloyd 2003). For husbands, Elbadawy and Assaad (2006: 7-8) suggest that wife's education is more important as a "household public good" for the welfare of the entire household i.e. for the education of children and upkeep of the house, rather than for its income generating potential.

My respondents have largely confirmed these statistical findings. They clarified that parents supported their education through the compulsory stage (the first nine years) mainly because education was the thing to do so that children would not feel inferior to others in their neighbourhood or community. Parents also wanted to spare children having to follow their own constrained path. Given their own education deprivation, they expected their children to get educated and achieve what they could not realise. The understanding was that with more education there were larger possibilities for material comfort and potential life opportunities.

However, the reasoning behind this gender equality is nuanced. It was generally understood that sons would eventually join the labour market. Hence, they would receive the share of schooling that was appropriate to their aptitude and capacities so they would use whatever level they achieved to find work and form their own families. Educating girls, on the other hand, seemed largely an end in itself. There was always a vague hope that girls would have a respectable and convenient office job, but parents were uncertain about the opportunities in the job market and could not see much beyond school.

Thus, the more certain route, that of marriage, was always parents' fall-back position: an educated daughter would increase the probability of marrying an equally educated man, and most certainly, an educated wife and mother would be an asset to her family and would be more capable of helping her children with their studies and looking after them. Invariably parents were convinced that their responsibility towards their daughters ended with their education. Marriage would inevitably come

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and then the work decision would be discussed by the daughters and their husbands according to their new marital circumstances.

Hence, it was mainly when marriage came into the picture or became a viable option that some families had to rationalise their decisions about girls' continued education. Such decisions had to be made especially in view of families' limited financial resources and the need to allocate money to other family members particularly for the education of other children. When Hanan (32) reached 15 and got engaged in her second year of preparatory school, her family tried to discourage her from finishing school and encouraged her instead to pay more attention to her marriage preparations. She was reminded that marriage was the woman's only security and that the labour market was not to be trusted. Her parents gave her all the examples they could think of, of relatives and neighbours who had educational degrees but ended up being "lemon street vendors". She was told that at the end she would "frame her certificate on the walls of her kitchen as this is where she would end up after marriage". Hanan noted that once engaged, her father began to deny her private lessons and channelled his meagre financial resources to her younger brother who was still making his way to primary school. His notion was that her younger brother was still in a formative stage in which financial investments, for example in private lessons, would pay off, widen his choices and direct him to more auspicious tracks. Hanan's parents also judged that as she had been engaged to be married, any extra money the family had would rather be allocated to her trousseau than to more education.

Hanan also recalls that she did not get much support either from her school teachers when she needed to strengthen her negotiating position vis a vis her parents. After all, for the entire period of her preparatory school, teachers repeatedly reminded the students that marriage was their ultimate destiny: "Why do you waste our time teaching you when you are all going to stay home and get married?" This remark is in line with the findings of the ASCE survey about the tendency of teachers to emphasise in the classroom that the value of girls' education was to prepare them for private roles, while on the other hand, stressing its role in enhancing male students' contribution to the labour market and public roles (El-Tawila 2000).

However, for Hanan things took a different turn when she broke off her engagement because she realised that she was too young and really

wanted to study rather than get married. Against the odds, she managed to graduate from commercial school with high scores and then her parents were ‘suddenly’ proud of her, although while she was studying, they used to challenge her by insisting that she should “wash and clean and do all the house chores”.

Indeed the need for daughters to assist with domestic chores was sometimes a direct reason to consider pulling them out of school and in that case, mothers were often influential in taking such a decision. Eileen’s (42) mother took a discouraging stance towards her daughter’s education and was the one who wanted to keep her at home, to the opposition of the father.

We were four children and I was the eldest. Mother wanted someone to help her at home and someone else to work and bring money. She put pressure on me to help her at home and started to look for work for my younger brother and sister so they could earn money. I refused and told her I would work and support myself. This is what I did in the summer. Mother thought it was going to be difficult and I would not be able to manage, but I told her I wanted to try. And it worked. But father refused to allow me continue to do that for a long time. He said I should focus on my education”

The clearest reluctance to continue to invest in daughters’ education took place when the latter were married, then divorced and came back to live with their parents thus adding to the family’s financial burden and bringing in new mouths to feed and expenses to pay. Jihan (28) was married young after she had just completed her preparatory school, got divorced and brought her daughter and came to live with her parents and siblings in their small flat. Jihan and her daughter were unwelcome in her family’s home and her parents were reluctant to allocate any financial resources towards her or the grand-daughter’s education while making sure that their limited resources were kept for the education of Jihan’s younger siblings. As it was becoming clear for her father that no money could be obtained from his ex-son in law and that Jihan and her daughter would have to be supported by him as long as they lived in his house, he made it clear that the only solution was for Jihan to re-marry so that her financial responsibilities would be shifted to a new husband. It was a vicious circle in which Jihan failed to secure a proper job without a proper educational degree and at the same time could not continue her studies because of lack of money.

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### *Clear assertiveness for employment*

The only situation in which parents showed unconditional support for daughters' education was when parents had concrete work aspirations or plans for them as well as realistic patronage and strings to pull to secure them jobs. In Dina's (22) case, her illiterate father worked as a janitor in a public university, but the sheer fact that he worked in an academic institution and mixed with educated academic staff had a symbolic value. Somehow his aspirations to see his daughter a student there, then a lawyer, seemed more real and achievable.

Even more than my mother, my father's dream in life was to see me a student of law in the same university where he worked, and eventually a lawyer. When it came to education, he never deprived me of anything. It was not important for us to eat or drink but we needed to pay for my private tutors and my books. He gave me all the private lessons I needed. When it comes to education, father did not keep away anything from us.

In Shahira's (32) case, her family had a strong reason to link education to work plans and entertain occupational prospects. Her mother's insistence that her children should get higher levels of education was motivated by the fact that she herself was a government employee and enjoyed the security of the public sector job. Year after year, however, she had been witnessing the increasing restrictions on the employment of young people as a result of the shrinking public sector. When her two children reached the preparatory stage, she pushed them to study hard in order to get into the general secondary track and keep their employment options more open.

Mother was very committed to our education and pushed us to get into general secondary but we could not make it. If we had asked her for 1000 EP (US\$ 200) she would have given us. She really wished that either one of us could become something big and would make her proud of us

### **5.3.2 Choice of specialisations and places of study: Gender markers**

#### *Morality for women*

In some cases the conflict was not about marriage or financial resources, but rather revolved around the choice of place of study or specialisation. Sometimes parents had strong feelings about specific institutions or places of study, often against the preference of daughters. They sought

to direct the latter away from the institutions they disapproved of. For example, many respondents had clear preference for preparatory nursing schools either because they “enjoyed caring for others” or because nursing had good job prospects. Especially nursing in military hospitals was sought because of job security, discipline and the prestige it brought. Many, nonetheless, were unable to join nursing schools because of the requirement to stay away in boarding schools and come home only for weekends. For some families, these requirements associated the nursing profession with hearsay and bad reputation. It was also associated with stringent rules and restrictions on social life and marriage. When she indicated her desire to join a nursing school, Shaimaa’s (20) mother cautioned her against those restrictions

She told me that nurses were required to spend ten days at the school and go home for a week. They get them cellular phones and cars and give them high salaries, but they cannot get married before the age of 25 and have to marry from within the same profession.

In a few cases, women and their families took a stance against school management that could not uphold families’ moral standards and were unable to put an end to some socially threatening conduct. Women spoke about schooling climate that challenged their and their families’ gender norms and socialisation. In this connection, Suad (33) described her preparatory school saying

I found that boys and girls were going out together and it looked like this was the norm – a compulsory thing. I really didn’t have my mind into that stuff. One of the boys in the neighbouring school harassed me and he was protected by the principal of his school. I used to complain but they would not listen to me because as she (the principal) said, his father was a big financial supporter of the school. So I had to tell my fiancé and he came with some of his friends and beat up the kid to death. I had to leave the school after this problem and had a very hard time doing so to the extent that I had to mobilise some contacts from state security police to help me get back my papers back and go to another school.

### ***Male Bias: Masculinity for Men***

Some male respondents articulated cases of obvious male bias which worked, not in the usual sense of favouring male education at the expense of female’s, but rather in discouraging male education as a sign of wealth and proof of lack of financial need. This was particularly the case

when men had the privileged position of the only male children among female siblings and/or when the family enjoyed social status or patronage in the community and could brag that they did not need children's financial contribution to survive. Ashraf (37) was a spoilt boy among four girls. His family was also relatively well off and financial resources were not an issue. Whether or not he went to school was not important for his family as he would be trained by elders to run the family business.

Ashraf also had a good connection at school

My uncle was our school principal and because of him, I was allowed to go to school even without my uniform and not be punished. I have always had special treatment from the teachers and I only had to do the minimum in order to pass.

While his sisters managed to work their way through school and finish their commercial diplomas, Ashraf spent many years in school and had difficulty obtaining even the scores he needed to get into commercial education. But he persisted and explained his attitude as follows: "I did it just to preserve my image in my family and among my sisters. A commercial diploma was really the least I could do".

Some male respondents equated schooling with rules and regulations that denoted constraints on their freedom and masculinity as men. Somehow schooling and school oriented mental activity was effeminate and reminded them of domesticity that was more in line with girls and being sissy (see Willis 1977: 149). For some men going to school lacked robust masculinity and they felt constrained and domesticated sitting obediently in the classroom. Ashraf said: "For us boys, it was *eib* (socially unacceptable) to carry books and go to school. This was something only girls did. Other boys would laugh at you".

Most of the male respondents stated that ever since they were children, they wanted to work and be independent. They viewed themselves as belonging to the labour market not to classrooms. They resisted school by not attending regularly and taking side jobs without telling their parents. Others simply did not go to school even if they had no other job to go to. Several men were rebellious and used incidents such as being rebuked by teachers or embarrassed in front of colleagues to leave class and disappear for days. In hindsight, they realise that they could not have made it in any other type of schooling that was more

demanding than technical education. The tough general academic secondary stream was not even a remote possibility.

#### 5.4 Financial resources and strategic allocations

For most families, limited financial resources meant that regardless of their good intentions or gender attitudes, education for all children could not be on top of their priorities. Rasha (31) recalls that her father, a fruit street-vendor could only afford to pay the “bare minimum” for her and her siblings’ education. This minimum was the administrative fees of their otherwise free public school. Everything else the children had to be responsible for. This included the more expensive private tutoring, transportation and pocket money. Rasha’s older male siblings helped the father with fruit selling and were paid to do that, but she and her younger siblings had to work in factories in the summer to support themselves. She said: “We worked in garment factories even before the exam results came out so we would find a place to work before the supply of pupils became large and factory owners started to be selective”.

Rasha recalled that for the slightest financial inconvenience her father was always willing to consider pulling his children— both sons and daughters — out of school, if it were not for her mother who coordinated her children’s work and study programme, saved the money they earned and interfered to keep them at school. Rasha said:

If it were not for my mother we would have been out of schools. She saved our money and did not take any of it. She never opened the purse and took money like other mothers did and considered it their right. Even the little we gave her as contribution to the house she saved for us and paid our private lessons.

Fat-hia’s (35) mother was even more proactive than Rasha’s. When Fat-hia’s father was unable to continue to support children’s education beyond primary school, her mother interfered.

Mother started to save and borrow money from neighbours so we could continue. She went to my school principal and told him about our problems. He was kind and allowed her to give him the little money she had and not to worry about the rest. Then when father’s financial situation improved and he saw that we were doing well at school, he supported us again.

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In many families, even a generally mellow financial commitment to children's education was not always durable. It was quite common that families could not uphold their support either for a long time, or equally for all the children all the way. Given in many cases the precarious nature of their own occupations, fathers used their financial resources only until they were depleted. Afaf (36) recalled that when her father still had his small piece of land which he rented to others, he was able to cover his children's education and his three eldest were able to get into university. Later on when his wife got gravely sick, he sold the land to take care of her medical expenses and did not have enough money for the younger children; those had to each manage according to what they were able to get.

Parents' commitment was also not unconditional. In general, financial vulnerability meant that parents could not allow their children the luxury of repeating school years if they failed. They counted the years for each child to finish school and a year lost or failed meant a waste of valuable financial resources. Describing the situation of her younger sister, Shahinaz (24) said:

My father had spent a lot of money on her education as he did with all of us. When she failed, he did not reproach her or do anything. But now it was understood that there was no reason for her to try again. One year was enough. Now she had to work and help with expenses.

Finally, families could not afford to entertain what they thought were exotic personal preferences that did not serve utilitarian functions or fit into long term plans. In some cases, parents had to take unilateral decisions if it became clear that more education would not enhance work prospects and at a certain point, whimsical plans had to be dictatorially subjugated to the collective welfare of the entire household. As soon as she obtained her preparatory school degree, Magda (32) considered attending a private institute for two years to become a beautician, but for her parents this was not a good line of study or work. Her family asked around and checked out the place and found out that the institute would not add much to her knowledge.

At that point, my parents said: either commercial secondary school or no education at all and find yourself a job. When we have to take a decision, we discuss it with our parents, but at the end they decide; they are always thinking of our interest but also the interest of the whole family. I didn't



want to go to the commercial track, but father said that commercial education had better chances of work.

### 5.5 The interplay between parents' choices and children's decisions

Despite their belief in the value of schooling, in many cases parents could not be of much help in giving their children advice and it was ultimately up to each child to find his/her own way, decide which level of education they aspired to and could achieve. Given parents' limited knowledge of the education scene and financial constraints, they did not put pressure on children to perform well or become achievers. Richardson (1977: 311) made a similar remark about working class families in Britain. They provided their children with a unique type of socialisation which maintained the delicate balance between avoiding pressuring children while at the same time backing them in whatever they wanted to do. They encouraged them to go to school as far as they wished but at the same time academic achievement was not taken for granted.

The educational status of Khadiga's (38) siblings is a good example of the diversity referred to above. Her father made sure to offer education to all his children regardless of their gender, and made large personal sacrifices so they would go to school. He engaged in several jobs to earn an additional income and spare his children having to work to pay for their education. But he and his wife put no pressure on the children to achieve high levels of schooling. Thus, the educational trajectories in her family were very mixed. Four of the girls had a commercial diploma. One girl dropped out after fourth primary; two girls could barely read and write; one boy finished his general secondary school; and one boy only, the youngest, went to university. He studied law for two years, then failed three successive years and dropped out.

Illiterate parents had limited knowledge of the educational scene and available study courses and were thus unable to make informed decisions or help their children navigate in the system. Parents were ignorant about rules and procedures they were required to follow. For some respondents, parents then seemed too relaxed or indifferent. In retrospect, however, they realised that their parents did not show visible interest in their children's schooling because they were not capable of following their

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educational progress. Again, often this meant that children had to take their own decisions.

Sherifa's (26) father was a carpenter by trade who found himself a job in another city to support his family of six children and her mother was illiterate. Even though her parents generally encouraged children's education, and had no major financial problems, they were unable to actively participate in supervising their studies and therefore, put no pressure on them. Sherifa did not remember that either of her parents visited her or her siblings at school nor did they pay any attention to their academic performance or interests. She and her siblings learned to take their own decisions and only in case of a critical situation, they discussed it over the phone with their father. Again, she and her siblings ended up with mixed educational paths.

Several respondents said they did not get help from their parents in the choice of schools or assistance in getting to them. They did not know where the secondary school they were applying to was or how to get there. Walaa (26) explained that even though her father had high aspirations for her, he was puzzled by the intricacies of the system and could not help her when she decided to apply to a general secondary school. Eventually she too was discouraged by what seemed like a complicated path and the far distance to the general secondary school. She ended up going to the secondary school nearest to her house which happened to be a commercial school.

I was the one who went around looking alone for places. My brothers were much older than me, so nobody paid me any attention. Father told me to go look for a place and he would support me. But he was an old man. Until that point, my schools had always been near the house. How could I go and look for a school out in the wilderness? They told me to go to the technical secondary near our house and from there try to go to university. I didn't know what to do, so I followed this advice. As a child, you do not know. People around you know better and they tell you what to do.

In many cases, it seemed right for parents to follow the example of others of similar economic and social standing, who had more experience with children's education and knew what a good choice would be. In particular, parents followed the examples of their own brothers and sisters with the education of their children and accepted what they did as the right course of action. In such cases, because they were too young

when the decisions were made, children followed the path chosen by their parents without questioning it.

Enayat (40) was one of the few respondents who attended a French missionary school and remembered that her early knowledge of French privileged her among her cousins and other family members. It was almost by accident that she got into this school, when it was strongly recommended to her father by his supervisor at work. But, the fact was however, that her parents never felt comfortable with her French education and could not relate to it. As soon as they learned from Enayat's paternal uncle that public schools offered easier curricula and were more affordable, her parents followed the uncle's footsteps and moved all the children to a public school in the last year of their primary stage. In the beginning the shift required some adjustments and private tutoring to ensure a smooth transition into an Arabic instruction school where all subjects were taught in this language.

We all went to a French school. Then we had a cousin who transferred from the French to an Arabic school because she found the subjects in Arabic easier to grasp and so influenced her younger sister to do the same. My uncle convinced my father to keep his resources to himself. So we did the same thing and I transferred to that school after the primary stage, and the same happened to my younger siblings. I didn't want to go to an Arabic school and had a hard time understanding the subjects in Arabic and my younger sister too was taking lots of private lessons to try to catch up.

Once that decision was made, the commercial secondary school route, which had also been taken by Enayat's cousins, became more viable particularly since holders of commercial diplomas were still able to secure a job at that time.

Then we had to take the short-cut of the commercial diploma although I had scored high enough to go to general secondary. Actually it was father who decided for us based on his brother's advice. He told me studying there would be easy and it was demanded in the labour market.

Along the same lines, parents were not always able to gauge the personal abilities of their children and their capacities were judged by those of their brothers and sisters. Parents experimented in ways that did not always work to the children's advantage. In the following quote, Magda (25) attributed her poor performance to her parents' inability to assess

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her individual education potentials without referring to their earlier experience with her older sister's schooling

My older sister dropped out of school in the preparatory stage. Mother had problems with her education and used to force her to study. She used to send word to the teacher that he should punish her and he used to beat her up. When it was my turn at school, mother thought she learned the lesson and did the opposite with me. She completely spoiled me.

While Magda did not resist the choices her parents made for her, Shadia (28) fought her parents' decision to force her to take the easy route, which was also based on her older sister's bad experience with schooling. She insisted on continuing her education and managed to go through the preparatory stage successfully.

Father was disappointed with my older sister. Then came my turn and I got bad scores in my preparatory school so he was disappointed again. It meant that, like my sister, I was not good. He asked me to stay home and stopped showing interest in our studies and left it all up to my mother.

## 5.6 Women's experience with schooling

Fifty three out of 55 women in the sub-sample of younger women<sup>2</sup> went to public primary and preparatory schools. Two thirds followed the commercial school track due to poor performance and inability to obtain the qualifying scores in preparatory school leaving exams to enrol in general academic secondary. In their case, the technical education route was expected. The remaining one third had qualified for general secondary but decided not to follow that route. In the following sections I will examine factors that determined these two different routes.

### 5.6.1 Those who did not qualify and had no choice to make

#### *Expected to follow the technical track*

Some students who got low scores in the preparatory school leaving exam did not aspire to qualify for general secondary. For them, conditions made the prospect of general secondary undesirable or impossible.

The school experience reported by some respondents had an important role in their discouragement. Several respondents in this group pointed to a largely unregulated system of education that not only made the daily routine of going to school quite unpleasant but also fuelled the

desire of both students and families to speed up the process and find shortcuts in order not to stay in school longer than necessary. Sometimes a major incident affected girls' morale and their performance. Bahra (25) said

I failed in my first prep. They had told me the final exam was on Saturday but it was actually on the Thursday before. When my mother found out by chance from a neighbour, she woke me up in the morning and pulled me by my hair so I could go to the exam. It was an Arabic and hand-writing exam. They allowed me to sit for the hand-writing test and not the Arabic. Of course I failed. And when I sat for the re-exam later, they failed me completely. The school could have done something about it and could have allowed me to sit for the exam the first time, but they did not.

Bahra lost interest in her studies and during the remaining two years of her preparatory school made no special effort to obtain high scores to get into the general track.

Nora (33) relied on private lessons during all her school years. She passed the last year of her preparatory school with the help of her class teacher/private tutor but the results barely qualified her to get into the technical track.

My school teacher used to give me private lessons and pass me. One time I quarrelled with the teacher and had to have a re-exam. But we were used to spending the summer holiday in our village. That meant that I had to stay behind to study and prevent the whole family from going to the village. On the exam day my mother went to talk to the teacher. He told her to give him EP 60 so he would make me pass without sitting for the exam. He took my name and prepared an answer to the exam in my name. But I was very anxious and went anyway on the exam day. As soon as he saw me, he said: What are you doing here? You have already passed.

In some cases, the experience of older children sent messages to younger siblings that caused them to "choose" the easier technical secondary. They adjusted their study level during preparatory school to obtain only the (low) grades that qualified them for technical schools.

Dalia's (26) older sister's trauma with the General Secondary Exam known as the *Thanaweya Amma*<sup>3</sup> and the fact that even after studying very hard, she still failed, had a negative impact on Dalia. She decided to avoid the general track and focused her energies on obtaining just the scores that sent her to the technical track. She says

My sister who killed herself studying did not get good scores. What about me? I am not ready to repeat this experience and waste years of my life. I do not want to be like her. I had two choices: either to obtain high scores and get into university or get sufficient scores and go to commercial technical and I chose the latter. I chose the shortcut.

***Aspired to qualify for general secondary but failed the examination***

A larger group had aspirations to join the general track, believed they worked hard to achieve that goal, and expected to qualify for general secondary. But, in the end, their scores were low and they were relegated to technical education. In some cases, one could see from their stories that their performance had always been poor and year after year their grades were bad, but they misjudged their abilities and still aspired to join the general track. In this case they put the blame on circumstances “beyond their control” exemplified by statements such as “the problem was not in me but with the teachers; they failed me because I did not take private lessons” etc. There was also the tendency to personalise the educational system. Respondents linked macro changes, such as cabinet reshuffles and appointments at the ministerial level to the educational process. They were particularly concerned with the ease or difficulty of exams, and their own performance. Soha (27) said:

The exams were very difficult. This was the year of the ministerial reshuffle and the minister of education had changed. I had taken private lessons and I used to study really hard. But a lot of people failed. I failed in the core subjects, which I studied very well, so it meant that I could not continue. My teachers had high hopes in me and used to tell me that I would not get less than 98 percent. It was a big disappointment.

In many of those cases there was a wide gap between the actual exam results on one hand, and students’ aspirations and perceived academic abilities on the other. Like Soha, several respondents said they had expected to obtain over 90 percent in their final grade, but only scored 50 percent and insisted that they did not expect those poor scores.

Many attributed their poor performance and subsequent enrollment in technical schools to some incident related to private tutoring. In some cases, because of parents’ limited financial resources students could not take private lessons regularly. But even when they took lessons, private tutoring had developed into a profit making business in which students were bullied and forced to be tutored privately regardless of their per-

formance. Batoul (26) had been an average student throughout her school years but was a hard worker and aspired to go to general secondary. In the following paragraph she recounted her story with private tutoring and how it affected her performance in the last year of preparatory school

The teacher beat me for no reason in front of the entire class. When my father went to complain to the headmaster, someone in his office told him: You may think that this is throwing away EP 30 every month but just pay the teacher so she can be good to your child and treat her well. Then I started going to the teacher's home to take a private lesson. She was bitter all the time. She complained that other teachers in the school had more classes and therefore more tutoring opportunities and more money. She was assigned only our class and had to make sure we all took private lessons with her. I think I was a good student, but she insisted on giving me a lesson.

Batoul then showed how her problems were exacerbated when she lost both her private lessons and her teacher at school.

She [the teacher] was delivering a baby in a few months. I was counting the days so I would not have to see her. But when she actually left to deliver her baby, they left us without a teacher for the rest of the year. I performed poorly in the exams but then we all passed that year. I don't know how. I don't remember that I learned anything.

Indeed Batoul passed the year, but she obtained poor scores that did not qualify her to join the general track.

Other incidents demonstrate government neglect of schools in poor communities. For example, the rise of private elitist schools has encouraged emulation at lower socio-economic levels. But lacking government patronage, adequate financial resources and strong links with policy makers, the imitation often had deleterious effects on the less advantaged pupils. The case of Ragia (26) illustrates how poor regulation of schools harms students.

After my primary years, I went to a private preparatory school because I failed in my first year of preparatory school (in the public school). This private school included primary, prep and secondary stages but it was not accredited. The principal established a secondary stage without notifying the government or obtaining permissions. I passed my first semester, but in the second semester when they (the government) learned that it was not

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accredited, they failed us all. I tried to take my papers to any other school, but no one would accept me as I came from an infamous school with a bad reputation. It was at the very end that I was able to get into a commercial school. There were lots of problems.

There are also incidents related to school practices that stigmatised pupils and served as constant reminders of their economically disadvantaged positions.

Yousra (24) was a hard-working student who wanted to study mass communications in the university but always had difficulty paying her school fees. She failed to pay them in the beginning of the last year of preparatory school. The administration constantly reminded her by sending written notices that were read out by the teacher in the classroom. Even though she found it humiliating, usually she was not the only pupil to be reminded. At the end of the year when she still hadn't paid the money, she was publicly singled out and prevented from taking her final exam despite her pleas. It was not until her mother deployed some local contacts who knew the principal personally, that he let her in and an agreement was reached that she would pay her fees in two instalments. But this settlement happened after Yousra had decided to skip many school days in order to avoid embarrassment. This affected her performance and her grades at the preparatory school leaving exams and only qualified her for technical school.

### 5.6.2 Those who had the choice

#### *Equality and implicit understanding*

One third of the study sample had fared well in both primary and preparatory school and had the option to go into general secondary, the formal route to university. And yet, despite this possibility, they decided not to follow that option. As mentioned above, within their financial means, families made it clear to children that education was an available option if they wanted but it had to be within parents' financial abilities and not constitute an additional burden on them. On their part, children often interpreted this caveat as an invitation to apply their sensibility and sense of justice and choose equality with their siblings.

Children also had a moral responsibility towards their families particularly as they went through rough patches. In such situations, following the uncertain path of general secondary and university or any procrasti-



nation that would delay entry into the labour market was implicitly and explicitly rejected by their own selves. The thought of pursuing education or other individual projects would have been selfish and ungrateful. In particular young men felt it was their “natural” responsibility as men to support their families. They realised that any delay in earning money was a threat to the entire family that they could not afford.

But the fact was that often family responsibilities did not discriminate between male and female children. Some women were aware that they had good potentials and that opportunities might be lost if they devoted themselves to their family responsibilities. However, there was generally no bitterness, rather a sense of one-ness fuelled by a common understanding that they – men and women – are collectively facing a disadvantaged situation. Women insisted that it was not male members’ indolence or procrastination in trying to improve their lot that caused their financial problems, but rather ferocious realities beyond their control. To that extent, young women were ready to use all the possibilities their education afforded them to rescue a family business from going bankrupt or spare their families an undignified life. Often this meant not only postponing plans of education, but also marriage

In some families, both male and female children forewent their education and worked together to save the household. When Asma’s (32) father died prematurely at the age of 38, he left a carpentry workshop and eight children: three boys and five girls. His eldest daughter was only 14 and the youngest son 6 months. The family tried to get workers to run the shop but did not succeed and they were losing their money. Eventually they had to sell the workshop. The eldest daughter, who was in the preparatory stage when her father died, gave up her education and worked in a garment factory. Not much later, she was joined by another sister. Now that his sisters had taken that step, the oldest among the boys felt it was also his responsibility too as a man to support his family, so he too dropped out of school. Family responsibilities were indeed daunting. Asma’s mother had to send one of her daughters to live with her paternal aunts in Alexandria.

As the five older siblings now brought home income from their various jobs, the four younger children, including Asma, were able to complete their education. Asma was a good student and had plans to study law at the university. She qualified to enter the general track, but instead, decided to take the commercial diploma route, to the dismay of her

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teachers, who had high hopes for her. “Mother was very pleased at our success and diligence. I don’t remember that she ever had to tell us to study or do our work. I used to come home after school and do house chores with my younger sister and sometimes my younger brother also helped”. In this and many other cases, the choice of the technical track was derived from moral obligations towards the family and the need for equality among siblings. Asma said

We all understood that no one should say they wanted to continue their education. We all went to technical schools so we would all be the same and equal. My mother gave us the choice and said we could go to university if we wanted, but she was not going to be able to support us there, so we chose technical education.

When Omaina’s (29) mother died, her two older sisters were married and she was the oldest among the young ones. It was understood in her family that she would stay home first to serve her sick mother and then when the mother died, look after her younger siblings. She did not even remember that this was a subject of discussion. She stayed at home until her siblings were old enough to look after themselves. Then she looked for a job also to help her father support the family and it was almost serendipitously that Omaina managed to continue her studies and also to qualify for general secondary. At work, she told her boss that she wanted to continue her education. He encouraged her and brought her books. He used to help her with her studies and also asked her colleagues to help her each according to his/her specialisation. But given that she had to continue to work, she had to choose the easier route of commercial secondary. She obtained her commercial diploma following the flexible system that did not require daily attendance.

Laila’s (28) mother took responsibility for the five children when her husband decided to leave his work as a house guard in Cairo and migrate to Iraq where he took up a job in construction and left his family behind. For months Laila recalled they did not hear from her father and the little money that he had left them was gone.

My mother started selling veggies and fruit at the street corner in order to support us. People thought that because of our desperate situation mother would want us to work in order to support her, but she did not ask us to work. Everyone who heard that father was away in Iraq thought that he was making tons of money and sending it to us. He too had promised that

he would send us money so we could build a house, which he never did. I stopped to believe him and mother continued to work to support us.

For Laila and her siblings, the situation was so dire that their main concern was to get only a sufficient amount of education that would enable them to earn their livelihood. Three of the five children, including Laila, qualified to go into the general secondary track, but all five children had technical education or are still in technical schools and combining school with work to earn a living.

### ***Disabling choice: class and gender insecurities***

At the end of the preparatory stage parents have to demonstrate their readiness to support their children's educational journey. This pledge is necessary as preparations for the general secondary exams require not only special financial arrangements for private tutoring, but more importantly a statement on the part of the entire family that they are psychologically ready to go through this onerous and tense process. As students transition into preparatory school, their fear of the general secondary education mounts and even when they qualify to join it, they hesitate and eventually decline the opportunity. Nagah (27) describes her family's feelings towards the general secondary stream:

My family wanted me to go to general secondary. But they said it was very tough and needed hard work and a lot of study. We heard in the papers that students commit suicide. I didn't what to go through a depression or have a mental breakdown. It was much easier to go into technical education.

The entire family, including the young women, had no confidence that they were fit for and could successfully go through the general academic education process. Sabrin (21) explains that she had scored well enough to get into general secondary and actually submitted her papers to the competent educational directorate to begin the application procedures. But on the following day, her father went to the directorate and withdrew her papers. He was concerned that the whole family would not be able to deal with the general secondary stream, that his daughter was too weak to deal with *Thanaveya Amma* and that she might be out of her depth in the academic stream. He spoke of general secondary education as an intimidating stream and a place "not fit for people like us". Sabrin and other women like her associated entry into the general secondary

stream with personal traits and physical abilities which they claimed they did not have. They described themselves as “fragile”, “vulnerable” and “not tough enough” to study in the general stream

Father sat with me and we discussed the matter calmly. He said that *Thanaweya Amma* was not for people like us and we would not be able to handle it. And he was right. This is exactly what happened to me in the prep school. I got really sick before the exams and was scared to death. He said that on the other hand, if went into the commercial school, my brother – who has just obtained his commercial diploma – would help me with my studies, unlike *Thanaweya Amma* in which we knew nobody. I never regretted that because I see what happens to people when they do their *Thanaweya Amma*.

Many women associated studying for general secondary with sickness. Mariam (28) described her intense preparations for the exams and then her disappointment when she still could not obtain the qualifying scores for general secondary.

During the exam month, I studied very hard and slept only four hours every day. I went to see the doctor because of over exhaustion. My hair had been falling terribly; I had black hollows under my eyes and my eye sight deteriorated. After the results were announced and I found out that I did not obtain the scores for general secondary, I had a nervous breakdown for a week.

Most respondents described at length their fear of specific academic subjects, particularly foreign languages. Their struggle with particular curricula had a strong impact on their choice to take an easier route. The fear, for example, of the English language, was collective and shared by most siblings in the same family.

One would tend to think that the inability to deal with specific academic subject starts early on in life and when left to exacerbate without proper intervention, becomes a problem. However, respondents had another explanation namely that learning foreign languages was technically and pedagogically difficult mainly because it was not in their “social sphere”; it was not a language they used or exchanged within their circle of acquaintances. In all cases, there is a sense of collective helplessness and lack of intellectual and other cognitive resources to deal with such problems. In the following lines Nafissa (24) described her struggle with the English language. For her, it started as a small problem but devel-

oped into a major constraint that forced her to completely change her trajectory.

I had the choice to go into general secondary but did not want to do *Than-aveya Amma* because I developed a complex of English as a subject. I was fine in all the other subjects except for English. I always found it difficult. As a child, I had attended schools that paid no attention to English. It was introduced as a main subject in first prep and I was totally lost. But because the school teachers and management knew my family, they let me pass and I got to third prep not knowing what to do with English and not able to make a sentence in English. I tried everything: private lessons and group tutoring. None of my siblings managed English either. I had to go to a commercial school because at least there my problem with English would be defused a bit because I could focus on more important subjects related to my major.

It was also common for students to change paths from general to commercial education in a procedure known as *tahweel massar* (changing paths). Some respondents claimed that in their schools as many as five out of nine classes shifted from the general to commercial track (see Chapter 2). Students would enter the general secondary stream, try it for a while, find it difficult and leave it to go to the easier commercial track. Asmahan's (21) family did not interfere in her decision to go to general secondary but when she decided to leave it, they were relieved.

I spent the first and second years there. I thought I was doing my best but was constantly scoring badly. I did not want to continue and told them at home I wanted to change to commercial education. They all thought it was a good idea and immediately on the following day my mother pulled my file from school

Once they shifted to commercial education, women fared well. Not only was the curriculum much easier, but the entire atmosphere was more relaxed and less competitive. For a while, they also enjoyed preferential treatment from teachers as their sheer acceptance into general secondary education was a proof of their privilege. Unlike others who were forced to pursue the technical track, they—at least—had the choice to try general secondary.

Yet, even this alleged privilege was used by some school management to put down and ridicule the girls. Young women who changed from general to commercial tracks posed administrative problems for school

staff as it meant that the latter had to find them places in the already filled up schools. Instead of celebrating that “brighter” students were joining the commercial track, the girls were rebuked for not realising earlier that they were not good enough for academic secondary. A school principal was reported as telling one of these girls: “Why be arrogant and insist on general secondary when you know that you would not be able to cope with it? Why not choose the easy road from the beginning?”

### 5.7 The labour market and university education: What prospects?

For both students who had no choice and those who did, there were negative feelings about the kind and quality of education they would be getting in the commercial schools; they were aware did not offer them much in the way of an edge in the labour market. Many students realised that commercial education was “just one level above illiteracy eradication”, and their degrees would be “just a piece of paper.” But regardless of their lack of confidence in the degree they would be getting, there was a general understanding that rampant unemployment has left its marks on everyone including university graduates. This served to “reassure” students that they were not the only ones suffering and defused their expectations about work. Iman (30) said “I did not like school and did not study, but even if I did, I knew I was not going to find work”.

The daunting experience of siblings and others who had university degrees with finding work were often referred to in women’s narratives. Zainab (32) said

My eldest brother – university graduate – works in Libya. It is certain that he would not find a job here if he finally decided to return. My other brother worked by coincidence because my father was still alive and applied for him in the railroad authority. My youngest brother went to Yemen after he obtained his BA in 1989 although Yemen is not a beautiful country and they don’t give good money. My other brother who graduated from the faculty of sociology works now as an office boy in a government office. I try to see the bright side of the situation. Just like there are people better than me, there are others who are lower than me. When I am sad, I remind myself that there are plenty of university graduates who cannot find work. What do you think *their* situation is like?

Nonetheless, once admitted into the commercial school, several respondents believed the commercial diploma would be a pragmatic solution for a temporarily disadvantaged situation. They were hopeful that eventually things would improve and they would be able to enrol in university. Some of them worked hard to obtain university qualifying scores. However, outsmarting the system did not work as Salma (23) explained what happened to her

Often it is just very small difference in the score that makes all the difference. I repeated the last year of commercial school three times and each time there was just a tiny difference that would not allow me to take the university admission exam.

On the other hand, other men and women did not even try. The Open University option remained elusive (See Chapter 2). At the same time, the majority of respondents had misgivings about the value of continuing education in higher institutes. In their opinion, they were not much different from the technical schools they attended. The university remained the only institution of higher education they were seeking. Nahla (24) says

As soon as I finished my commercial school, I went into a two year computer institute only to discover that this was not what I wanted – that it would still be worthless when I finish. What is a two year institute? There was no difference between it and the commercial school I went to. What will it do to me? I spent a year there and did not take my exams. I left it and started looking for the Open University. I felt that the name of a ‘university’ was still more important than any higher institute even if it is a four year institute. At the end an institute is just an institute. The difference between a commercial diploma and an institute is 4 EP (less than US\$ 1) in terms of salary.

In my interviews with the younger generation, only one young woman, Kholoud (23) was enrolled in a higher institute and only one man, Mohamed (28), was in the Open University. A third participant, Dina (20), found a job later on with an NGO with an administration committed to the education of its staff. When I met her she had not yet enrolled in a university but was pursuing that possibility.

Kholoud and Dina on one hand and Mohamed on the other represent two types of respondents: the few who had well paying jobs and a favourable work environment that encouraged education, and those

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who vehemently believed in the value of university education and had the strong personal interest to pursue it despite difficulties.

Kholoud (23) graduated from the Mubarak-Kohl commercial school which, by its very rationale as a partnership with the private sector, required students to receive training in private sector companies and created some kind of moral commitment on the part of those companies to appoint their trainees under good working conditions and appropriate levels of pay. They also encouraged them to pursue university education. In addition, not only did the programme provide students with a comparative edge and relatively more marketable skills, but its managers also had an interest in proving its success as a model programme; they actively helped their students with job placement and further education.

Kholoud recalled how the German manager of the Mubarak-Kohl school took it upon himself to convince private sector businessmen to appoint her, as they were reluctant to hire a veiled woman. He insisted that the veil was a religious duty for Muslim women. When his attempts were to no avail, he offered her a job as a secretary in the Mubarak-Kohl central office. After spending a year at work, Kholoud had a substantial salary increase, which she was told would be automatically earmarked for her education in a higher institute and enrollment in English language courses. She was allowed flexible hours and could study in the office when work pace was slow. When I met Kholoud, she was earning a good salary of a net of EP 1500 (US\$ 272) from Mubarak-Kohl which was six times more than her colleagues in the informal sector. She had medical and social insurance and was in her third year at the upper institute.

On the other hand, Mohamed, 28, the only male who continued his education, was convinced that he was “cheated out of his dreams” to go to university and find a respectable job. From a very young age he had to share responsibility for his siblings with his mother after his father left with all other Egyptian construction workers to toil in Iraq during the oil boom of the 70s. He never came back.

Mohamed was pushed into the commercial track for lack of money and then pushed to the labour market to earn money. Going to the Open University was his dream, but now that he was also married and had children, he believed that more education for himself was the only investment he could offer to his children. “It is not a question of money. It is a question of social status; for my children to know when they



grow that their father had a university degree is all very different from a commercial diploma. This is all for the children's sake".

Mohamed married a commercial school graduate like himself but she did not work. They agreed that he would work, while his wife took responsibility for domestic chores. Mohamed's argument was mainly based on arithmetic. He assumed that his wife, like most other CSGs, would find a menial job in a shop and her financial contribution to the family would be minimal. He says:

We calculated it. If she earns EP 150 she will have to eat a meal at work and there is transportation, so that is the end of the money. Plus of course there is a lot of priceless *babdala* (demoralisation). She will be too tired to look after her home and her two children because she will get back late... I work very hard myself and come home late but at least I am reassured knowing that she is at home looking after the children. We cannot both leave the children alone and stay at work

According to this logic, it became Mohamed's "responsibility" to get educated and produce status for his children. Also implicit in this argument is that his wife and children would derive their social status from him and that Mohamed, as the breadwinner, was responsible for elevating the status of his entire family (see discussion about men as agents of social mobility in Chapter 1).

Mohamed moved between several informal jobs until he got to a configuration that he could live with, that would allow him to complete his education. He worked as a driver in the ministry of interior. Although it was not a job he was very fond of, he derived his social status from the fact that he was driving "important" police officers. At the same time, he enrolled in the Open University and from his salary of EP 500, and the additional bonuses he got on occasions, has so far been able to pay one year of his university fees. Unlike Kholoud, Mohamed works long hours and has no flexibility. However, he views it as a matter of time until he obtained his university degree and could move up to a clerical position in the same place.

## 5.8 Conclusion

I have examined in this chapter how education decisions are made on the intra-household level. My objective has been to understand how those dynamics reflected children's understanding of their objective con-

ditions, the choices they had and the possibilities their education realistically offered them for occupational and social advancement. I have discussed decision making among two types of students: those who scored poorly and were expected to join the technical track, and others who scored well enough to qualify for general secondary yet opted to go to technical secondary.

There were many overlaps in the kinds of constraints that shaped education decisions. It is not true that those who had the choice to go to general academic education were not constrained by their family circumstances or fear of *Thanaweya Amma*; often they too were stigmatised and had problems with private tutoring. It is also not the case that those who were forced to take the commercial school route and stop at its end were not also influenced by the national fear of *Thanaweya Amma* or the perceived lack of future work opportunities. Finally, the two cases who managed to go to university have also experienced all the above. The point that needs to be made here is that the decision goes beyond the question of scores to ultimately reflect a strong identification between the poor and technical education.

I believe that the difference between the primary and secondary effects on education decisions is more fluid than is apparent in Boudon's propositions (see Chapter 2). Rather than looking at educational decisions as steps with each step entailing different options and with decisions at branching points open to more choices, I have demonstrated that decisions at those later points are largely governed by the deliberation of the entire family, which in turn is cushioned in structural forces of financial constraints and decisions made at earlier stages.

We cannot start discussing educational choices without understanding the structural reasons of constrained economic resources. Morgan (1989) reminds us of the constraints that lack of economic resources can impose on families and that without resources there can be no strategies. Without financial means, we should avoid using excess rationality and reading more calculation in household strategies than what is present in reality. Economic calculations are socially embedded within the family. Hence, decisions should be considered as a combination of different kinds of rationalities and fortuitous and haphazard acts; some decisions are made for varieties of reasons not merely to achieve advantage. In this sense cost effectiveness and utility are important but they are not the only criteria to be taken into account.

Nayla Kabeer (2000: 25) speaks about conflicts of interest within household and warns that behaviour within them should not be judged as acts of affection governed by loyalty of family members to each other. I believe, however, this is a matter that goes beyond affection and loyalty. The above narratives show awareness that the limited horizons and scant opportunities are a collective destiny; they were just as likely to be the fate of anyone in this social group: men and women. This crucial class perception attenuates the gender dimension of inequalities. Reviewing these stories, one certainly does not get the sense of an [sic] “officializing” gendered strategy which Kabeer claims ultimately reflects the narrow interests of men as occupants of powerful positions in the household with monopoly over material and symbolic capital (Kabeer 2000: 44).

This is not to say that the role of gender is not important. As the above narratives have shown, parents believe that marriage is women’s ultimate destination. They rationalise the distribution of their limited financial resources in accordance with their belief in the importance of marriage. They also assert their objection to particular areas and places of study that they do not believe are suitable for women. Women also articulate their fear of following the general academic track on grounds of female traits that have grown to be associated with women such as physical and psychological fragility and inability to face difficult situations. But within the larger picture, the above narratives have shown that education decisions are made on behalf of the entire family which identifies with and recognises the ordeal of one child’s education as a collective challenge and constraint.

The decisions young women take are not separate from their families. In fact, sometimes they are a result of parents’ own dreams that failed (see the case of Laila above). The narratives indicate that agency is a function of this disadvantaged context and is not separate from the structure within which it is exercised; rather it is derived from women’s definition and analysis of their collective disadvantage. Women – as daughters in this case – internalise their structural constraints and possibilities and act upon them. Notwithstanding the role of personal abilities in education, the narratives show that both groups – those who did not have the choice and those who did – acted as agents deciding at different points in time in their educational trajectories, what their limits were and what they could realistically achieve.

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As indicated above, only two respondents went to university. In the first case this was made possible by the financial resources provided by a well paying job, and a management that had stake in proving the success of the programme it offered. One cannot but wonder if without the support Kholoud received from her German administration in securing a job and enrolling in university she would have been able to get to where she was (see the case of Kholoud and the German boss). The second case of Mohamed, indicates perseverance to achieve a personal goal, which required him to organise his family life in a way that would relegate his wife to a secondary position and focus on his personal occupational and academic success to achieve status for his family.

Other than these two examples, most respondents spoke of the dream to go to university, but it was a dream that stood alone and seemed delinked from the steps that led up to it. The fact is that they did not identify with the university track and could not locate themselves within it. Both parents and children lacked confidence in their abilities and were more comfortable within the realm of technical education that did not challenge their social and financial abilities. Technical education has developed to be the poor people's fallback position. They could aspire to go to university, but if they failed to take that route, which was almost always the case, they still had their bastion of technical education. They are aware that their position is disadvantaged relative to other graduates with more education, but again with pervasive unemployment, they are not that far off from university graduates; their prospects in the labour market are until this point uncertain. *Habitus*, Bourdieu claims, is not eternal and is open to new experience. Thus women enter the job market with a fair amount of uncertainty but with the hope that they might find a place and justice there.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Since 1984 the minimum wage in Egypt has been EP 35 per month. After adding bonuses and other financial benefits, it reaches EP 289 (\$ 52) for government employees and the public sector. Private sector employees earn much less. See <http://ipsnews.net/africa/nota.asp?idnews=50218>.

<sup>2</sup> Two women went to French and English missionary schools.

<sup>3</sup> General secondary comprises three years and culminates in national competitive exams known as the "general secondary exams" (*Thanaweya Amma*) on the basis of

the scores of which students are ranked and distributed to universities and faculties. The examinations and the build up to them have been a subject of major public complaints of families and students alike. It is also a popular subject in the media. The question of how to simplify *Thanaweya Amma* procedures is always a top priority for almost all ministers of education following cabinet reshuffles. In the last few years, the tension was so heightened that a few students committed suicide for failing to obtain the scores they had aspired for to enter university. Well-to-do parents are willing to invest more money so that their children can avoid the *Thanaweya Amma* and the stress it generates. A secondary school diploma from overseas or an international school in Cairo is sometimes considered a backdoor to college admission for the well-to-do in Egypt.

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## 6

## Wading Through Treacle: Young CSGs in the Informal Sector

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the work trajectory of young CSGs in the age group 20-39. Young women transition into the labour market without a clear plan of how to look for a job and no concrete idea of what to expect. There is a fair amount of confusion about the role of the state and whether the public sector is still recruiting new employees. After all, young women's knowledge was based on the experience of other people. Judging by those and other signs, the chances were not bright.

In this chapter I examine young women's transition from school to work, their encounters with the diminishing role of the state from the area of employment and their endeavours to secure a job in the informal sector. The retreat of the state meant among other things the rise of a new variety of employers, weakening the rules regulating employment relations and the need to struggle to find a job. In the new context, CSGs were dispersed along a variety of jobs bounded by employers' image of them as gendered and classed beings. In order to perpetuate this concordance between women and jobs, employers created a hybrid that blurred the manual/non-manual job divide and reinforced status differences while offering no opportunity for personal growth.

On the other hand, I argue that the new working conditions have had some positive effects. CSGs have become aware of the persistent attempts to subordinate them; they struggled on daily basis to subvert those endeavours. Their jobs have become catalysts for changing their consciousness about their social position.

### 6.2 The public sector in a new context

By the mid nineties, the centralised services of the ministry of manpower in providing employment were halted and the ministry's role was limited to collating information about job availability and bringing it to the attention of young people through the *National Employment Bulletin* sold in

newspapers kiosks and distributed in public facilities. The ministry's employment services bureau was replaced by several small employment offices – the result of joint projects between the Egyptian government and bilateral donors like the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Their specific task has been to liaise between new graduates and private sector employers.<sup>1</sup> There was no talk about public sector employment.

### 6.2.1 The rise of the public sector as an informal employer

In chapter 3 I described mechanisms adopted by the government to discourage job applicants from approaching public sector jobs by prolonging the waiting period and reducing university enrollment. The next step was to impose restrictions by making public sector appointments by competition so that public sector units would announce their jobs in national papers and selection would be made on the basis of a test following specific criteria.<sup>2</sup>

Simultaneously, the public sector has been emerging as an informal employer. A new set of temporary work arrangements without social or medical security has come to life with contract durations ranging between a month and a year depending on the needs of the institution. Employees recruited on a yearly contract basis often have defined work tasks, just like regular employees, as well as some arbitrary social and medical benefits and holidays. Even though there was no commitment to keep temporary workers with a year contract beyond the contract end-date, their appointment was usually extended and they were often led to believe that in case a vacant permanent appointment appeared, they would be given priority. Some employees who fell under this category have been endlessly waiting for this open appointment.

However, in order to maintain an upper hand in deciding who can and cannot stay, employers sometimes dismissed employees just before the year came to an end and brought them back again on the job if there was a need for them. This procedure circumvented attempts at permanent appointments, particularly as the previous Labour Law (137 of 1981) stipulated that if an employee worked in the same place for one continuous year, he/she was entitled to a permanent work contract. Under the new law (12 of 2003) such measures were no longer necessary, as the law unambiguously stipulated the right of employers to hire workers for specific durations (see Chapter 3).

Another common employment modality (also before the enforcement of the new labour law) was “private sub-contracting for the government”, an arrangement whereby the government out-sourced its employment needs to private businesses and firms. For example, before the 1990s personnel such as bus attendants and cleaners in educational institutions were permanent employees who would have enjoyed all the public sector benefits of permanent employment as well as medical and social security. In recent years, most of the young respondents who worked as bus attendants for educational institutions, earned their jobs when they were sub-contracted by bus companies following a school bid for buses. With sub-contracting arrangements the school would pay the bus company or the private employment office, for example, EP 400 (US\$ 72) to cover the salary of the employee, but only slightly more than half of it (about EP 250 – US\$ 45) would go to his/her pocket and the rest to the sub-contractor.

The more vulnerable group of employees, who worked for the government on the basis of short term monthly contracts calculated on daily basis, was usually hired on an ad hoc basis through a newspaper announcement, to carry out a delineated task for a specific duration but had no hope for long term appointment. It is among this group that the disappointment with the public sector and with the general work experience has been most pronounced. They were the group that suffered the most erratic and meagre pay, as well as the complete absence of any sense of obligation towards them. Heba (26) was appointed on a daily contract basis in the government to collect information on the status of illiteracy in the country. She describes in the following lines the unfavourable work conditions and environment as well as the meaninglessness of her work

I have not been trained to do the job. They only told us we needed to ask the questions and write the answers in the empty spaces. I had no idea what I was doing this for. There was no one to tell me how to improve my work. There is no motive for people to work; nothing that makes you want to continue; Although I should go everyday, I am not expected to, or if I did, then it is for a few hours everyday simply because there are not enough places or chairs for everybody. We are seated in the photocopying room with Xerox machines and we are around 23 to 25 persons. Can you imagine what would happen if we are all at work on the same day? As this



was becoming virtually impossible, employees were asked to stay home until summoned

In the following lines she explains how she also viewed it as financially un-remunerative

I spend more money on the job than I actually take from it. I earn EP 100 and spend EP 50 on transportation. The remaining EP 50 are not enough to buy a soda and a sandwich at work. Every day I take pocket money from my mother and sometimes I say to myself instead of going to work and then get sent back, why don't I stay at home and they will anyway deduct it from my pay. I also don't earn the money on a monthly basis; they pay us every three months. Aren't we now in July, I have just now been paid for April. This job is a total waste of time.

Heba had high hopes for a job she could enjoy and grow in. She tried to look for a more rewarding job and found one that was quite far from where she lived. She had no objection about travelling a long way to work, but has calculated the pros and cons and concluded that even though the pay there was higher, she would have to spend a substantial amount of money on transportation, and at the end, as she said, she would still be left with the very similar amount to what she was getting from her present job. She justified her decision to remain where she was by saying "At least with the EP 100 I am getting now, I am not exerting a big effort". Heba's calculative reasoning is a good answer to the claim that women's job prospects outside the public sector are constrained by their physical immobility and reluctance to commute for long distances (Assaad and Arntz 2005: 21).

### 6.2.2 Benefits within informality

Being close to the government i.e. in a government office, even if not in a formal capacity, made temporary and/or sub-contracted employees visible and familiar faces to the management. They had the advantage of learning before other candidates about imminent job openings. Some women in my sample were able to make the transition into longer term jobs just by being in the right place at the right time. Moreover, while employers had no formal obligations vis a vis temporary or short term employees, the latter's presence created a tacit sense of obligation and responsibility on the part of employers and spurred their desire to help them. In schools, for example, a sense of compassion with informal

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CSGs employees was particularly visible with married women. The general understanding was that no married woman would knock the door of an informal employer unless all other formal doors have been closed off and they have been desperately pushed out by constraining family and economic conditions. In public schools where CSGs were informally hired as assistant teachers, clerks and bus attendants, senior school management used their clout to twist the rules and applied ingenuous methods to augment their income by helping them take additional jobs at school. Female clerks, for example, would be allowed to take on a supplementary job of bus attendants. In such a case, an employee would start her day very early in the morning by making a tour with the school bus to collect children and bring them to school, then put on the hat of a clerk and take charge of her administrative duties until 3pm when she again collected the children and gave them a ride home in the school bus.

In addition, if they had children, CSGs are sometimes allowed to enrol them in the same public school where they worked and enjoy the same tuition waiver given to formal employees as well as free of charge ride in the school bus with their mother. Moreover, being close to school teachers, it was common for children of CSGs to benefit from the group tutoring organised by schools for their pupils in return for a token fee. In other instances, CSGs were able to make some informal arrangements with their colleagues, the teachers, to privately tutor their children for no or little money. A privately sub-contracted bus attendant recalled how the school headmistress collected money from her school staff to contribute most of the expenses of the medical surgery the woman's daughter underwent. The headmistress also used her contacts to allow the child to have the operation take place in the teachers' hospital that served only unionised school teachers.

### 6.2.3 Access to jobs: "Wasta"

Barsoum (2004: 85) explains that because of the very large number of applicants to what is now a scarce commodity, the government had to resort to a "filtering mechanism" and accept "recommendations" for specific candidates in order to avoid a long and time consuming selection process. In 1997 government departments received "verbal" instructions to stop all new public appointments unless absolutely unavoidable- able.<sup>3</sup> The unavoidable has been interpreted as the presence of a strong pat-

ronage (*Wasta*) for the applicant, coming from, for example, “the minister herself”. While in the eighties the waiting period for a public appointment had typically been many long years, in 2006 the mean number of years to obtain a public job was only 1.3 years<sup>4</sup> which suggests the strong impact of the *Wasta* in shortening the waiting period. Those who had the right connections did not have to wait an excessively long period to get an appointment.

The majority of young people who do not have a direct *Wasta* follow job advertisements in national papers but find them increasingly challenging. Many of these jobs require English language and computer skills which they often do not command. Other jobs that do seem appropriate are in fact a test of their “social worth” and the power of their social and cultural capital, rather than being truly open opportunities or competitions. After repeated applications and rejections, female CSGs have learned that most of these advertisements are merely a formality dictated by law, and that often appointment decisions had already been made even before advertising the jobs. The need for an influential *Wasta* often curtails the chances of the less advantaged young people to employment. They have learnt to scrutinise them carefully and exercise self-exclusion.

When I met Iman, she was working as a maid in the house of a middle class family. She is a good looking 30 year old single woman, who after obtaining her commercial diploma, knew that she wanted to work in the area of TV and film production

I have always been attracted to that field and am an avid magazine reader. I knew everything by heart. I knew who directed all the films and who produced them. This is what I had been doing all my life. I knew I could be successful. I applied to work as a secretary in the radio and TV building. I wanted to begin as a secretary then find my way up to do programming. There were 5000 applicants and places for only 100. They sent me a letter and I went for the exam. There were lots of people but only those who had connections made it and I failed the exam. I always felt that these exams were nothing but a formality and that those who were to work had already been chosen. Some people had connections from members of parliament. There was a veiled woman who was asked to make a decision about her veil and whether she planned to keep it. She insisted on keeping it and was denied the job, but her strong connection brought her back because he was a powerful man.

Despite the bitterness Iman experienced when she was denied a job opportunity because of lack of *Wasta*, she had no choice but to resort to the same weapon later on in order to secure a job. Only in her case, she was asked to compromise herself.

And when I tried later to find a *Wasta*, I went to see (...) who had nominated himself for local elections but found out that he wanted me to go visit him every day at work and spend time with him chatting and drinking soda, so I decided to stop pursuing it. Earlier I had also submitted my papers also to the data centre at the ministry of electricity which was opening and wanted data entry personnel but again, they only took those who had connections. Now I have given up. I know that in Egypt there is no proper system to find work. I have no trust in the system. Anywhere you go if you do not have connections nothing will work. But even if you are not a good worker but have the right connections, you will find a job.

When the *Wasta* failed, Iman made a decision to give up and stay at home. However, she could not respect her decision for a long time and live without any source of income. Both her parents had died and she was living in the family house with her four siblings who were all unemployed and in similar desperate situations. Her last resort was to work as domestic helper for the same family her mother used to serve and she was paid a decent wage of EP 500 (US \$ 90) which is equal to the salary of a CSG after several years of service in the government.

Young people's attachment to public employment became increasingly personalised and localised, reflecting exactly the abilities and limits of their promised *Wasta*. For example, it was not unusual to hear CSGs say that they were hoping to work in the ministry of tourism or even in a particular branch of a specific company, another way of saying that their *Wasta* was influential – and could help them find a job – in this particular place.

For Laila (24), for example, working for the government has been a family dream. Before he died, her father's plan was to secure a job for her and her brother in the ministry of electricity where he himself had been working. Using her father's work colleagues as her *Wasta* after he died, Laila applied for a position there eight years ago and had still been waiting for a response. While nervously waiting for an answer, she has found herself a contract-based job also for the government that she hoped would become a permanent one. After deliberations, she and her

family – mother and brother – decided to transfer her “right” to the government job, to her younger brother. She substituted his name on the waiting list for hers so that when he graduated he would find a job.

I went and wrote my brother’s name instead of my own. It is true that my (current) job is not great, but I can find something else and can take any salary that is appropriate to the kind of effort I will put into it. But for my (younger) brother it will be even more difficult to find a job and as a man he should have the opportunity. We all thought about it at home and said that if I did not get it, maybe he will. This has been my father’s wish: me or my brother, it does not make any difference.

Laila’s scheme evokes Bayat’s (1997: 3) notion that in cases of necessity, people take justice in their own hands and enforce “quiet encroachment” strategies to achieve their aspirations. If the entitlement to a government job is not granted, it should be slowly usurped (Parkin 1974). These approaches remind us of similar tactics job seekers resorted to before the abolishment of the government employment scheme when they used to keep their names registered for a government job at the ministry of manpower even after they had already found a job in the private sector. Often they wished to keep their options open and have the choice between the two jobs (Assaad 1997: 90). Ultimately this meant both raising unemployment figures and depriving truly unemployed and needy others of the work opportunity.

In my sample, thanks to the tradition of giving some special consideration to children of employees in the public sector, some CSGs obtained their jobs through a *Wasta* secured usually by their fathers who despite their low status jobs such as office helpers or janitors, were often in a position to ask the upper management for personal favours. For example, Hanem’s (30) present job as a librarian in a public university was secured to her by her father who has been working as a helper in the office of the Dean for 25 years and got to build social capital and expand his circle of “important people”. He had found a job for Hanem’s older sister as a clerk in the university, and when it was time to find a job for Hanem, the dean was reluctant as he had had considerable pressure to appoint other people and said that Hanem would be taking the opportunity and place of more deserving others. She explains that her father “begged” the dean until he was able to get the job for her.

However, some of those who had been struggling for a public sector job realised that it was a disillusioning pursuit. Young men, in particular, who had large financial responsibilities as they planned to get married and form families, were especially disappointed. For example, Ashraf (male) (34) always dreamt to work as an administrator in the university. After obtaining his commercial degree, he had had some lucrative job opportunities with the private sector as a sales person in advertising companies and in family business, but his eyes had always been on the university. His infatuation with a public job in the university, which he attributes to his personal failure to become a university student, and sheer longing to meet and work with university professors, made him endure the EP 75 (US\$ 15) he earned monthly (calculated on the basis of daily rate) from his temporary job as a clerk. But after six years, he realised that a long term or permanent government job was a mirage; he was getting older and wanted to get married and form a family which he could not possibly do at this place in which his presence was also unwelcome.

Other employees with permanent positions used to be very mean to us people with contracts as if we were taking our wages from their pockets. They felt that they could have brought their children or brothers instead of me and so they would have priority in getting appointed there. It was when I heard that my colleagues had been there for 14 years and wished they would get appointed before the age of retirement, that I got discouraged and decided to leave.

### 6.3 “Entertaining oneself”: A training certificate to hang on the wall

Once the public sector test failed and that job route was eliminated, young people spent close to a year at home considering options. For one, they discovered that continuing their education by entering university, which for some had not been ruled out, was in fact not possible because of the high fees (see Chapter 2). Also, as mentioned earlier, marriage for many young women was no longer an imminent project (Chapter 3). If neither marriage nor education came through and the family started to impose restrictions on physical mobility, young women went out in search for work.

After the diploma, I stayed at home for a year, and then I thought about work. I had thought that I would be able to go out and do things as I used to do during the school days, but it turned out to be more difficult. At home they would ask where I was going and what time I would come back. So I thought to continue my education, but it was too late. The date of submitting my application had long gone. And the truth is, I did not want to study again. So I decided to work

Others described the waiting time as a state of boredom. After some time to recuperate from what they believed were long years of study, there was little else that they could do.

I graduated in 1992 and worked in 1995. I was getting really bored. I would wake up late in the morning, eat breakfast, idle about at home, do cross word puzzles or play backgammon, go out around sunset and return in the evening to go to bed and do the same thing the next day. We were all like this except my younger brother who had an industrial diploma and father arranged for him to get training in a nearby workshop

Many young women took skill building courses. Private firms that offer computer and English language courses are abundant but their fees are prohibitive for most people with modest means. Increasingly political parties, business associations, NGOs, universities, as well as religious institutions have entered this field in an attempt to improve young people's employability. However, like many of these programmes that do not have a clearly defined target group and do not take impact into account in their design, we do not know much about the impact of their work and there are question marks about whether they really serve the most deserving. Interestingly, even if they have affordable training places to choose from, young people still turned to government agencies hoping that something might still come from there.

After school, I decided to take training courses to 'entertain myself'. I registered my name with the ministry of manpower even though I knew they would do nothing, but I said I would not lose anything. But I had a computer session at the ministry of manpower and they gave us money and said the following round would qualify us to work, but there was no work. All I got was a pretty training certificate to hang on my wall

Chhachhi and Pittin (1996) describe how their Indian factory workers used the phrase "time-pass" as a euphemism and socially acceptable way to legitimise employment till they got married. They continued to use the

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phrase even when there were no prospects for marriage or when they continued to work after getting married. Also, Basi (2009) points out that two types of female workers in Indian call centres used the term “time-pass” to explain why they sought work there: women who lacked career ambitions and those who were economically secure and did not need to work. Egyptian CSGs used similar expressions of “alleviating boredom” and “entertaining oneself” to describe the same situation. However, for these women from poor socio-economic background to describe their search for a job as a “time-pass” is their way to dispel any association with poverty and financial need and provide a fall-back position in case they failed to find work. This “role distancing” (Goffman 2006, 105) allows them to save face and claim they were neither keen nor serious in their endeavour, should they fail to find an appropriate job. However, my interviews have shown that this attitude was a veneer masking a great amount of anxiety and lack of trust in the job market.

#### 6.4 Two different employment worlds

In her ethnography of the job search process, Barsoum (2004) provides a detailed account of the separate worlds of employment agencies that cater to two distinct types of job applicants – the rich and the poor. Up-market employment agencies function as gate-keepers to ensure that only applicants with the appropriate skills and dispositions or *habitus*, are given a chance. Their ideal candidate is a woman with knowledge of foreign languages – which invariably comes with some degree of wealth – and computer skills, but who have, most importantly, the [sic] “valorized capital” and the appearance of the *Bint Nass* i.e. a woman “who does not look poor”, and is well-groomed, cultured and classy (Ibid 42-59). (See also Chapter 3 for more about *Welad Nass*).

The poor, on the other hand, deal with the numerous run-down employment offices that have risen in poor popular areas to manage this remunerative recruitment business as they charge the numerous job applicants a few pounds each just to fill an application form. Despite their unattractive appearance, these offices provide a link between job seekers and private business. Several of the women I met got their jobs through them. Other channels for finding work for the poor include vehicles with microphones that go around the streets making announcements of vacant positions among other things, such as the opening of a new store or a lost child. Finally, there are ads in free of charge newspapers some of



which, it is believed, involve fraudulent or immoral practices. In the following lines Samira (28) describes her experience with a job that she came across through one of the newspaper ads. It specifically asked for CSGs and advertised a salary that could go up to EP 1000 (US\$ 180).

I went to the company and found it in a narrow and dark alley. I asked for directions and people started telling me to be careful but I had to find out for myself. I went upstairs and found a depressing room in a state of havoc; no place to sit; it did not look at all like a company. A man wearing pants with suspenders without a shirt appeared. As soon as I saw him, I opened the door and walked away. I went back to the newspaper and told them that they needed to do a better job to make sure where they were sending job applicants

Another woman said

First they told me it was a job in a factory and that I would learn hand embroidery, and then they said I will sit on a machine and at the end it turned out to be a sales job. I was required to go around carrying a heavy bag of things selling stuff to people in the streets and in cafes and going up to flats where sometimes you find single men and other times they kick you out and close the door in your face. It is all immoral and degrading.

When CSGs go out in search for work, they are daunted by work prospects as the jobs they are offered are usually menial, degrading and do not have career prospects. With the little confidence they have in their skills and their ability to compete with others with higher education, a vicious circle starts to operate: They are offered poor jobs and because of their need they are not selective in their choice and become generally oblivious to the notion of investing in human capital or upgrading their skills. They are basically trapped in a chain of bad jobs. Work decisions are essentially made by elimination based on a “practical sense” of what their objective chances are given the overall context of unemployment rather than through thoughtful deliberation.<sup>5</sup>

## 6.5 Jobs for female CSGs

As the dream of a clerical job in respectable office settings has become more and more evasive, female CSGs are now recruited in areas seen as just appropriate for their middle level education and numeracy skills, as well as the very basic knowledge of foreign languages that their technical

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education provided. They work as assistant teachers in schools and kindergartens, bus supervisors, sellers in shops, waitresses, typists and secretaries in small businesses and local NGOs, attendants in clinics and increasingly as domestic maids.

Wages for CSGs range between EP 150 (US\$ 27) and EP 250 (US\$ 45) for a starting salary. Periodic raises are usually insignificant in terms of amount. They are also arbitrary and follow no fixed rules. An assistant teacher said “One year she [the school owner] gives us a raise, another year she does not. We do not know the rules and she always makes you feel that you are begging from her. Seven years ago I started out at EP 150 (US\$ 27). Now I earn EP 300 (US\$ 54) only”. It is noteworthy to mention that the upper end of the range i.e. EP 250 (US\$ 45) is just below the minimum wage suggested by the National Wage Council in the discussions that took place in 2008. As I was doing my field-work in 2007 economists and other experts were pushing for a minimum of between EP 450 (US\$ 82) and EP 600 (US\$ 109) to reflect inflation and increase in prices (Farghali and Hamed 2008: 14).<sup>6</sup>

In the informal market social insurance is not a subject that either employers or employees choose to bring up. To subscribe to security means to deduct an amount representing the share of the employee and constituting a substantial part of what is already a low pay, which many young people are not willing to forego. At the same time, employers are required to contribute an even larger sum which they are also reluctant to pay unless pressured by the employee.

Moreover, there is a common misunderstanding on the part of employees that social and medical security constrains their freedom and makes it difficult to leave the job if they decided they wanted to quit. It is indeed the case that young women plan to stay on bad jobs for only a short period of time until they are able to move on to a better place. But often the planned move does not happen and they end up staying on and enduring bad jobs. In this case, they start asking for insurance. Amira is a 29 year old CSG who worked in a school for five years without insurance thinking it was not worth it because she would soon leave. However, when she found out that quitting has merely remained on the level of desire, that she did not even have time to look for another job and was not psychologically ready to make the move (“what you know is better than what you do not know”), she decided to ask for insurance.

But when necessary, CSGs use the social security card in their negotiations with employers sometimes just to make a statement that they have an equal right to a secure employment like the more educated teachers. For example, in schools which hire large numbers of commercial school graduates as assistant teachers (see below), the latter are invariably asked to perform after hours personal domestic chores as cleaners and baby sitters in the homes of school principals and senior staff. These services are often unpaid and considered a continuation of the usual work day.

In one particular school, the principal provided social insurance to teachers who were university graduates as she assumed they knew their rights and could be a source of trouble with the labour office if denied those rights. She had also applied rule-of-the-thumb concessions that teachers could enrol their children at school with decent tuition waivers or at reduced fees. On the other hand, she made sure to bluntly explain to assistant teachers – mostly CSGs – that that rule did not apply to *their* children. After all, school principals are keen on preserving their luxurious “investment schools” as exclusive territories for the professional and upper middle class and not tarnish them with lower class culture. While unable to refuse performing domestic service in senior staff houses for fear of losing their jobs, some CSGs decided to ask for insurance for their work at school as well as other concessions typically granted to middle class teachers. Their demands were subject to extensive negotiations with the school management but were finally allowed.

#### 6.5.1 Working in a shop

“So your ladyship has an MBA from the American University? Why, the beggars in the street have commercial diplomas the same as you!” (Al Aswany 2006: 43)

These lines from the “Yakoubian Building” were addressed to the lead figure, Buthayna, a young woman in her 20s and a graduate of a commercial school. After a wearying search for a job without success, she had to ask for advice from her friend who realistically reminded her of the huge difference between her and American University graduates and that her diploma has become worthless. Buthayna had to finally listen to her friend’s advice to work in a boutique and offer sexual favours to its owner in return for extra money that, with her wage, would allow her to support her family of mother and many siblings. The shop in down-town

Cairo described in the novel is owned by a male – a womaniser – and is the site of sexual harassment and moral dissipation. For women, working in small places with a few staff members is associated with sexual harassment which partly explains why they are reluctant to work in shops despite the availability of opportunities. However, the fact is they often do end up there.

Women who make a decision to work in a shop know that one of the main tasks is to clean the place and dust the merchandise every day. This requirement is not subject to negotiation, and women cannot claim they did not know it was the rule. Given their aversion to cleaning places that are not their own family homes, and the understanding that their education has been a waste of time and money if the work they did reinforced the image that they were poor, working in a shop indeed becomes a sign of despair and lack of alternatives. Naturally, there should be no conflict between taking up work as a safety net and acquiring skills at the same time. But it is clear that the shop line of work offers no opportunities for learning or growth and is a *cul de sac* for most women. When I asked CSGs to list and describe their jobs, they often omitted to mention a good number which they viewed as “insignificant” because they believed they did not add to their knowledge and skills.

Unlike companies that occupy flats or have proper spaces in office buildings, shops are places “without doors”, which implies informality and openness to the street. For many women, a street-level store is associated with social abasement. The notion is that as one goes down to the street level, and mixes with individuals of lower social standard, one also sacrifices one’s own social status. For example, Entessar (32), states that her current temporary office job in the government is much better than her previous job as a seller in a shop where “It felt as though you were sitting in the street, getting all the vulgar language of passers- by and listening to the vernacular language of merchants and lay people”.

CSGs work in a wide array of shops that ranges between up market department stores and boutiques in central areas, to small shops in narrow streets that sell trinkets and might have a photocopying machine to increase revenues. Being the least popular work places, shops turn-over is quite high and shop owners are always in need of new workers. The process of recruitment is simple. Often young women walk into the shop asking if there are vacancies. An informal interview takes place with the shop owner during which he/she asks about previous experience in simi-

lar positions, and if the working hours and pay are suitable, they could begin work on the spot. No formal proof of education and no legal documents are required but for security reasons, the shop owner keeps a photocopy of the ID card. Typically the job involves 12 hours of work from 10am to 10pm sometimes with a break for lunch that the women bring from home or buy from neighbouring shops. The standard pay is about EP 150 (US\$ 28). No contract; no insurance.

Many shops place advertisements on shop windows for “good looking young women holders of commercial diploma”. The usual requirements are: an ability to read, write and make simple arithmetic calculations, as well as good interpersonal skills. Such conditions are not difficult to find in women with less than commercial school diplomas, hence stores, depending on their sizes, hire a variety of women with different educational degrees ranging from a few years of education to a commercial degree. In recent years, some shop keepers started to add the term “veiled” to the job requirements so they would have an employee who combined the good looks with the respectable Islamic appearance, adding good reputation to the place. In fact, because formal employment rules do not apply, shop owners have discretionary power to set rules and code of dress, often becoming intrusive and interfering in the smallest details. Dina’s (25), first job was in a photocopying shop near her house. The owner made daily remarks about the appearance and dress of his four young women employees. He dictated what they could and could not wear, preventing them for example, from wearing jewellery, make up or nail polish.

However, what bothers young CSGs most about their work is the actual interaction involved in buying and selling. Admittedly, service work and working with clients is understood to entail emotional pressures on the workers, with the “inauthentic nature of service interactions” potentially producing alienation and leaving the workers unhappy and uncertain about their true feelings (Hodson 2001: 228). Some articulated their work situation in a similar way.

My friend came to visit me in the shop where I worked and after watching me said she could never do these things like laughing with the clients and negotiating with them so they would buy. She said she did not have the patience or the skills for this kind of thing. The client kept on trying things and left without buying. My friend did not understand how I was able to endure that and also keep a smile on my face.

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But, rather than an act of economic exchange which should end with the transaction, shop sellers also see their interactions with clients and persuasive endeavours to conclude the sale as an enduring act of humiliation that compromises their dignity. Selling entails two sources of tension. The first is that women are aware that the job *is* about showing clients merchandise and helping them try out different items. In fact in most shops wages are low but largely augmented by commissions based on how much they sell. On the other hand, they realise that this very act of selling is a social class encounter which clients use to deliberately place them in an inferior position and make them appear as their own ‘servants’. Young women find it especially frustrating that their education and the fact that they have a certified diploma make no difference and do not bring them respect. But because they are accountable to the owner and need to keep their jobs, they have to swallow their hurt pride.

Some people come to boss you around and show you that you are of lower standard. They order you around and say get me this and get me that, let me try this or that so you feel you are little. And they are not polite; they do not even say please or thank you. I feel like I am their assistant *البيسة* just to help them put on clothes, and at the end, they leave me and go without buying anything.

Another woman in a shop said

That a worthless, barely educated woman would walk in and ask you to bring everything down from the racks, then look at them and in the end leaves you and you have to put everything back in place I go home every night boiling at the humiliating treatment and at the end, he [the owner] tells me it was my fault that I was not able to persuade them to buy. But who do they think they are? A bunch of worthless, uneducated women who have some money.

Notwithstanding the above, for most CSGs working in a shop is an inevitable stop in their work trajectory which particularly appears in uncertain transitions from one job to the other and as a quick solution to financial crisis. For example, Gihan (28) is divorced and has a daughter. She has returned to live with her parents and siblings in the small family flat. She is a regular customer of the shops in her neighbourhood, having worked intermittently in several of them for varying periods every time she had to find money to pay her child’s school fees. Jokingly she said

that shop owners in her neighbourhood now knew when to expect her at their doors by monitoring school fee schedules.

Nashwa (26), on the other hand, has managed to stay in the shop line of work since she graduated from her commercial school seven years ago. As she and I were talking, she realised that she had spent an average of a year in each place and every time she left, there was a 'strong reason' and it was "for no fault of hers".

Nashwa's, first job was in a phone exchange. The place operated around the clock and workers served on the basis of shifts. After six months, she had to quit when an amount of money disappeared from the drawer. Because of the informality of the place and the multiplicity of employees, the owner was not able to discover who took the money until much later. In the meantime, Nashwa decided to leave after an argument with him in which she tried to convey the point that "being poor did not mean that she stole the money". Her next stop was in a shop that sold women's garments and again she had to quit after a short period of time because the owner was a womaniser and gave the girls who worked for him a hard time as they always had to contrive to make sure none of them was left alone with him in the shop. Then she worked with a milk-man and learned to make yoghurt and cream and as she finally thought she was getting to learn a new and useful skill, the owner of the shop got himself a work partner and the business started to go downhill. When he began to pay her irregularly, she quit. Similarly, her next stop was in a shop that sold women's accessories, and again the business did not fare well and the owner decided to sell his shop to another man who in turn decided to turn it into a car rental agency. She was angry when the first owner innocently told her that she could be "part of the transaction" and be "sold" over to the new owner. She left after politely telling him that this line of business was of no interest to her.

For a whole year Nashwa stayed at home not knowing where to work and how to look for a job. During this year, she re-opened her father's carpentry shop which had been closed for a long time after he died, but because of lack of experience in this area, she did not know how to run it properly and had to close it. This journey of work and no work lasted six years in Nashwa's life until she finally heard from her friend about vacancies for assistant teachers in a school south of Cairo where I met her.

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### 6.5.2 Fuzzy and undefined jobs

#### *Assistant teachers*

Like all other higher stages of schooling in Egypt, private kindergartens are now a lucrative business particularly following the recent education reform considering the pre-school stage part and parcel of formal schooling (Egypt Ministry of Education 2006). Inexpensive public and NGO-sponsored nurseries that government employees can afford and where children pick up some basic skills are abundant. However, pre-school is also an area where class differentiation is visible. The middle and upper middle classes send their children to German, Irish, French and English nurseries where they pick up the language of their intended education and enjoy a linguistic edge during the entrance tests and interviews that precede primary school admission. With these plans in mind, middle class parents spend time deliberating this formative period in their children's education to make a good choice of school. For them, a good nursery is typically located in an up-market neighbourhood with foreign management and teachers with mother-tongue knowledge of the foreign language. The nursery charges an average of EP 1500 (US\$ 300) per month so that children can spend a day from 8am to 5pm. Generally, they take two days off.

The kindergarten I visited is located in a busy street in a residential middle class neighbourhood in Cairo. Two Egyptian female business partners with university degrees and good knowledge of English, rented a ground-level flat in a relatively new seven-storey building to set up their modern, "American-style" kindergarten. They illegally acquired a space of 5x5 square meters in the area between the building and the public street and turned it into a play-ground for the children. The floor is covered with artificial green grass. A couple of seesaws and wooden toys stand in the play-ground while a big colourful Mickey Mouse sign hung on the façade of the building with a visible arrow marking the entrance to the nursery. This particular nursery charges EP 800 per child (US\$ 140). All the teachers are female university graduates assisted by CSGs, better known as assistant teachers.

One of the two partners, an elegantly veiled woman in her 30s, was sitting in a large office facing a closed circuit TV monitor which she used to follow the performance of her 15 female employees in their classrooms. As we were chatting in her office, we could hear the loud voice



of small children repeating verses of the Quran after the male teacher who comes for an hour everyday to teach them the Holy Book. The owners of the kindergarten are keeping up with the new wave of nurturing “modern Muslims”. Private Islamic language schools now on the surge, cater to parents who wish to give their children an Islamic identity along with the modern credentials that would enable them to compete in the global marketplace. The private kindergartens described above represent the first stage in this type of schooling that culminate in upper levels luxurious “investment” schools and universities, set up over large spaces in the outskirts of the city and include amenities such as horse stables, swimming pools and tennis courts (Herrera 2006).

Freeman (2002) explains how some pink professions come with a certain image of femininity (and I add class) and how clothing contributes to the production of specific professional work identity. This image, in the case of Freeman’s offshore clerks in the Caribbean, is observed to be in opposition to the women’s objective class positions. As the Egyptian nursery principal chooses candidates for the assistant teachers’ positions, she makes sure to select those who are “adjustable” and can fit the image of the modern Muslim woman who puts on the veil but would also feel comfortable adding the modern touch of jeans and sneakers and would know how to apply the simple but elegant make-up typical of middle class women.

In recruiting for positions, the principal also combines older and younger women. The former are important in dealing with small children because “they have experienced what it is to be a mother and would be kind to the children”. However, it is also essential to have on staff agile younger women who have the physical energy to play with kids. In one school, the principal was so outspoken in her bias against the “inflexibility” of married women that when she wanted to express her dissatisfaction with a young woman’s work performance, she told her she hoped she would get married and have children so she could get rid of her. Willingness to stay late until all children have been picked up by their working parents, doing extra work and spending longer hours to substitute for other labour like bus attendants, working on weekends and performing personal domestic tasks and baby-sitting favors for the principal, are part of the job and generally do not entail additional remuneration.

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Parents' Day is an occasion when space is organised in a Goffman-style theater to mirror the occupational and class hierarchies applied in the kindergarten that become visible in the way the women play their roles in face to face interactions within this institutional setting (Hacking 2004). Parents are invited to visit the school and spend a few hours watching their children perform singing and dancing activities and meeting with teachers to find out the level of their children. After the formalities and children's show in the theatre, everybody goes out to the school play-ground for informal chats. *Dadas* or female cleaners, mostly older and uneducated women, stand in the back near the toilets in their uniforms of checkered blue coats so that parents can spot them and exchange smiles of recognition. After the meeting is finished, parents would hand them some money as a token of appreciation for the work they do for the children. Assistant teachers stand closer to the central meeting place, but a few meters away from where parents and teachers are chatting. The rule is they should be alert and prompt to answer any question addressed to them, but should not interfere in the discussion unless specifically asked to. Like *Dadas* they too receive financial gifts, but these are gracefully put in a closed envelope with the assistant teachers' names written on them and sometimes the phrase "with thanks and love from [the child's name]". Exchanging conversations with parents in Arabic, English or French are the middle class university educated class teachers who are the closest to parents in terms of social class background and dispositions. These do not receive money, but rather gifts of material value such as hand-bags and jewellery or symbolic value, such as flowers.

The job of an assistant teacher is to attend classes with the main teacher, help with activities, organise the children to take them to the play-ground and generally watch over them. The assistant teachers themselves believe that they spend more time with the children and are in many ways closer to them than the teachers are; they can therefore offer useful information to parents, if allowed to communicate with them and voice their opinion. However, their professional role is curtailed by the management who constantly monitors their performance and errors. In its turn, the management is reacting under pressure from parents who want their children to communicate only in the foreign language in order to master it which would necessitate minimal interaction with the assistant teachers. In performing their work assistant teachers use a limited

repertoire of basic words in English or French: playground, toilet, class, lunch etc. They are also taught how to help the main teacher recite simple English or French songs for the kids, after correcting their accent and monitoring their Bs and Ps.<sup>7</sup> A school principal described the situation as follows

Parents insist that their kids should speak in English all the time they are at school and I would be in trouble if it becomes obvious that the assistants cannot really converse in English. The maximum I can do is to teach them to sing with the kids in English and even then I get mothers who claim that their kids are not pronouncing the words right and the assistant teachers are passing on their bad English accent to the children.

Essentially, assistant teachers hover between the two worlds of teachers and *Dadas* although in many ways their world is closer to that of the latter. The difference in pay between assistants and *Dadas* is quite insignificant – EP 100 (US\$ 20) on average. On the other hand, the difference between these two and teachers is substantial – at least US\$ 100. A school principal explained that she had no problem at all finding assistant teachers and *Dadas*. When she has vacancies, she places an ad in the newspapers and gets them in droves, but quite often too young women come knocking on her door asking if there are vacancies and many CSGs are quite happy to work as cleaners.

### **Secretaries**

Our knowledge of the experience of CSGs with secretarial and clerical work has largely been shaped by and limited to that of the older generation of female public sector employees essentially of low productivity, boring and unchallenging (see Chapter 4). In the formal private sector, the representation of CSGs in clerical positions has been rather insignificant mainly due to the alleged lack of appropriate skills to meet the demands of this competitive sector. In recent years, the employment of CSGs in the formal private sector has been limited to males in the lower positions of office helpers and messengers. With the large supply of university graduates and rampant unemployment, there has been no reason to force the private sector to recruit a technical school graduate when it could get a university graduate at higher skills and reasonable financial terms.

In the informal sector, the title 'secretary' is now attached to a broad spectrum of women ranging from those who perform secretarial work in office settings, to others who work in doctors' clinics and those who perform paper pushing functions and a variety of other jobs of indeterminate character. None of the 'secretaries' I met while conducting the study had received any formal secretarial training or courses or followed a linear trajectory performing secretarial work. Most of them have had an irregular occupational path and came to their secretarial positions from disparate backgrounds as sellers in shops, waitresses and blue collar workers in factories. They do realise that they do not have the competence or skills required to be a good secretary. What they performed now had little resemblance to the ideal image of the well paid, respected and skilled secretary they once had in mind.

Secretarial work for CSGs occupies a fuzzy grey area between manual and clerical work. When Farida (22) was promoted to a secretary from a blue collar factory worker, she did not notice any significant change in her work. In fact, some advantages like her relatively high pay disappeared. As a factory worker, she used to be paid on the basis of her production which amounted to a lot more than the fixed salary she was getting now as a secretary. Similar studies in Britain on women who managed to cross the manual/non-manual divide found out that often the move was an indication of the "less favourable context of non-manual work.... than an indication that working-class women ... 'overcome' their origins" (Hayes and Miller 1993: 659). Ever since Farida was moved to the administrative floor, she realised that becoming a secretary was in reality not a promotion at all and her job was a euphemism for office helper. The work she now did required very little mental effort but a great deal of "light weight and agility".

Actually I do not even have a desk. Everyday in the morning, my supervisors give me tickets for work orders and my job *as a secretary* (my emphasis) is to distribute them among workers in the factory. I also receive papers from the various departments and distribute them for signature and approval. I am always running around feeling like a complete jerk.

Nagwa (29), on the other hand, gets the chance to sit at a desk and type. She works as secretary to a middle-aged lawyer whose two room office occupies the ground floor of a relatively new building in a narrow side street of a densely populated popular area in Cairo. Her working

hours extend from 6pm to 11pm and she earns EP 120 (US\$ 22) per month. Her job entails cleaning the office, serving tea and coffee to clients, typing legal memos on the type-writer as the office has no computers, and going to court to pay young lawyers some money so they would appear before the judge and ask for postponement of legal cases. She did not mind the job of cleaning the office once upon her arrival in the morning. To make it an acceptable task, she approximated the chore to her domestic functions as a woman and the office to her family home: "Cleaning is something I am used to as a woman and I do it in my own home; an office where one is comfortable and well-treated, is like home", she said. However, when her employer formalised the degradation by asking her to wait until everybody has left and clean the office again in the evening, adding to her gendered task a class dimension and reinforcing her image as an office helper, she decided to quit. The domestic and menial chores simply outweighed her professional tasks and she was not able to defend her job as a secretary even to herself.

### *Female office helpers*

Medium and large scale firms that require specific technical specialisations and skills apply dual employment practices. Members of the technical, professional and executive staff who are "indispensable" for the operation of business and who have been employed for a long time, have long term contracts, social insurance and other benefits. On the other hand, new recruits particularly for lower level positions, such as secretaries and janitors, sub-contracted through private employment firms or by word of mouth, are granted contracts for short or definite time duration or are hired without contracts and enjoy no insurance benefits. The obscure phrase "graduates of commercial schools required for a reputable firm" is typically understood to be a call for recruitment of office helpers.

Office helpers in public and private establishments are predominantly men. On one hand, there is a feeling that women should perform domestic duties only within the confines of their homes, but also that men represent more flexible labour than women since they are physically sturdy and more capable of doing additional tasks that require muscular strength, like moving furniture or lifting heavy things.

Lately, however, with the increase in female-headed households and the rising role of NGOs in the area of employment, more women are

recruited as office helpers. In order to allay the stigma of “public domestic servant”, office helpers are also asked to perform photocopying tasks and send faxes, which gives them some sense of importance and defuses the degradation of their otherwise menial work. Making coffee and tea for employees is part of the job but young women helpers have come up with a slightly modified work arrangement which they implement discretely without stirring trouble, as they try to limit their service to senior management and avoid serving staff of their same social standing or work hierarchy like drivers and other low level employees. Moreover, they explained to me that they also heed the age factor and try to serve only older and senior individuals. Nicely, they would try to encourage young people, regardless of their work position, to serve themselves.

When they apply to these jobs which provide an acceptable work environment and good pay, young women hope that they will move on and grow. Often however, the jobs have no potential for growth and once there, young women are trapped in battles of survival, eventually losing sight of the promises of promotion which become increasingly unattainable.

Doaa is 24 years old. She had read an advertisement in a local paper and applied to a large construction company without knowing beforehand what the job really entailed. She took a typing test and was briefly interviewed by a staff member, which made her assume this was going to be a secretarial job. In all cases, she was not willing to argue as she needed the job badly in order to support her mother and younger brother after her father abandoned them. Few weeks later she was summoned to the office together with four other girls and was told she could begin work as office helper in the buffet. She did not object as she liked the idea of working with four women, three of whom had commercial diplomas like her and one was a university graduate with a BA in history. Later on the latter was given a clerical position. Doaa had hopes to be appointed as a secretary in case of vacancy. After all, she spoke some English and her typing was good.

The job required coming at 7am before all the employees to clean the office and staying till 6pm, after the employees have left, to put the place in order. During the work day, the five girls made tea and coffee and photocopied documents until one day the management decided to “masculinise” the buffet and “get rid of all the girls”. There was no one to complain to. After all, the girls had no binding contractual obligations.

The progressive management that had hired Doaa and her colleagues was replaced by more conservative male staff, who thought that the kitchen was becoming too dominated by women, making the male employees uncomfortable and restricting their movement in and out of the kitchen. In addition, with the girls being “young and giggly” the appearance of the office was deemed to have become “unprofessional”. Doaa and her colleagues were devastated by the management decision. She says:

This was my only source of livelihood. I begged them and I wept and said if I made any mistake I would correct it but they confirmed that all three of us had done nothing wrong and that it was just a managerial decision to change the team of girls to a team of boys. It was a disaster for me and although my salary was already very low, I had adjusted myself and my family to the money. I knew how much I gave my family and how much I kept.

Interestingly, after a short while, the same management that dismissed the girls began to discretely find ways to bring them back, but placed them in disparate places independently of each other. Only this time, Doaa returned to the buffet to work with a much older illiterate man. Although she was relieved to get back her job, she could not help being disappointed. She had hoped that the change would mean a meaningful rectification of her status and that she would finally be doing clerical tasks that would be more compatible with her education and skills. Instead she was disheartened that the management again gave no regard at all to her educational credentials and placed her with this man who also turned out to also be a thief as he was tampering with beverages rations and other food items. Although she made sure to distance herself from his fraudulent acts, she was always afraid that he might implicate her.

Doaa had to think of other ways to get out of this quagmire. She began a ‘sandwich enterprise’ in the firm whereby she made sandwiches for the employees and sold them at reasonable prices that provided her with a small margin of profit. The project went well for a while and she even began to expand to other firms in the same building until the management drew her attention that her new business was taking away from the time she had to give to her original job of cleaning and making tea and coffee. Once again she tried to explain that the additional income she had started to make was important for her family survival and told me

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that her success was in fact allowing her to explore the possibility of quitting and having her own private enterprise.

Crestfallen, Doaa was forced to stick to the original terms of work. Realising that she now did not have the extra income from sandwiches, the firm employees took the initiative to collect five pounds (less than one US Dollar) monthly from each of them to compensate her for her financial loss. At the same time, she got several offers from her managers to work as a domestic servant in their homes at double the amount of money she was earning in the firm. Doaa refused the offers, stating to me that had she accepted, she would have completely degraded herself. The last time I saw her, she was trying to convince her management to begin to use her as a messenger and send her out to run errands: go to the bank and deliver mail to other companies. She was desperately trying to find any other route that would keep her out of the buffet. “I am now convinced that even if there is a vacancy, they will never take a girl from the buffet and make her a secretary. The problem is I will never grow in this job. It has no future”, she said.

### *Working with an NGO*

In the following part I will discuss the role played by NGOs in women’s occupational and social mobility. In both cases, women’s initial contact with the NGOs took place when they were recruited as beneficiaries of the NGOs programmes for health, educational and legal services and as other income generating activities. This relationship lasted long enough that CSGs started to earn regular or semi regular income from those activities, or were actually employed by the NGO in a standard employment arrangement, with or without contract. In the following sections I will discuss two cases. The first addresses the contribution of NGOs to the “housewifisation”<sup>8</sup> of married women by promoting the courtyard economy and the second demonstrates the inability of NGOs to sustain work for young women and their own ambivalence about enhancing CSGs status and class position.

### *Housewifisation of working women*

The first case is a donor – funded local NGO that targets women by providing a package of services including reproductive health awareness raising programmes, literacy classes for illiterate women, a kindergarten for children and a variety of income generating activities for married



women. Women are trained to do needle work and produce finely-laced bed covers and table cloths. A foreign expert brought by the donor agency provides the NGO with marketable designs and patterns that the women have to follow. The instructions are communicated to the women through the NGO resident staff who coordinates the work and is also a member of the local community.

The entire group of women appears at the NGO to receive their work assignments, instructions and work materials and discuss the deadline. They are free to take their work home to do it there, but also have the possibility of going to the NGO once or twice a week to report progress and chat with other women. Each woman is asked to work on a piece of the same product. When all the team has finished their assignments, the pieces are stitched together to make one big piece, which the NGO displays for sale in an outlet for NGO products.

On average, a table cloth worth EP 1000 (US\$ 180) on the market is a product of the work of five women who put in 4 to 6 hours of work on it every day – including Fridays – for a month or more. As for the women, they each earn an average amount of 100 to 150 EP (US\$ 18-27). Those who are not able to work at full speed or devote the time needed, earn much less. Most of the CSGs engaged in these activities are in their 30s, have children and are married to men who work in both the formal and informal sector. Their husbands earn an average of EP 300 (US\$ 54). While the majority of beneficiaries are CSGs, there were also women of lower educational levels; some had primary schooling only while others could barely read and write.

The opportunity to benefit from NGO services is network-based, and usually not advertised; it goes around by word of mouth (Abdel-Rahman 2007). The CSG beneficiaries in the NGO I visited were mostly recruited by the same man – a senior employee in the NGO who sits in the main office – from among his neighbours and acquaintances. He has now developed a reputation of being the supplier of work for women. He himself is an old graduate of a commercial school, married to a woman of the same educational background who is now a housewife looking after their two teenage boys. As he recruits young women to become beneficiaries of the NGO, he applies the same logic he would have applied to his wife, based on his understanding of the role of married women, what is appropriate for them and what they can realistically do with their level of education.

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Of course they could use their work here to get training and go to the city and work in better places, but this will mean that they return to their homes at 5pm. you have to remember that after all they are mothers and housewives. I am offering them the chance to make money and work, while at the same time not neglecting their houses and families. They can take more courses on knitting and other things and use these skills at home to make money.

The NGO also organises health and legal awareness lectures which beneficiaries appreciated, found them useful and were able to apply what they learned in their life.

The lectures have been very useful. My son was very nervous and had allergy and used to scream and yell a lot. After the lectures, I have been able to deal with him quietly without tantrums. We also learned a lot about women's right and political participation.

CSGs identified with the NGO. At the time I visited, there had been a kerfuffle – a confrontation with the government – over the latter's decision to close the kindergarten section of the NGO for alleged violation of certain rules. The women had been angry and protesting, writing memos to the ministry of social affairs, bringing the matter to the attention of the local community and mobilising them to protest. The management of the NGO appreciated the support it got for this emergency situation, but in general, did not take advantage of women's remarkable potentials and driving force. Primarily they saw themselves as providing an "environment for women to get together to chat and discuss their lives – an outlet to vent an unhappy marriage or a domineering mother in law and alleviate the boredom of being only a housewife", while simultaneously having the opportunity to earn "pocket money" through the needlework they offer them.

But what the NGO really did was contribute to obfuscating women's work and obscuring the economically productive nature of their work. It reinforced a pattern of women's contribution to family income through work which is allegedly not too strenuous and comes naturally to women as it does not require the learning of new skills (Enloe 2000). In this sense it was not real work. The NGO further adds to women's dual burden of combining work with domestic responsibilities. They are pressured by the NGO to perform their "work" without interrupting their

responsibilities as wives and mothers, which is often a tense situation for women to handle. Aisha (32) says:

I feel I am worthless. I feel like a maid at home. I am always running, coming here in a rush and leaving in a rush. When I complain, my mother in law says 'this is your life and you have to learn to live it'. I wish there was a law that prohibited working on Friday. My wish in life was to work in an office or a health bureau to go in the morning and return at noon and sit at a desk. I always wanted to be a secretary. I wanted to sit at a desk and do paper work.

Women have complained that they were often under a great deal of pressure to meet the strict deadlines on their work which sometimes required that they showed up at the NGO frequently to resolve technical problems or learn a new stitch in violation of the principle of flexibility they were promised. This arrangement also required a fair amount of time management and organisation, not to mention of course the skill and accuracy required from each woman to synchronise with other members of the team in order to produce a uniform piece that did not distinguish one woman's stitches from another.

Various authors (see for example Jacka 1996: 152-5) have pointed out how the courtyard economy makes full use of families' existing resources including house space, water and electricity as well as women's presence in the house for unpaid child care. Because they define women's contribution as "no work" because of lack of formal links to the labour market, they justify – also to the women themselves – their appallingly low levels of remuneration. They consider the kind of work done by women as secondary to the primary income of their husband (Wright 2001: 124).

Due to the precarious nature of its own funding, the NGO was keen on allocating all funds into activities or projects rather than towards wages and salaries. On the part of the women, however, even the little income they earned was essential for the running of their households.

The problem of my life is that my husband does not work regularly and we have no insurance. He gives me everything he earns and has nothing else to do with me the rest of the month and sometimes he gives me EP 5 (less than one dollar) or 10 and I manage the household. If I need more money, I have to find a way to get it. I am terrified by the thought.

Moreover, since it was a collective process that depended on several women's input and work pace, they got paid only when the whole prod-

uct was finished which could take months. This again points to the NGO's notion that they were providing women with an (irregular) pocket money that was not essential for their households. But the truth was that women could not afford to earn an irregular income. They needed to feel secure that they had money for emergencies and receive their wages in a timely fashion to meet their financial commitments and emergencies.

One day I was really sick in the middle of the night and it was the end of the month and I could not go to the doctor. My husband said he could go borrow money from his mother, but I said no, an aspirin would do. If I had a fixed salary, this would not have happened. I could stay without work for three months if I am tired. Sometimes we earn EP 100 and 200 pounds and other times, there is no money at all. I would like to have a fixed and regular source of income.

Among all the women I interviewed, this group working with NGOs earned the least income but their expectations were also quite low as they had learned to manage with the little they got and be content with it. At the same time, because it is valuable money that came as a result of hard work, they were cautious about how it was spent.

Sometimes I earn EP 50 to 60 a month but this amount comes in very handy. Sometimes my husband has no money and I use the little I earn to buy things we need. When my husband does not earn enough in his workshop, I bring out the little I have to meet our financial commitments. One time I asked my husband to roll the bobbin for me. Jokingly he said: I will do it, but how much will you pay me? He asked me to buy him a pack of cigarettes. I refused and told him no – this is money that I got after hard work; it better be put into good use.

This kind of work further devalues CSGs education and does not distinguish relatively more educated women from others since it does not require any particular intellectual skills. But more importantly it opens no doors for women to progress in that line of business. Indeed the NGO nurtured the skills that it defined as marketable and helped sustain donors' interest and continued source of funds, but as is the case with cottage industry, this work arrangement creates a sense of dependency on the work supplier. The women involved had developed enough skills that they could set up their own business, but did not have sufficient re-

sources to produce commodities without the assistance of the merchant capitalist – in this case the NGO.

It is too bad that despite what we are learning here, there is no money to do our own project. Any project requires a lot of money and lots of transactions and marketing. The NGO coordinates our work here; each of us does something and we act like one team, but alone we cannot do anything.

Notably this work arrangement also limited women's physical mobility and imposed a sense of stasis and reluctance to go beyond this safe women-only circle that is spatially confined to the NGO premises and to the neighbourhood. Now and again, the women attended workshops in the NGO head-office in the city and this was the only chance when they became aware that they were part of a larger entity and organisational structure. Otherwise, their lives – family, social life, children's schools and work – revolved around their neighbourhoods and they had few opportunities to go beyond them. Among all the CSGs I interviewed, those who worked for this NGO struck me to be the least aware of what was going on in the world outside their neighbourhood. When we chatted about shops, consumer goods and prices, not only did they – understandably – make it clear that they functioned within a particular price range and very tight budgets, but they genuinely did not know that expensive goods existed. Their vision and horizon was quite limited.

#### ***Failure to sustain young women's aspirations***

In contrast to the above, the following story examines a different role played by another NGO: it raised the aspirations of young CSGs but failed to sustain them.

Farida's (See "Fuzzy jobs: secretaries") experience as a secretary in the lawyer's office was especially painful in light of her good previous work experience with a women's NGO and the aspirations it had allowed her to entertain. She was introduced to the NGO when she solicited their help in filing a case of divorce from her husband. After this incident, she became a regular participant in the NGO's activities particularly the weekly seminars organised for young women to enhance their reproductive health knowledge and educate them on women's empowerment. As she continued to frequent the NGO and showed interest in its work, she was recruited as an outreach officer to help raise women's awareness in

other parts of the city. In return for her voluntary services, she received a monthly honorarium of EP 200 (US\$ 36) which became a regular source of income for around one year. With this money, Farida was earning from her work as a volunteer what other CSGs got from “regular” full-time jobs.

Invariably, CSGs working for women’s NGOs were pleased that finally they had real opportunities for professional growth as well as different possibilities to choose from. They learned to develop a sense of respect and dignity from their work. Amina (27) describes how she interacted with a group of businessmen in the context of a study in which she participated as an interviewer for the NGO she was working in

I felt my work was important and conveyed this sense to the man I was interviewing. I gave him the feeling that he was not condescending on me; he will help me but is not doing me a favour. People have to learn to respect you. I gave him the message that (*emphatically*) I was giving *him* the opportunity to participate in an important study and express his opinion, an opportunity that not everyone can have.

In addition to growth opportunities and respectful treatment, CSGs were treated on equal foot with the more educated middle class staff despite their lower educational degree. They were listened to when they had something useful to contribute to discussions

Here in the NGO, we all meet around the table to talk about our work; there is no hierarchy; each of us has something important to say and we all listen to each other. There are no social differences here. We know that our managers are from the upper class, but they do not make us feel different. It was as though it was in their nature to be simple.

Safaa (30) was struck by the informality in the women’s NGO she worked in as a librarian and the general climate of equality that prevailed. Even though she believed social divisions existed in the society at large, her experience with the women’s NGO taught her that class did not matter and its barriers could be broken. In her case, class and gender empowerment came together. Her position towards the veil (*begab*) is illustrative of this point.

Even though the veil has now become the norm among lower middle class women in Egypt and all the young women in my sub-sample of 50<sup>9</sup> Muslim women were veiled except two, young CSGs associated with women’s NGOs articulated a liberal and relaxed view about the veil. This

position was in line with that of their “reference group” (Turner 1964: 360): the university educated middle class founders and senior staff of the NGOs who were predominantly unveiled. In my interviews, the young women made sure to let me know that they were not bound by the veil as other women in their class position were, that they felt they could take it off any time and that for them it had a purely utilitarian function to allow them more secure mobility in and out of their conservative neighbourhoods. Once they were within the familiar and secure confines of their NGO office, they had no qualms about uncovering their hair even in the presence of male colleagues.

However, like other young women who experienced work with NGOs, Farida, Amira, Safaa and others felt let down when their tasks came to an end, mainly due to lack of funds and they joined the ranks of the unemployed. The young women had expected the NGO to be more involved in their lives and help them through the process of securing other jobs that matched the training and skills they had acquired. Safaa says: “I had high expectations because of my work with the [NGO]. I tried to be patient and look for a similar job or something of the same social standing. It was hard for me to go to a lower place”.

Indeed NGOs working in the area of women’s empowerment face the moral and ethical dilemma of their inability to sustain their services to young women on the long run. This, Desai (2002) explains, is related to the broader role NGOs have been playing as a ‘shadow state’ in providing welfare services. They are caught in a bind trying to respond to different needs of women without separating them from each other, with a view to consolidating their empowerment. Their notion is that empowerment cannot be addressed without simultaneously addressing for example, the problems of employment, health and education. While women’s NGOs do help in the short term and become part of their beneficiaries’ lives, they are unable to maintain the interest in the long run as this entails financial and tedious emotional support.

The women’s frustration and feeling that they were dumped resonates well among some NGO staff in Egypt who acknowledge their disappointment and relate it to broader developments within the context of NGOs, the general deterioration of education and changes in the job market. The following quote comes from a senior head of an NGO who has lived in Egypt long enough to observe these broader changes

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When we first started, it was hard to find an employee. People didn't want to work or be involved with NGOs or the private sector. They were suspicious of them, plus jobs were abundant in the public sector. In the beginning we saw ourselves as a manpower development agency; we needed to have more people on board and give them intensive work experience. We brought in more people than we actually needed so we can train them for other organisations to hire. This was the whole idea behind participatory training which we upheld. In the past I was looking for opportunities to bring people into the system. I never had job descriptions. It was more about what can you do to make your life easier and better. We had an obligation to hire some of these people and for years we did not pay attention to educational qualifications. It was all based on their ability and willingness to sell themselves. But then quality of education has gone down and we got to a point where they could not move forward when we introduced computers. Language skills had also started to become important.

NGOs could not continue to support young people due to their own precarious and tight funding situation and their accountability to donors. The latter were often after quantifiable targets and tangible impact. Increasingly, they were less interested in learning about the root causes of problems, as a senior NGO activist said in the following quote

We had a vision in the past because the environment was conducive when it was much easier to incorporate these people into the system and convince donors of your ideas. Donors were more willing then to give you extra funds to develop different levels of people. Now they have become more focused on the results they wanted and don't address the constellation of factors behind a particular issue. Take for example employment. They just want to get people in jobs; but there are reasons why people do not work or do not know how to work and much of it has nothing to do with the skill itself. Sometimes it is the attitude towards work; lack of understanding of why they are there. The whole world of work is something not familiar to young people.

The young CSGs had hoped it would be easy to find secretarial work in other NGOs once they demonstrated the relevance of their previous work experience. Most of them had learned how to draft impressive CVs in which they documented all the events and workshops they participated in. However, they discovered that carrying the title of an NGO did not necessarily mean the organisation was concerned about their personal growth and their rights as employees. Like other informal organisa-



tions, NGOs often did not sign contracts with their employees or provide them with insurance, not to mention the meagre salaries they offered.

Also, young women were critical that some NGOs did not live up to their reputation and did not practice what they preached. Mohga (25) explained to me why she did not approach the international NGO she had done some work for in the past to ask for a job when she needed one

When I first went to the [international NGO], I was intimidated and thought I was going to see something I have never seen before. But I found out that it was nothing but a good décor – a façade. There were good people sitting at their desks but they were not better than me in any way. When I went to deliver the work, I felt that all they wanted was the work – the questionnaires. They did not care how much work I had put into it nor were they interested in the stories I brought back from the field. After delivering the questionnaires, they were not interested in me as a person any more. They did not even give me a cup of tea. Here is the work – here is your money. Bye – bye.

Both Desai (2002) and Goetz (1996) warn about the class and status culture of some NGOs that might include notions that challenge those of the constituency they are trying to serve and even the culture of some of their own employees. They also point to the need to heed the distinction between the aims of the NGOs, the perceptions and capabilities of the staff and the issues facing the beneficiaries they are serving. In actual practice, not all NGOs are in favour of gender and class equality (Goetz 1996). Describing the first job she got in an NGO for the handicapped after her job in a women's organisation, Samira (28) said

I liked my job as a secretary, but I had a hard time. I had assumed that as an NGO they knew better, but they really did not respect the rights of their employees or respect them as they were. They always wanted to change us the way they wanted. My boss, the chief administrator, had always worked in the area of physical training and tourism and did not understand what it meant to work for an NGO. He used to demand that I obey him without discussion, forgetting that in my previous work, I had learned how to debate and discuss. I used to stay after work and explain to him our rights as employees to a dignified treatment.

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Samira was able to articulate what she meant by “dignified treatment” as she elaborated different treatments based on individuals’ educational distinctions

Really the question is how people treat individuals with lower degrees. In our office a person who has no education is treated differently from a person who has a university degree and again different from the technical diploma holders. They could not shout at someone who had a university degree but thought that people with lower degree could be shouted at. In fact they thought that yelling was the only way that worked with people like us and that we would not understand in any other way. This was simply not acceptable to me.

Samira’s statement was confirmed by a male NGO staff member who described his experience working with young men and women with intermediate degrees. His task was to train them to become outreach officers. In the following paragraph, he refers in particular to the young women who came to him from women’s NGOs with more empowering work cultures. He believed these women needed to be disciplined and restrained.

Some of them came to us from other NGOs where they had been completely brainwashed. They speak when they want and want to tell you their opinion about everything. They started to call everybody informally on first name basis. I had to stop all of that. This is not a way to work. They are not used to the notion of rights and duties and tend to forget the latter. (*interviewer: what are these duties?*). Their duties? They have to remember that they do not have university education. When you have a BA, this is a proof that you have acquired a certain respectable culture and life skills. The academic subjects you learn in the university are not the issue; it is the culture that you get there. These kids (CSGs) must take things gradually and you should not open the door for them very large. They have to know how to grow but continue to respect others; they have to know that the ‘the eye cannot rise above the eye-brows’.

## 6.6 Gendered paths: different journeys; same destinations

I mentioned in the Introduction (Chapter 1), that international migration has impacted respondents differently, depending on their work sector, type of work, where they were in their life cycle, and most significantly, their gender. In this section I focus on some young men with commer-

cial school diplomas and their ambitious plans for work and social mobility.

Like other men and women with the same degree, young men shared the dream that migration would open new doors and transform their lives. In some ways, young men's experience is comparable to the older generation of men and women who worked in the public sector in terms of the disappointing outcome of their project. All their experiences – both old and new – reveal some aspects of the weaknesses and limitations of this type of education. In this sense, young men's experience would naturally belong to Chapter 4 with the older generation of women and men, where the discrepancy between dreams and reality was discussed at length.

Fully aware of these areas of similarity, I have, however, chosen to address young men's experience with migration in this chapter in order to make a different point about the situation of young women and men in the informal sector as they navigate without state help and intervention. While all migration experiences have been gendered in some ways, the experience of young men with clandestine migration, with its emphasis on masculinity and adventures has been particularly so. I focus here on the gendered journeys some young men make, but ones that have ironically led them to similar destinations like female CSGs from their own generation, landing in low level and status jobs from which they struggle to break free. In Chapter 7 I continue the story, using the failure of aspirations in unsatisfying jobs to explore gendered perceptions of dignity for young men and women.

We have to remember that men are more evenly represented among the three branches of technical education and constitute the majority in the industrial branch which has been the focus of government discourse and action as well as donor training and employment funds. To that extent, unless government and donor documents specifically mention that they are referring to commercial and/or agricultural education, they are mainly speaking about industrial education, training and job opportunities.

It is likely that young men eventually find their way to employment (Assaad 2010). They do not restrict themselves to jobs within their specialisation and are more mobile and flexible than women. They are active in the area of sales that require physical mobility to market products.

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They are also waiters in fast food chains and the swarming cafes and can be seen on motor cycles delivering fast food and also office helpers.

In recent years, however, illegal migration to European countries has been highlighted as young men's risky path to social mobility.<sup>10</sup> In my interviews with young men, they described undignified jobs as those that constrained their freedom and physical mobility. Masculinity has been their passport to move, to travel, to explore and to take risks. It is somewhat included in the definition of masculinity for men to break away from familial and local attachments and from home in contrast to who did not travel away from home without the protection of a male escort without risking losing her respectability (Enloe 2000: 21-3). In my sample, women travelled for work in the company of their husbands. Only one woman travelled alone to work in Libya and when she settled there, the first thing she did was summon her family to join her, and marry an Egyptian in the Diaspora (see Chapter 7).

In the following paragraphs I examine trajectory of a young man, Adel, aged 25. I use his story to introduce a male-gendered route to social mobility.

When I went to see Adel at the office where he works as office helper, I had to ask around some of his colleagues about him as I only knew his first name and had no other useful information. As I started to give the few details I had of him, they realised I meant "Adel of Italy" and "Adel the migrant". He looked even younger than his age. He wore black trousers and a neat white shirt on. The gel effect on his hair combed to the back gave it a faddish and shiny look. Later on he told me how much he and his male colleagues resisted putting on an office boy uniform at work and that his superiors sympathised with their demand and agreed not to impose on them a special dress code.

Like many young men, Adel's later disappointment for the failure of his migration dream was beyond repair for he had every reason to believe things would go right. After all, he was not the first one to venture into clandestine migration and actually surface on the other side of the Mediterranean and become a successful businessman or professional. Two of his young uncles also with commercial degrees like his had migrated earlier to Italy and are now successful lawyers there. One of them recently obtained his Ph.D. Both uncles come back to the village on holidays glowing with "signs of wealth and cheerfulness" carrying gifts for everybody and the houses they built for their families in the villages are

living testimony of their success. Adel's home-village is well-known for exporting its young men to Europe.

Adel was so impatient to leave the country after obtaining his commercial degree that he did not stay around to even go through his army service. He was introduced to one of the men in the migration business and they agreed to pay him EP 10000 (US\$ 1800) as a down payment and another EP 25000 (US\$ 4500) upon arrival in his new destination. Knowing how important this dream was for Adel and having seen by themselves what migration did to their relatives, his parents sold everything they had including a small piece of land in the village, in order to pay the first amount of US\$ 1800.

He did not much care where he was being transported. Either Italy or Greece or any other country was going to be fine for a destination. But Adel's story is satirical and he was not alone in that. He tried clandestine migration three times without success. The first time he sailed with more than fifty young men like him in a primitive boat from a deserted spot a few kilometres away from the coastal city of Alexandria. After spending three difficult days and nights on the boat, they finally arrived at what they thought was their destination. A few kilometres away from the shore, they were asked to leave the boat and swim to the shore where they would be met by the sailor's partner, only to find out that after spending three days in the sea, the sailor made a full circle and returned back to the same spot they sailed from in Alexandria! Adel did not give up. He and his fellow adventurers went back to the sailor and threatened to take his life if he did not take them to Greece without charging them an extra piaster. The second time they sailed from a different coastal town (Balteem). Only this time, the boat broke down and they landed in a Greek island. The Greek police was there to receive them. They stayed for a week on the island, then were deported to prison in Athens where they were kept in custody for 40 days until the Egyptian embassy arranged for them to go back to Egypt. His last attempt a year ago was again with the same man. They sailed from the same town but were arrested a few hours later while they were still within Egyptian waters by the Egyptian police. They had had no identification cards as the sailor had specifically asked to leave them behind so no one would be able to identify them.

Devastated, Adel had to finally give up and begin to face life in Egypt. Since he made the decision, he has been moving between jobs that he

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could not remember their number. He counted to me only those where he stayed long enough to remember. He now works for a World Bank education-funded project which pays generous wages but without any contracts. He occupies the kitchen with two other male colleagues of the same age and educational status. His main concern now is to work hard so he can return to his parents the money they had lent him to travel, and take full responsibility for the education of his younger siblings so they can finish their general education and go to university and not have to be cornered by the poor prospects and disillusionment of technical schooling.

## 6.7 Conclusion

I demonstrated above that in the last few decades CSGs have faced a much more insecure and varied terrain of employment than did earlier graduates. Most of CSGs' occupational movements have been of a horizontal rather than vertical nature; the jobs they exchange are alike in terms of low pay, lack of human capital, skills and opportunities for growth. They have been wading through thick treacle and their advancement has been slow and full of struggles. A combination of conventional and new types of jobs has increasingly been identified with women from the commercial stream requiring the performance of work that is both classed and gendered. Most of the closures and negotiations take place along the manual/non-manual divide.

Although each woman had a unique experience, they all functioned within the same framework of class and gender constraints. Not only did public patriarchy of the labour market keep CSGs subordinated in the ghetto of sex-typed low level jobs, but they were also forced to adhere to specifically prescribed gender and class roles. In some organisations their performance was regulated and the expression of their emotions checked. They got fired because by their sheer presence as sexual subjects, they threatened the masculine "orderly procedures" of their organisations (the case of "office helpers"; see also see Acker 1990: 151). In other work settings women were forced to engage in emotional labour which often meant restraining their frustration with what they perceived was humiliating treatment and an expression of rigid status structures (working in shops). In a third case, they were expected to abide by norms of social hierarchies, despite their gender empowerment and critical approach to social issues (young women working in NGOs). These

contestations were played out on the manual/clerical job divide. A CSG could only become a secretary if she combined with her clerical work the job of a maid. And because a woman who cleans is a woman who does a “traditional” and “natural” job, then cleaning was not a skill for which she was expected to be remunerated (Enloe 1990: 162). Many CSGs carried to their work places the “unpaid family labour” legacy for which women are not rewarded.

The vignettes point to status rigidity in the Egyptian social structure. There has been an implicit understanding that CSGs have a specific social position in which they were expected to remain. Dominating groups – employers and clients – have used direct and “elementary forms of domination to produce and reproduce conditions of domination” and through “socially recognised” symbolic violence ensured submission (Bourdieu 1977: 190). This explains the reaction of shop sellers who understood that when clients went through merchandise, they were trying to degrade them, or the reaction of the NGO staff member interpreting a young woman’s desire to speak up and grow in her job as an attempt to go beyond the “natural” limits, for which he used the analogy of the impossible movement of the eye going above the eye-brows. Bourdieu (1977: 169) elaborates that the struggle here is about “the imposition of the dominant systems of classification”.

On the other hand, we should also recognise the opportunities the informal sector has provided. Because work relationships in the informal sector do not function under the institutionally-sanctioned written rules, they enable personal expressions of moral responsibility towards employees. We have seen that that the male management that got rid of Doaa (office helper) and her colleagues, was the same management that brought her back after providing new work arrangements for her. They were not offering her a good job, but they were concerned that she should be able to survive and continue to support her family. Also, the same school principals who hired CSGs on informal basis to become bus attendants or assistant teachers often twisted the bureaucratic rules to allow them to benefit from the same pecuniary and other advantages of regular staff. Many of these gestures remind us that in the present economy, people are not always independent, individualist and calculating beings (Godelier 1999, 12). They also remind us of “gifts” in the sense used by Mauss that represent acts of solidarity and superiority at the same time, but in general help maintain the status quo.

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Beneria (2001) and Pearson (1998) have cautioned that although the neo-liberal market has reinforced the precariousness of women's work conditions, the fact that women are now employed in various sectors might enhance their presence in the public space and increase their empowerment. Indeed informality has created spaces of movement and negotiation where CSGs question attempts at subordination. Doaa, the office helper, was able to negotiate with the same management a different job description that would keep her away from the degrading work of the kitchen and the company of her male colleague that she resented. The example of NGOs and their inability to sustain their support to female CSGs raises questions about their role in Egypt's new political economy, but the fact remains that it was through work in some NGOs that women learned to question their social position and used their work experience there to reflect on how to push their case and educate management of other NGOs about their rights and expectations. Not only has Nashwa been trapped in the future-less shop assistant line of work, but she also has to resist being treated as a commodity and quit her job after making the point that poverty is not synonymous to treachery and stealth.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Several of these bureaus are currently evaluated to gauge their impact in matching supply with demand. A recent ILO report indicated that they are underused as only 10 percent of the job applicants solicit their assistance and the majority search for jobs using the help of friends, family members, relatives and acquaintances (El Zanaty 2007: 20). Moreover, findings also showed that technical school graduates have not been among the main beneficiaries of the new employment bureaus services.

<sup>2</sup> If no examinations are required for the position, then the criteria are: the highest qualifications (university or institute or technical school), the highest academic scores, seniority of graduation and age seniority. If on the other hand an examination is required, then the highest academic scores are replaced by results in the job competition (Interview with Safwat El Nahhas, The Central Agency for Organisation and Management, October 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Richards (1992: 24)) says that the message would have been much clearer if the government had simply abolished the guarantee. By leaving it on the books, the government remains responsible for the employment of graduates. This



illustrates the “continuing inefficiencies created by maintaining government responsibility for the employment of university graduates”.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s calculations.

<sup>5</sup> Unemployment was 11.7 percent in 1998 and dropped to 8.3 percent in 2006 (Assaad 2009: 20).

<sup>6</sup> Workers demonstrated again in the spring of 2010 to increase the minimum wage level to EP 1200 (\$218) (See Abdel-Fattah 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Many Egyptians do not distinguish the P from the B and it is quite common to hear one say “beoble” instead of “people” and “prother” instead of “brother”.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Mies (1998) claims that there is a strong relation between capitalism and patriarchy in which women’s work is the main actor. She states that capitalism exploits women’s work through the functioning of the patriarchal system that defines women’s work as house work or subsistence work and therefore not economically gainful. Women’s work is not counted for the in the cost of production, which leads to the accumulation of capital.

<sup>9</sup> In my sub-sample of 55 women, five were Christian Copts and 50 Muslims.

<sup>10</sup> In *Omarek Yakoubian*, Al Aswany delineates gendered paths of social mobility for three of the lead characters: a young man, and two young women who studied in commercial schools. Whereas Taha, the man, took the adventurous masculine path of Islamic *Jihad*, the two women left their jobs and settled down as housewives after marrying two inappropriate but rich men (See Al Aswany, 2004).

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## 7

## The Interplay Between Marriage and Employment

### 7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I return to the paradox with which I began this thesis – the continuing importance of commercial education for working-class women in Cairo despite the poor prospects of employment they confront. Literature on Egypt suggests that women's education may improve their marriage prospects. At the same time, the central propositions in the early literature on social mobility indicate that 1) marriage is central to women's social mobility and 2) there is an inverse relationship between marriage and employment – that the latter obstructs women's career through work interruption and lowering of occupational ambitions, in addition to the difficulty of re-entering the job market after marriage.

I alluded in the methodology (Chapter 1) that it was the interplay between marriage and employment, and not marriage per se, that promised to inform our knowledge of CSGs experience. In Chapters 3 and 4 I demonstrated that while the older generation of women in the public sector married men of their own educational and social level, it was not unlikely to marry men above their social level. I also indicated that this trend has been changing. Younger women had a realistic view of the limits of their social position and doubted that marrying upwards could take place. They were ready to marry below their educational level so long as men could assume financial responsibility for their families. Previous literature on Egypt has shown that in such a case, young women were willing to work only until they collected money for their trousseau but their plan was to stay at home after marriage and become housewives.

In this chapter I examine how the above scenario is played out in the life of young women today. It attempt to find out how the experience of CSGs sheds light on the above propositions. I focus here on the marital/intra-household level to understand why and how young women who

started their married life as housewives joined the labour market at a later stage. The questions I wish to address are: What prompted their decision to join the labour market? How conducive have their marriage arrangements been to social mobility? Does employment become an alternative strategy for social mobility? I examine here the only case of potential upward social mobility through marriage that I encountered in my study. This case confirms younger women's statement that marriage does not enhance women's social status. It also highlights the importance of personal dignity in marriage, something that young women also referred to.

## 7.2 Is marriage a route to social mobility?

### 7.2.1 Incompatible marriage: Process and implications

As indicated in Chapter 5, the overwhelming majority of women in the public sector sample married men with similar background: with intermediate education and similar government jobs. I demonstrated how their occupational and social mobility was delimited by the contours drawn by the structures and rules of their government jobs and the status bestowed upon them as government employees. However, as we distance ourselves from this group and move out of government careers, the picture becomes more varied. Most of the women outside the public sector married men of similar working class family background, but the noticeable change has been that the latter were of lower educational status and were in some cases illiterate.

Indeed in my sample it was rare for CSGs to marry men with university degrees or a higher social background than their wives. The choice of a marriage partner from one's own social level has been buttressed by the conviction that well-educated and well-off middle class men will only marry women from their social background. In this context, one of the respondents said: "A man from the middle class will never propose to a woman with a commercial degree unless he knows that she has money or a job that brings money or he has to be in love with her. If he does not love her, there is no reason to overlook the money".

Nabila (35) got turned down twice by men with university degrees because of her diploma and even though in her case, her father still insisted that she waited until a suitable and well educated man proposed, she has decided to marry the next man who proposes regardless of his academic or social qualifications. Unlike the father, Nabila and her fe-

male members of the family, mother and aunts, were more realistic about her chances as a woman in her mid 30s with a diploma and a modest job as a bus attendant to find an educated middle class husband. But even then, it was not easy to find an appropriate husband. Nabila complained that men proposing to her were much younger and had no financial resources. She realised that younger men would count on the probability that older women would not be too demanding given their despair and desire “not to miss the train of marriage”. At the same time, men would still be able to rely on an older wife’s financial support as they begin their own practical lives.

Nabila did not want to end up being a spinster. She and the female members of the family were putting pressure on her father to persuade him to let her marry a driver, a widow with three children who she liked. She said: “My mother begged him to let me marry him and now she has left the house and gone to stay with her brother to punish him for his obstinacy. My aunts also keep on reminding him that I am getting old and there will not be many more men proposing again”.

My interviews have demonstrated that the increasing delay in age of marriage and the inability of young people to afford its costs has eased patriarchal grips; it has made families less stringent about the financial conditions they set on their daughter’s prospective partners, and more lax about their educational compatibility. In fact, my interviews indicated that in their despair to get married, women often made imprudent decision in a rush. Respondents told stories about how men concealed from their brides and their families some critical facts and the latter were not perseverant to inquire about them. For example, several respondents said that until they got married, they did not know what their husbands’ occupation or educational degree exactly was. They also did not know that the men had some risky personal habits of drinking or consuming drugs or second wives. In an extreme case, a participant said that her husband had indeed told her family that he was married before and had two children, but when she went to his home after their wedding, she found out that they were five not two children. Laughingly, however, she said she did not think two or five children made any difference.

A sizeable number of women were married to men who had no secure jobs. Often husbands had one or two limited skills that they could not market for remunerative work. For example, several husbands were trained as drivers, but because they were not educated enough to obtain

a license, have been unable to pursue this line of work or could only do so within limited geographical scope and within particular hours for fear of being arrested. Others were married to uneducated factory workers who did not have long term work contracts or to low level employees in the public sector who were laid off within the privatisation scheme and given an end of service bonus which they invested in some projects that did not succeed.

The typical scenario was that a husband would have a job at the time of marriage, and life would be relatively stable in financial terms for a few years. The wife would bear a child or two, the husband loses the job or gets laid off and the family is in a bad financial situation. Many women explained that debts started to accumulate as husbands sought to have their own business which often failed after having borrowed large sums of money to establish it. Several women explained how they sold their gold or furniture to pay husbands' debts and make ends meet as the latter became unemployed and their financial contribution decreased remarkably. A typical statement was: "He gives me EP 5 (less than US\$ 1) in the morning and has nothing to do with us the rest of the day." In some cases husbands' unemployment seemed voluntary to their wives as when Sayeda (42) sarcastically remarked that no job was good enough for her husband: "My husband is a very proud man. He is not ready to do any work if he does not like it even if it means staying at home for months. He is happy to sit in the coffee shop for four or five hours playing backgammon. Often I had to get him from the coffee shop at 2am."

Most women went out in search of a job to prevent the imminent downward mobility of their family and most importantly, to sustain their children's schooling. Fatma (40) describes below why she had to go out to work and the negotiations that finally resulted in taking that step. Initially, her husband resisted, but finally gave in.

I begged my husband to let me work so we would at least be able to pay our daughter's school fees. He was reluctant because he was worried about neglecting our daughter and my inability to reconcile work with home which is true. I told him that if I got tired I would stay. At the same time, he was fed up when in the middle of the month he would find that he had no money for us.

A few women decided to work after years of domesticity, but not out of dire financial need. In this case, in agreement with their husbands,

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their decision to work came to complement the latter's income and help achieve a family project such as building a house or moving into an independent marital flat. In such cases, women's work was of a utilitarian and ad hoc nature and was discontinued as soon as the purpose was achieved. Seham (34) describes her and her husband's desire to move into a new flat and explains how they worked out their finances after adding in her contribution and the help they received from their families

I worked so we can move into our own flat and become independent. I sold all my gold and we paid our rent from it. In the meantime, we are building our own one-storey house. My husband took a loan at work and I told him I will have to go out to work. Mother said she would take care of my daughter and she and my father buy my grocery and food: oil, sugar and butter. From my salary we paid up the loans for the house and also for water and electricity in the flat where we temporarily lived. My husband used to keep EP 50 (less than US\$ 10) from his salary for his cigarettes and transportation. He gave me EP 50 which was too little and I had to sacrifice a lot of our needs.

In the majority of the other cases where women worked to save their family from a serious demotion, they continued to work well beyond the actual incident that pushed them out, as will be described below.

### 7.2.2 The difficult balance: Work appropriateness, status as married women and financial need

In the job search process, married CSGs are not mindful of their status as carriers of an academic degree. Their main concern is to fill the gap between family income and expectations of household members. If they worked for a short time before marriage to save for the trousseau, they would try to go back to the same job after marriage. However, the concern now was whether the job was dignified enough for their status as married women.

Appearances are of high importance in women's work. Even with their recognition that they were pushed to the labour market because of husbands' indolence, their work should have no implications on the apparent masculinity and respectability of the husband and his image as a provider for his family (see Rugh 1985b: 278-284). However, this is sometimes not easy to conceal. Awatef (32) had a job as a bus attendant which she had been doing before she got married and went back to it

after her husband got laid off from his factory. What bothered her most about her job were the comments made by her male neighbours as they saw her leaving her house very early in the cold and dark winter days while they were on their way to perform dawn prayer in the mosque. She would hear them sarcastically saying “the women are going out and their husbands are sleeping warmly in bed!” Awatef found her image as a toiling wife who left her snug bed to go to work while her husband was lazily hanging around the house quite painful and she could not wait for the day when she could quit her job, which was otherwise quite satisfactory.

In making decisions about work, Rugh (1985b) states that women are mindful to balance a number of considerations including what the community regarded to be a proper job that did not entail immorality. Prostitution is obviously banned but so are other jobs that require night service such as waitresses in hotels and nightclubs. Beyond that, there is a general consensus that any job is a good job as long as it is *halal* (religiously legitimate). Lamis (28) said: “I do anything that is *halal* to get money. I do make-up for women, I sew clothes. If a woman needs help to wash her carpet, I help her and get paid a few pounds”. Clerical work is not particularly sought if it is not remunerative and often it is not. Hosnia (35) moved between various jobs when she decided to join the labour market after marriage. One of these was as a secretary in an advertising agency. She worked there for a year after which the owner of the business suddenly disappeared without any notice leaving no money to pay the employees. The owner of the flat suggested to divide up the furniture among the employees so that each got a couple of chairs and some tables. This was all she could get in terms of financial settlement. Since that incident, Hosnia has been focusing more on jobs that paid higher wages, which in her particular neighbourhood, happened to be in factories and small shops.

While it is understood that married CSGs who sought work outside the government are undoubtedly driven by financial reasons, excessive financial need that forced them to take on low status job, for example as domestic maids, should not be made obvious. This explains why women who worked as maids usually paid special attention to the propriety of their physical appearance and neatness of their dress so they would project the dignified look of a secretary or clerk and not be perceived as domestic servants. Young looking women often carry books or a briefcase in order to confirm the office-work image. Older women reported

that they managed to hide even from their own husbands the fact they worked as maids. And yet, they are so self conscious and concerned with concealment that they themselves often wonder if the reality of their work is not too obvious to everyone else. Hayam (29) says: "Sometimes I feel that everybody knows about my work but do not want to embarrass me. I personally feel that all the women on the street are maids just like me."

Despite women's concern with balancing financial need with public image and status, my interviews were pointing to more profound changes in the gender order within the marital house. Kandiyoti (1988: 283) states that women's "bargains with patriarchy", results in their acceptance of the established normative and patriarchal order as it allows them to claim protection "in exchange for submissiveness and propriety." Bibars (2001: 154-5) explains that as women became the main income earners and as men no longer fulfilled their traditional roles as breadwinners and failed to uphold their part of the gender contract, a new gender order has evolved in which women no longer owed men submission and obedience. My interviews showed that with women's entry into the labour market after marriage, men were in fact less concerned about their self image vis a vis their wives. Repeatedly women said that they went about doing their business finding work and any plausible source of income while their husbands turned a blind eye to their endeavours "My husband does not ask me about anything. He never asks me where I am going or where I am coming from. One day I bought a living room and a new carpet. I asked him: Won't you ask me where I got them from, he said no, it was not his business".

### ***Work at the cost of exploitation***

When married women go out to work they have a clear understanding of what kind of constraints they will be encountering as married women. It is understood that they would face attempts at exploitation and their ability to negotiate favourable work terms would be challenged. As they look for work, they are aware that they need to pay the price of years spent at home or in child rearing and being cut off from the labour market. This happens even if they had had significant prior years of work experience, for example in factories, and their skills and speed at work was not affected by the passage of time. They realise they have to deal with continuous threats of being fired as well as attempts to reduce their



wages or relegate them to simple and redundant tasks. In kindergartens where CSGs worked as bus attendants or assistant teachers, there was a visible difference in how the management handled married and unmarried women. Invariably, it was the latter who were rebellious, troublesome and critical of the management's work decisions. With married women, on the other hand, there has been a tacit understanding that they would be treated kindly and not be required to do unpaid overtime work as long as they did not challenge decisions or ask for more money.

Maha (36) is typical of this latter group. She is married, has two children and long years of experience in kindergartens. She has been working in the same kindergarten for four years and now earns EP 400 (US\$ 73) only. She explained that every time staff had one of their periodic meetings with the school management, the principal made sure to remind CSGs that they had to "mind their social limits" and not demand more rights. Yet, the principal also made sure to explain to the more senior married women that her anger was not directed at them and that she "really appreciated their quiet and non participation in the discussions". Maha's work colleagues tell her that with her long years of experience she can find a better paying job somewhere else, but like many women in her situation, she is not ready to risk not finding another job at her age and with her numerous financial responsibilities. She is aware of the attempts to put her down, but is still grateful for the management's 'special' treatment. She is willing to continue to honour the terms of their agreement and not ask for rights, such as bringing her own children to school and enjoying substantial reduction or fees or tuition waivers, typically granted to middle class teachers.

Nonetheless, some women were able to negotiate successfully and "usurp" what they identified as their rights or the maximum they could get from the system. Aisha (34) was pregnant in her second child when she went out to work in the familiar neighbouring factories where she had several casual jobs before marriage. She was able to use the presence of a large number of factories in the neighbourhood and the considerable competition between them to her own favour; she found herself a good place to work. Under her heavy veil and wide-fitting dress she managed to conceal her pregnancy from the factory management while arduously negotiating her wage and hierarchy through the system. With persistence, after she revealed her pregnancy towards the very end of her term, she even managed to obtain social and medical security coverage

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which guaranteed her a free delivery and three months maternity leave in accordance to the labour law. After the delivery, she decided to stay at home and did not return to work. But Aisha was clearly walking on a tight rope. She paid a high price for her contrivance as she had to keep a very regular work schedule and appeared at her machine every day till literally the morning of her delivery, which was not easy for a pregnant woman to do.

### 7.2.3 Marriage constraints cancel out job rewards

For some women, what started out as work out of necessity or distress eventually opened new possibilities and became rewarding as a source of status and income. However, the joy and rewards they sometimes found in their work and the promise they had for professional advancement came at the high cost of multiple and conflicting responsibilities. Despite their success at work, they only worked with half their mind. The other half and much of their energy was devoted to handling an unemployed husband who sat at home and stirred trouble, or spent all their time in coffee shops sipping tea and playing cards, or squandering the wife's savings in personal enterprises that were not carefully planned. A good number of the married respondents were abandoned by their husbands going after other women or taking second wives which meant that CSGs spent a good part of their time in courts trying to force their husbands to pick up their financial responsibility towards their children as well as other marital obligations.

Salma (40) for example, went to work at the age of 33 in order to support her own siblings' education against her husband's will and his reluctance to contribute to that. He continued, however, to be responsible for their own children's education and in that sense, her work was not essential for the survival of her own conjugal family. However, when she later on got divorced, she continued to work but this time in order to support not only her siblings but also her two children. Her husband took another wife and decided not to contribute to their maintenance anymore.

Salma never imagined that she would have two jobs at the same time which she would enjoy. With her commercial diploma she was able to find a job as a clerk in a nearby school at a salary of EP 240 (US\$ 44) and because she had worked for a short time in a pharmacy before marriage and nursed her sick mother for a long time before she died, she also

knew how to give injections and worked in the afternoon in a private hospital. Her responsibilities as a single mother towards her children were at times difficult to handle. For some time she had to interrupt her work in order to look after them and during that time she cleaned vegetables and sold them to the school teachers and other employees in her neighbourhood to make money. When I met Salma, she had made a good name and reputation in the hospital where she worked and was getting offers to work for a higher pay in other places. But she was happy to remain where she was. It is true that her work was exhausting, but she had a stable routine that she did not want to disrupt. Instead of taking another job, she decided to use those offers to negotiate a salary increase and a more flexible work schedule that she adjusted to the needs and schedules of her children.

However, in a society that gave little recognition to the value of their contributions as mothers, CSGs realised that they may work as hard as they can but the status of the children was in the final analysis always attributed to their father (see the case of Mohamed in Chapter 5). Samah, (38) who worked to support her three children after her separation from their father, told me that when asked about their new clothes or toys, her children always said “mother bought them”. However, the kids were repeatedly told by family and friends that it was wrong to say mother bought them and had to say instead that father did. Samah’s close friends explained to her that if it became known that she was fully in control of her money and resources, it would invite greed and interest of other men. But in her heart Samah knew that no matter what she did for her children, it was their father who gave status to the family.

#### 7.2.4 Maintaining dignity within an undignified job

Dignity is defined as “...the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others” (Hodson 2002: 3). It includes a subjective and a relational sense of worth with the latter emanating from interaction with others. The definition of dignity is a social and cultural construction embodied in the Egyptian case by the concept of *Welad Nass*. In the next paragraphs I will examine how relational expressions of respect (or lack thereof) affect CSGs’ sense of self worth.

As mentioned in the Introduction, dignity was not part of the vocabulary of CSGs who worked in the public sector since, as elaborated in Chapter 4, their dignified status as government employees had been en-

sured and they did not need to struggle to realise it. Unlike those, young CSGs – both males and females – outside the formal sector, often spoke about the degradation involved in the job search. They also spoke of loss of dignity or fear of losing it on the job.

Sabah (26) graduated from commercial school and found informal work in a small garment factory. She would have liked to find office work, but could not afford to take her time to look for one as her parents indicated that they would not be able to contribute to her trousseau and that it was her job to do so. She worked for three months in a garment factory, but the pay was little and she moved to a sugar factory for a higher pay. She worked there for six months, after which she got married and stayed at home. Her husband was illiterate. He was not able to maintain a proper well-paying job. As they already had two children at school, Sabah had to look for a job. She went back to her father and asked him for her school certificate so she can start looking for work, but he refused, reminding her that he married her off so she could be the responsibility of another man. “What use was your marriage then if he cannot support you?” her father asked.

She tried several factory jobs that required no academic credentials and finally followed her friend’s advice and worked as a maid in an up-market neighbourhood in Cairo. She leaves her home at 7am, gets back at 8pm and earns EP 700 (US\$ 127), double the amount she would have earned in the factory had she stayed there. She cooks and cleans the house, feeds the children when they come back from school and looks after them until their parents return from work.

Sabah’s work was quite exhausting especially since she had to repeat it when she returned to her own home. She says “I go there to clean and cook and come home to clean and cook. I leave my daughter with the guard of the kindergarten before it opens, and then I pick her up after sunset on my way home. Sometimes I take her to my mother and so instead of paying the nursery I pay my mother.” And yet, according to her, physical exhaustion is bearable if compared to what Sabah describes as undignified and humiliating treatment that derides her education.

I am constantly reminded of my poor social standing. Earlier, I used to sleep over at their place. In the beginning they told me they would have a room for me, but then I found out that it was a mattress in a closed off balcony. I was pregnant then and it meant that I had to carry the mattress every morning and every night and that I had to go to bed after they all

did. But what hurts me most, is when their children, who are the age of my own children, call me 'girl' *بيا بت* or by my first name. When they speak English – and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the time they do – I feel left out and immediately think that perhaps they are talking about me. Well, that is the problem of our educational system – if I had learned good English, I would have understood what they were saying. They often tell me that my diploma is worthless and that I can barely read and write.

Above all, what distresses Sabah most is that by accepting to be a domestic worker, she has now been derailed from a respectable job path; she does not see how any employer would ever agree to hire a former domestic servant as a secretary. She says:

I am growing older and losing my health. It is cold and water is too cold and I am tired. I want to have a respectable and well-defined job with fixed hours. Not working at all is no longer possible, but I want a job in which I would not be disparaged *مرماطون* and would not entail demoralisation *بهذلة*. But how will I find it? I have not learned anything to compete with and there are others who have just graduated and cannot find work and those working in offices do not want to leave their positions and if they do, they make sure their children take over.

Also crucial for Sabah is that because she was not proud of her work, she did not talk about it to anyone – not to her neighbours but certainly not to her children. She is concerned that her children have friends at school who brag about their parents' occupations and that neither her husband who does not have a job, nor she with her undignified occupation, can contribute much to instilling any sense of pride in their children. By not discussing her work, Sabah believes she is protecting her dignity, which now extends to become the dignity of the entire family, especially the children. She says: "I cannot tell my neighbours that this is where I work in order to protect my and my children's dignity."

Like many women in similar situations of having been pushed to accept low level jobs that are not commensurate to their school degrees, married CSGs feel that they were especially let down by their marriage and the inability of their husbands to shield them from the vagaries of life and the uncertainty and degradation of the labour market. Sabah used this constraint to impose her conditions. She puts the blame of her misfortune on her husband and makes sure to remind him time and again that because of his indolence and sluggishness she has to go

through this ordeal and experience loss of dignity every day. Her way of retaliating against her husband's input to her degradation was to control her income.

My husband does not ask me about the money I earn from my work. To have to accept this demoralising and undignified work, I had to set the rules before I left home: If I am to work as a maid to support the family, he should not ask me for money and I will never use my money to pay for his cigarettes.

While some married CSGs reluctantly accept undignified work as a survival strategy for the entire family, others insist on conceding their financial want in order to maintain self respect and ward off humiliation. Nagat (32), for example, had an informal job as a typist in a small firm. She joined it after she got married to help with house expenses which her husband could not handle alone. However, she had hoped that her financial need would not have to appear in the picture. After all, she was a competent employee and the quality of her work was comparable to that of her university graduate colleagues in the firm. She was fast and accurate in Arabic typing and could also type in English, though she did not know the language. Things fared well for Nagat and her good work continued to be appreciated until one day a more senior male colleague decided he wanted to get rid of her and replace her by his fresh-graduate niece. Following an argument during which she confronted him about his schemes, he raised his hand to slap her and before he could do that, she picked up a chair and hit him on the head.

For Nagat this incident epitomised the perfect intersection of gender and class injustice. She realised that the assault on her dignity was at once an attack against her as a woman and as a poor person. Her reaction was in response to these two injustices. It was important for Nagat to show that her financial need was not going to compromise her dignity

This was a very important job for me and I was supposed to cherish it. God only knows how important it was for me and my husband. It was just beginning to open up new horizons for me. We had finally started to consider leaving this wretched neighbourhood where we lived to a new flat in a better location. But I had to protect my dignity. I told him if he ever thought to touch me I would break his arm. Then I stormed out of the office and never came back. How can I allow anyone to slap me? Just because I am a poor فقيرة woman? It is very important to show people that

you do not need the money they give you and that money will not be a reason to humiliate you.

Nagat has no children but insists that her position would not have changed even she had children. She was unhappy that her husband did not wholeheartedly support her course of action. But they both continued to live on his limited income for years until she managed to find another job as a secretary in a physician's clinic. In the meantime, they put all their plans, including moving out into a new flat, on hold.

### ***Masculine conceptions and norms of dignity***

The perception and articulation of dignity has a nuanced gender content. Unlike women who largely suffer privately, young men find it difficult to accept jobs that restrict them to private and narrow spaces, which they find enslaving in the sense of restricting their freedom and physical mobility. Several men complained about their jobs as security guards according to which they were required to remain "in their places and not move". Adel (27), had a well-paying job as a security guard in one of the upper class walled and gated communities, where he was specifically told that "each of these residents' life cannot be valued in money and it was his job to ensure that they were safe and secure". He was also told that if he wanted to earn a living in that place, he was to "glue" himself to the security kiosk. Adel resented that the job reified him as a free and dignified human being, but was also bewildered at the employing firm's heightened concern with what to him seemed as "unjustified" need to secure the lives of the "rich", which to him, like the life of everybody else, was ultimately in God's hands, not his.

Other jobs that challenged men's dignity were those that have traditionally been the domain of males but were now increasingly recruiting women (See Chapter 5 – "office helper"). For example, male CSGs saw jobs that restricted their presence to the kitchen and required them to share it with women too stigmatising and undignified. They saw them as a survival strategy type of work that has in recent years been associated with women. Karim (32), he was desperately trying to find another job that would keep him out of the office kitchen which he shared with an elderly woman and constantly reminded him of places for "individuals with special needs."

Often men addressed an implicit plea to employers – which resonated well among the latter – to understand the large gap between their aspirations on one hand and objective reality on the other and that they would not have accepted to take up a menial job if they were not forced to do so. When they asked to be treated with dignity, men asked for “a *spirit* of fraternity and equality”, that would make them feel they were doing their (menial) work out of their own free will, even as they were aware that they were in no way socially equal to their employers. Nabil (27) says:

When people treat me kindly, I feel psychological comfort, even when it is an order to do something, I feel I am doing it at my own free will. Men in the office treat me as their brother, as a colleague, as a friend and the more senior people treat me like their child. Even if my work situation does not improve, I am happy here. In the morning when they arrive, they come to me in the “buffet” and say: good morning Nabil, how are you today?” The most important thing is their manners. It is true they are the managers and I am an office boy, but the most important thing that I take care of my job and work as God has ordained us. Treatment is so good here that I feel like I am sitting at a desk in the office just like them. For me it is enough that they stand up to greet me when I walk into their office carrying their coffee in the morning.

### 7.3 Cross class marriages in the context of migration

With only one exception, none of the respondents married upwards. Ayat (56) is the only woman who married above her social class and even though in terms of age she does not fall within the group of young women, her case speaks directly to the propositions raised in the early literature on the role of marriage in social mobility and also illuminates my critique (see Chapter 1) that social class is not synonymous to income levels or occupational groupings but is mainly about social status.

Ayat met her husband, Hisham (62) in the Diaspora in the early 80s when each left Egypt with many other men – and few women – in search of livelihood in the aftermath of the launch of the Open Door policy and political and economic liberalisation. Ayat was an ambitious young woman at that time who had just finished commercial school and her aim was to work in Libya, earn money and bring her family composed of parents and five siblings to the country so they can all work and live there.



In Libya, through the Egyptian community, she met Hisham, an upper middle class male university graduate who also left Egypt in search for work. The class differences between the two were very large. He descended from a prestigious family with impeccable tradition in the military establishment. She on the other hand had a working class background and a father who, because of gambling and drinking habits, lost most of his clients in the dress making business, and a mother who had to take up small jobs in factories and sweat shops to raise her children.

Against all odds, and after severe opposition from Hisham's family, they got married. When they got back from Libya, Ayat considered various jobs. At the time the market was open and jobs were abundant. She finally settled in a government clerical position which she got through her husband's family connections. When I met her, she was getting ready for early retirement. He, on the other hand, took up a job in the advertising department of a leading newspaper and has already retired. They have three children and four grandchildren.

However, until this point in their lives, and although things seemed to have fared relatively smoothly, marriage did not break social barriers between them. Particularly for Ayat, it has been a struggle to learn to live a middle class life and get accepted in a social milieu that was not hers. It meant that she, and to a large extent her own family, had to unlearn their working class habits before they could learn new ones. It started with simple things that they never questioned like their eating habits and physical appearance.

Eating with a fork and a knife for me was a very strange thing. In Libya my family and I had already learned to each eat from our own plates. In our social milieu, eating with a fork and a knife was already a very unusual thing. People ate by sitting on the floor to a low table *طبلية* from the same common plate I never plucked the hair from my eye brows until I married Hisham. Where I came from, girls did not do that kind of thing.

When they relocated to Cairo Ayat came face to face with her husband's social life and milieu. Like the working class women described by Skeggs (1997a: 91), she read herself as a "classed" woman

Everything shocked me, even the smallest details. Where I come from, for example, when there is mourning, women took off all their jewellery, covered their hair and dressed very plainly. Oppositely, in my husband's family when his father died, I was surprised to see that women put on their

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best clothes and jewellery, and bragged about it. It was a fashion show not mourning. It also finally sank in my head that there were clothes for the bed room and other clothes to receive guests and things to wear when you went out.

Ayat had to find herself an ally in the middle class in whom she could confide and who could help her understand her husband's life and fit in it. The most obvious two women who could have played that role- her mother and sister in law – had boycotted her in protest against social incompatibility. Other family members were indifferent and only a few sympathised with her dilemma.

I got along only with the few kind people in his family. I used to like to spend time with my friend Heba's mother. She was a very chic and proper lady and she gave me good advice and corrected my behaviour and style without embarrassing me. I learned from her how to be a *hanem* (a lady). In the beginning when I had to deal with Hisham's family, I was nervous then things got a little better. You sit with them and you learn quietly and try to take from them whatever you can. You pick up words and styles. If you are not confident you are lost because it is always difficult for someone who is not originally from that milieu.

Although she made some progress, Ayat had to understand her 'sense of limits' and what she could realistically achieve. She gradually understood that she was never going to "pass" as middle class (Ibid). She knew she was too odd for that family and her differences were obvious to everyone. She was the only CSG in her husband's family and the only people with this degree were their domestic servants. All her husband's family were university graduates and some studied abroad. All of them spoke English and French fluently as the languages of their growing up and socialisation. However, they were not necessarily intellectual or well read, particularly in Arabic literature. Ayat decided not to pursue foreign languages and knew she was not going to pass muster as after many years, she still could not tell the difference between English and French. On the other hand, she tried to find herself a niche. She became an avid reader of Arabic novels and literary works. "I read any piece of paper I could lay my hands on. I thought that at least my intellectual level should be superior."

Ayat contrasted her inability to be classy to her husband's complete ease with this life – the confident simplicity of attitude and conduct

which had impressed their common friends in Libya and encouraged them to proceed with the match-making with Ayat. He has always kept his upper class tenets while retaining a sympathetic – and revolutionary (in the case of his marriage to Ayat) attitude towards the lower classes. It was this attitude that allowed him to adjust to less auspicious changes and work conditions when they returned to Cairo. He found a job which required that he mixes with low level workers and sit and eat with them. As a member of the middle class he did not need to pass. Like fish in water, he did not have to make any effort to gain cultural and other capitals and was therefore less concerned with manifesting his class, which spoke for itself (Ibid). Ayat was particularly impressed by his relaxed attitude about some of their rough patches when it came to financial matters. His cultural and social capital spoke for him and he did not have to prove anything to anyone. Those who could judge his acts were of no social power (Ibid).

Hisham is not worried about the future. He does not care about money and is not concerned if one day we don't have money and the next day we do. I used to have a lot of gold but now have nothing but my wedding ring, but he does not care. My brother, on the other hand, is always worried about the future and wants to make money and save for security. When our daughter had problems with her husband, Hisham and his family thought she must get divorced. My family and I, on the other hand, with our limited (laughs) minds insisted that she should remain married for the sake of her kids but we were also concerned about social stigma. For Hisham this was all nonsense.

But the fact is that Hisham was not as care-free about their marriage as his wife had thought. He too had some qualms and had to learn how to deal with them. Now that he was married into the lower class, he felt personally responsible for lifting his wife and her family up and rectifying their conduct to conform to his middle class standards.

In Libya, I was very surprised that Ayat had been living there alone and blamed her parents for having left her to live on her own; this is a weird attitude by my standards. Her sister was right when she said that God sent me to them at the right time. I summoned all the family to Libya and in three months they were all there. As poor people, it was fine for them that we would all cram together in one tiny flat. But I made it clear that I could not live with them. I found them a small flat and jobs. Ayat's sister had failed in her high school diploma, I put her back in school and used to

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drive her to and back from school every day. I became the 'big brother' to her male siblings and they could not do anything without my approval. At the same time they were also very useful to us baby- sitting for my daughters and cooking our food.

But Hisham's concerns started to mount even before they returned to Cairo. They began when his first daughter was born in Libya. It was then that he started to use the language of "us" and "them"

For the first time, it started to make a difference to me that Laila will grow up and see how they [mother and her family] eat and drink. I thought that she will eventually grow up and get married and that her mother's family will be a source of embarrassment for us all. I thought to myself these people had to change. I started to teach them things and began to control their behaviour. One day I went home and found Ahmed (Ayat's younger brother) who was 14 years old then, sitting on his mother's laps. I yelled at him and her. I told them that people like *us* (my emphasis) did not do these things. When Ayat earned her first salary, I told her that she could use it to help her parents improve their life-style.

Once they had children and he became concerned about their future, all the things that he thought were germane but harmless to his wife's lower class background were suddenly magnified and abhorred; he had to police their behaviour

My goal since Laila was born in 1973 was to be a policeman until my children got married. I realised that there were things that I hated about my wife: her loud voice, her vulgar words, the fact that she answered back when we had an argument and the ways she ate and spoke with her mouth full. With the way she brings up the children, I am like a policeman – a watchdog – always monitoring her behaviour with the kids and intervening when I found that she was not teaching them properly. It really took a lot of efforts from me to get them used to the ways I like and how I was brought up. I wanted my kids would be raised like me and become like me. May be I was a bit too cruel, because at the end, she has been a good woman. But if I were not there, my children would have been vulgar. What helped me was that the girls also looked up to my side of the family – to my aunts and cousins. They were their role models. They know that their mother is a good woman but that she is not from the same social level like *us*. (interviewer: who is 'us?'): *Me and my children*"

The children, now in their 30s, have grown up with this dilemma. They realise that their mother is from a much lower social level and are critical of her public conduct, but on the other hand they love their mother, are fond of their maternal uncles and aunts and feel a moral obligation to defend them when necessary. Only they are required to take part in the policing too. Hisham says

I like it that they defend their mother. When I told them we could not invite their maternal uncles and aunts to the children's weddings, they got upset and said: but they are our uncles and aunts!. So I had to give in, but asked them to make sure they watched their conduct and how they talked and ate so we would not have a social scandal.

More than 30 years after their marriage many events have happened some of which are quite significant. The children attended foreign language schools, graduated from universities and married into the professional middle class. The grandchildren are following the same path. The maternal working class grand-parents died and with them the last memories of the struggle for survival and desperate attempts to live as a middle class. The maternal uncles and aunts followed different migratory paths to the Gulf and later opened their own business and became wealthy, but they could not pick up "class" naturally and remained in what Hisham called "the nouveau riche" category. Hisham took a second wife, an old friend of his natal family's who shared the same social background as him, but split his time between her and Ayat. At the beginning the new marriage was a source of great tension, but eventually they all settled into a routine that was acceptable to all parties, particularly as Ayat admitted that this was what her husband should have done from the beginning. He should not have married her. In retrospect, she confesses that despite the long years of marriage she never fit into her husband's social world. She never really felt she was part of it.

When I went to Libya in the 70's I wanted to marry someone who would take me up with him. The maximum I could have dreamt of was to marry a man with a university degree but to marry into this family and this class background? It never crossed my mind. But you know what, until this moment, I have not felt this was my home or that I belonged here. I don't feel at peace except when I am with my natal family, although I am critical of their conduct sometimes. [Ayat paused a moment]. You know what? That's not even true. I don't really feel comfortable except when I am at work.

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I followed Ayat to her work place. She sat in a room with seven male and female colleagues – all with the same commercial school degree and family background. They all knew Ayat's husband and spoke about him with reverence and fondness. Ayat got for herself the recognition and respect which part of her could claim as a woman married into the upper middle class. The other part was her more relaxed self, comfortable in her skin, loud and vociferous as she cracked jokes with her work colleagues and recounted anecdotes about her grandchildren.

#### 7.4 Conclusion

Broadly speaking, this chapter addressed the role of marriage in social mobility. I attempted to respond to the emphasis in the early literature on why women cannot be considered agents of social mobility. Empirical evidence from some European countries, particularly the UK pointed out that when women marry, they fail to maintain their work career and marriage weakens their labour market position. It was in this context that marriage, rather than employment, was considered to be women's path to social mobility. In consequence, women are appended to the class (vis. occupational) position of their husbands.

In this chapter I underscored that marriage is not a reliable route to social mobility for CSGs. To begin with, women do not choose marriage partners who enhance the possibility of social mobility after marriage. Not only does marrying below their educational levels to men with precarious work situations elide possible upward mobility, but in fact it also causes or threatens to cause downward mobility. Women's entry into the labour market is a manifestation of the deterioration of their social and life conditions and an indication that their husbands have failed to provide for them. Their decision to join the labour market and their ability to juggle their marital and motherhood roles to ward off these imminent threats manifests their agency. As CSGs continue to carry on with their responsibilities, they walk on a tight rope trying to balance their financial want with the need to maintain status considerations, including the image of the husband as the head of the household along with the need to maintain their personal and family dignity.

Employment does not help married CSGs in their quest for social mobility either. We need to remember that due to their modest education and their unemployment, men are no more agents of social mobility

than women are. Ironically, the narratives show that at this level of education men too have a dodgy and lukewarm relationship with the labour market, a claim often made against women in the literature on social mobility.

Although they are mindful about the appropriateness of the type of work they choose for their status as married women, the jobs they access are often not conducive to advancement or career building. Moreover, in the cases when such a promise exists, CSGs occupational lives are overshadowed by their family responsibilities and problems. The narratives discussed above show that women are concerned about maintaining their dignity on the job and undignified jobs render such an undertaking fraught with tension. Their jobs as domestic servants, for example, mean that unlike men, they have to work and suffer within the domestic sphere; they are forced to put aside their diploma and comport as domestic servants. Women spend a great amount of energy negotiating work and marriage arrangements to balance their financial want with the need to safeguard their dignity as educated women, protect the image of their husbands and children and ultimately lead a dignified life.

CSGs do not marry up. However, if cross class marriages do happen (one case only), we have to be careful in drawing conclusions about the ability of such marriages to subjectively lift women to a higher social status. This chapter shows that status distinctions between married couples do not disappear even after the formation of families.

Where do we depict women's agency in this complex scene where marriage and employment become entangled in ways that early theories did not predict? Women's agency lies primarily in their ability to decide when to interfere to prevent further family decline and to reflect, each in accordance to her position, the best way to do so while preserving their dignity and that of their families.

Women speak about jobs that reinforce their sense of denigration, abasement and servitude. These are jobs that deprive them of the dignity they deserve as educated beings. All women speak of their pursuit of dignity. But even then, their degree of resilience in accepting undignified treatment is not uniform. Much depends on their understanding of the availability of alternatives, the realisation of whether or not they had fall-back positions and how critical the income they secure is for the welfare of the entire family. In that respect, as indicated by the narratives, the

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reaction of a married woman with children who attended schools was different from that of a woman without children.

What the narratives in this chapter have revealed is a prelude to interrogating the assumptions about women's exercise of agency and the importance of social mobility projects, which I discuss at length in the final chapter.



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## 8

## CSGs Strategise: Pushing Back the Limits of Doxa

### 8.1 Introduction

This is the last of the empirical chapters which brings together the experiences of young women with social mobility. In Chapter 6 I illuminated young women's rising awareness about attempts at subordination and focused on their daily struggles to ward off closures and battle subordination by manoeuvring to gain small occupational moves. Their objective has been to prevent themselves from succumbing to inferior occupational positions. I showed how women in the public sector also performed small occupational acts of compliance and defiance within a general institutional context that they realised, in the final analysis, brought them respect and status. In the previous chapter I underscored how young married women juggled employment and marriage strategies to prevent imminent downward mobility and secure a dignified life.

In this chapter I take a broader stance on strategies adopted by young CSGs, in an attempt to discern how they conceive of social mobility and their approaches towards it. I place those strategies within a single conceptual framework, using Bourdieu's notion of strategies as a practical sense of a social game. To remind the reader, Bourdieu (Lamaison and Bourdieu 1986) states that individuals enter the social game as players with habitus that is the source of all practices; it allows individuals to produce regulated and practical taxonomies in meeting life situations without being the product of obedience to rules. A good player for Bourdieu is one with habitus that embodies the game, understands its rules, does what needs to be done and follows "...what the game demands and requires" (Ibid: 112). This requires improvisation and creativity and often individuals come up with a variety of possibilities and moves, but these are only dictated by the limits of the game and in-

scribed in the game itself. Again, a good player, Bourdieu says, is one who masters the art of practice, knows the rules and their logic and who “manages quite naturally to be at the place where the ball will come down, as if the ball controlled him. Yet at the same time, he controls the ball” (Ibid: 113).

In the following sections I address a wide array of individual strategies that range between contestation, restructuring, forging alliances and dismissal. What I describe below shows strategies that take advantage of available opportunities offered by social structures, changing employment contexts and rise of new actors. As I review the narratives, I examine strategies that push the limits of the doxa and reduce the space of “what is beyond question” (Risseuw n.d.: 168), showing that under conducive circumstances women do contest dominant systems of classification. Some of the strategies have been tested and yielded durable life arrangements as the case of some young women shows, while others are still developing. However, in many of these cases, the strategies are not necessarily or deliberately adopted to move upwards, but mainly to construct an environment CSGs could live in that recognises their status as educated and dignified women.

## 8.2 Challenging the fixity of social structures

I begin this chapter by describing how some CSGs took advantage of the country’s changing political economy scene to advance occupationally and socially by engaging in a new type of work – field research – that was in growing demand. The interest in social field work took shape with the growth of development work by international NGOs starting the 90s and the latter’s increased awareness about the scarcity of reliable quantitative and qualitative data on different sectors such as health, education and employment. NGOs were encouraged to train a cadre of local field-workers to collect data and administer questionnaires. Similarly, the government’s Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics (CAPMAS), which executes large scale research projects and undertakes the country’s main national censuses, started to recruit middle level-educated individuals to administer questionnaires in different parts of the country. Those are hired on short term basis and sent home after the task has been accomplished, but were kept on rosters and summoned whenever there was another need for them. Some of these interviewers

hang around hoping that a job would materialise and become more permanent (Barsoum 2004: 82-3).

Those activities expanded as academic institutions and private research firms trained groups of young women to become field-workers. Because interviewing often required entering people's homes and speaking with women in the house, female interviewers were preferred and the job was eventually feminised. As the research studies were mostly foreign-funded and had generous budgets, the young women earned good money: they had generous daily rates in addition to transportation and meal allowances.

Sawsan (36) was among the first cohorts of women who worked as interviewers in the field. After two long years trying without success to find a job with her commercial degree, she finally got a favourable response to an advertisement in the newspapers for data collectors. She went to the interview place along with her sister and neighbour, all graduates of intermediate types of education who have been unemployed since their graduation. They all met the foreign and Egyptian recruiters who represented the foreign organisation launching the foreign-funded research study. Immediately they sensed the flexibility of the foreign university professor, when, unlike the latter, he did not mind having both Sawsan and her sister work for the project. His Egyptian counterpart, on the other hand, with a bureaucratic mentality, thought of all kinds of problems to abort recruiting the two sisters for the same job.

The foreign expert mentored Sawsan and her group, was able to depict their individual areas of strength and gave them assignments to further enhance their innate abilities. Sawsan grew quickly and had a chance to work with him on other studies of his own. Gradually she developed the reputation of a skilful data collector. As she continued to progress, the foreign expert introduced her to other colleagues and that brought her more work. Soon she learned how to do open interviews which expanded her opportunities even more until she was upgraded in her community of work to the level of supervisor which meant training others and monitoring the entire work process.

Clearly Sawsan had favourable personal attributes. She was a vibrant and self-confident woman but in hindsight, none of this, she realises, would have been possible without the support she got from the foreign professor which opened new paths before her. Earlier, Amin (2000) argued that interaction with foreigners, learning their habits and work con-

duct was partly responsible for the social mobility that took place during the seventies with the enforcement of the Open Door policy. However, more than learning new work styles, working with foreigners meant that Sawsan could circumvent the rigid hierarchical social structure that she believed thwarted her recognition as a skilful interviewer. She had realised the criticality of this moment in Egypt's history and the growing interest in generating data and the kind of work she has excelled in doing. She was also aware of the importance of foreign expertise in the burgeoning research context and decided to let the foreign expert fight her social wars while she engaged in learning new skills, not worried about where she fit in the class system or how she was viewed by others.

The foreign expert who had been living in Egypt for a long time, knew that social distinctions were pronounced, but to his mind, personal capacities and willingness to learn were what mattered and those had nothing to do with one's position in the social stratification. As he was pleased to see that Sawsan was making strides and earning a name in the social research market, he could not help observing the resistance his Egyptian middle class researchers demonstrated towards her growing ambitions and her assertiveness in joint meetings.

On her part, Sawsan's self confidence grew as she continued to refine her interviewing skills and began to approach different varieties of people on professional grounds

He taught me how to answer any question and how to sit with a woman washing her clothes on the bank of the river and another upper class woman at the American University and be able to get information from both. I went to places that I did not dream of entering. I went to the American University to ask students about relationships between men and women. I felt nervous in the beginning because here I was at the most liberal and upper class place in the country where girls sit on men's laps and play in their hair and where girls smoke. But I was able to establish good rapport and it worked and I had six great interviews.

In a few years, Sawsan became known well enough in the research community that there was always work for her in the pipeline. Even if a continuous flow could not be assured and she would face short intervals of no work, she was paid well enough that she was able to save money for lean months. In a short time she was able to move with her family to a larger flat in a new building and a better neighbourhood where she

could now receive her guests and conclude business. She also put her children in a private school where they could learn foreign languages.

Through her expanding connections, Sawsan had a chance to participate in a visit organised by a foreign embassy in Cairo to the embassy's country in the effort to create a new variety of non-traditional allies other than the Western educated university graduates. She stayed there for one month.

I learned a lot from the visit – learned how to respect time and that people listen to you when you speak even if you are making mistakes. I was asked to give a speech and after I finished, the guests came up to me and shook my hands. While there I did not speak a single word of Arabic which really made a huge difference to me. Now I have a computer at home and installed a translation programme on it and got an email account. I m now receiving mail from the ambassador and his embassy here has put me in charge of forming an association for those who participated in the visit. I will enrol in a language course at the American University.

Sawsan has now become a purveyor of field interviewers and provides work for many of her extended family members. She has been thinking of creative ways to improve work by suggesting, for example, to draw maps for field sites and households, which required bringing on board more staff. She also subcontracts individuals – including her family members – to administer questionnaires, conduct interviews and transcribe them.

I feel I have become a very important person in my setting – something like the minister of research in Egypt. I give people work and I subcontract work. I get phone calls from people I don't know who ask if I have work for them. I also make recommendations for people to go work in other places.

On the other hand, Sawsan believes her success at work has had a negative impact on her married life. Her husband began to rely on her earning abilities and stopped taking his own work seriously. He moved from one business adventure to the other and his government salary went into paying loans and debts for his failed projects, while she was fully in charge of the household and children's education. At some point Sawsan's assertive role as the main breadwinner angered her husband and in one of their stormy arguments, he asked her to stay home and let him support the family, only to realise that alone he did not have access

to the large business network and social capital she had: “I let him try and work and be responsible for the house while I stayed at home. He worked for two months in research with a local agency and was really tired and brought home little money what I brought by working for ten days only in the field.” Recently Sawsan has been bringing work to her husband. He has been taking time off from his job as a government social worker to join his wife when his contribution was required in a research project.

On the other hand, Sawsan’s work requires that she spends days and sometimes weeks outside her home in the field. Although her extended family have benefitted from the opportunities she has opened to them and the financial assistance she gives to her parents, her family has been critical of her unrestricted mobility. Also the young women in her team did not see themselves continuing in this line of work much longer after they got married. They found this style of business too disruptive of their work and gender expectations. Her male cousin who works with her said:

I would love my wife to have a light and simple job to go to, but there is no man in the world who would allow it that he stays at home and his wife goes out to work – to stay at home and look after the kids while she went out. It makes him feel useless and without responsibility. When the man earns money and brings it home he can have a word and control. If the wife does, she will crush the man تدوس على الرجل دوسة and that would be the end of the world. Any work that keeps my wife away from my eyes is not needed. People talk. This is not an office or clerical work, so that whenever I go I will find her sitting there. This is work that requires that she moves from one city to the other and people in rural areas are not used to seeing women moving around so actively. Things can happen to her while she is away. No matter what senior position she achieves, if she does not feel that she is in the protection of a man, it is all futile.

### 8.3 Restructuring relations in the work-place: Insistence on more egalitarian ways of working

It was common in my interviews with middle and upper class employers that they referred to the Quran and to the verse that specifically mentions that “God created us in classes”, to justify why class asymmetries should be maintained. Interestingly, the same argument was also adopted by some CSGs and an understanding prevailed that if God had wanted

things differently, he would have had them differently. They even used this “divine arrangement” to support their argument for complementarity.

Nagwa (28) says

The rich need me just like I need the rich. If we were all rich, no one would need to work. What it really boils down to is that I work because I need money so I can live in a dignified manner and the employers want me to do work for them so their life would go on in the way they want. So we are really exchanging services.

But whether this was about a divine logic or exchange of services, the conclusion many reached was that we were all equal before God and there was no reason for humiliations and maltreatment on the part of employers.

To make their menial work more acceptable to their own selves, young men and women gave their work environment and relations a tinge of family or friendship labour: If they were domestic servants, then the house they cleaned was like their own home, the madam of the house was a sister and the employers’ children were like their children. Women used their status as educated persons to render class distance more permeable. After all, like their office employers and madams, they too had families and were involved with their children’s schooling and spent their income on their private tutoring and fulfilling their needs. With such interpretations, they were able to justify their jobs to themselves, and also derive a sense of dignity from them.

However, in cases when CSGs realised their employers were not responding favourably to the need for some egalitarianism, they have been assertive in re-arranging hierarchical work relations and emphasising their position as educated women. Although, for example, assistant teachers in schools sympathised with *Dadas* (the uneducated cleaning women below them) as the latter are required to do the hard and menial work which reminded them of what they could have been doing had they not had this modicum of education, they found it necessary to draw clear job lines between them and the cleaning women. They did that without consultation with their employers and presented it as a *fait accompli*. As employers were mostly concerned with the smooth running of work at school, they did not much care about these ‘small details’ as long as it kept everybody happy. Safaa, a 25 year old assistant teacher ex-

plained that the assistant teachers have clear work description and have set the rules on what they could and could not do among themselves.

The rules are clear. Anything at the table level is my job as an assistant; anything that falls on the floor is the cleaners' job. If some food falls on the floor, I will insist that the cleaning woman comes to remove it. Also I do not take the kids to the bathroom. I can wash the children's hands and help them brush their teeth, but no toilets.

I had an interview with Shaimaa (20) who was mainly concerned with creating an egalitarian work environment that made her job tasks bearable. After trying several jobs in shops and caring for an old woman, she settled in a successful business – a middle size shop in the city centre that sells medical equipment. It includes a showroom on the ground level and an office and a kitchenette on the upper level. It is a family business that was handed down to a young graduate of the American University by his father.

As Shaimaa described to me the organisation of work and division of labour, she made sure to also mention the educational status and class situation of each position and job incumbent. They had a small number of staff: other than the rich young owner who is also the general manager and Shaimaa herself, there is a senior male accountant with a university degree and an office boy who struggled to complete only his primary schooling. She described herself as a “secretary, saleswoman, typist and a tea and coffee maker” and recounted how she ended up with this portfolio.

First she had to prove her competence at work and used her strong interpersonal skills to attract and deal with difficult clients and successfully conclude transactions. She made sure that the owner was aware of her hard work

My work has been impeccable and I knew that the owner reviewed my work behind my back, but I did not make him feel that I knew. He had surveillance cameras and watched us. One day a woman came to return a wheel chair and claimed that she had bought it from our shop but that was not true. She rebuked me when I told her it was not ours, yet I continued to treat her with respect, because she was a client. The owner came down, interfered and defended me and told her he had been watching the incident.



At that early stage, the owner treated her arrogantly the same way he treated the office helper, so she interfered to correct this situation

He has university education and speaks English, so he treated us with arrogance *as though* (my emphasis) we were lower than him. But he forgets that we are all equal before God. I made him feel that this was not right. Whenever he was talking with clients, I would interfere and offer my opinion. I knew that sometimes he did not like it, but I did not care. Then I began to do my work on his computer: I entered the accounts on his machine, so I could give him the chance to see what I was doing. He tested me. He stood there to listen to how I spoke to clients, and then when he found out that I was okay and began to trust me with the work, he started to ask my opinion on things. Now we negotiate our selling prices and he listens to me. Now if he has to travel outside Cairo, I am the one who meets the clients and negotiates things with them.

As she grew more confident in her indispensability, she restructured her relations with other members of the office staff: "With the office boy, Ahmed, I treated him well when we are alone, but in front of the owner and other colleagues, I was a secretary and he was a manual worker. He (the owner) had to see the difference". With the conservative bearded accountant she was the young modest Muslim daughter:

The woman who stands next to him must be respectable: no jokes and no laughs. I allowed him to teach me how to be a good Muslim woman, how to pray regularly and on time and let him teach me more about my religion. Now we have grown to be very close friends and he treats me like a daughter.

For Shaimaa creating a "family" atmosphere was essential for her to continue at work. Making "brothers" of her work colleagues meant creating a more humane environment that was free of class tension and distinctions. Shaimaa came up with the idea of weekly potlucks that would bring staff members to sit around the table and share simple food every Friday. She also lent her 'sisterly' ears and offered advice to her colleagues, including the owner, and listened attentively to their personal and family problems. Now that she has established a status as a good sister and valuable secretary she did not mind making tea and coffee for the clients and "out of her own volition" helped the office boy with cleaning and allowed him to call her by her first name.

When I interviewed Shaimaa at the shop, she was relaxed, treated well and making good money but hoping that this job would be a stepping stone to something better. After all, some of her clients were “important” people who could help her find a clerical job in an office. While we were talking, a gentleman from an Arab Gulf embassy walked in and Shaimaa excused herself to serve him. He wanted to buy a walker for his elderly mother. After some bargaining, she sold it to him for EP 80 (US\$ 15) instead of EP 95 (US\$ 17). He gave her his calling card and told her to call him if she needed anything from his embassy. She asked me if I thought he would help her find a better position there. I told her to try. When we talked a couple of months later, she had approached him and was still waiting for his help.

#### 8.4 Allying with the middle class: “Noblesse oblige”<sup>1</sup>

Gamal Abdel Nasser was a fool to have allowed this massive free education. In the past people inherited the *métiers* of their parents and knew exactly what they would become and where they belonged; *they* were not left to face these closed doors and *we* did not have to deal with those half educated people that spread like insects around us now. The half educated people *أنصاف متعلمين* are very dangerous. When you know someone is totally ignorant, you start with her/him from a scratch and you know where you stand, but those who have only half the information are dumb; they behave as if they know it all, but the truth is they are ignorant and quite dangerous for that matter”.

Kamal, the 75 year old lawyer’s reaction is common among men and women of upper middle class background who lost their land and property to the confiscations and nationalisation measures that followed the 1952 revolution. While I was interested in his opinion about technical school graduates, his words encompassed a much wider range of individuals, including the Free Officers who launched the revolution. His words were much in agreement with those of another aristocrat in the *Yakoubian Building*, who said “....the free officers were a bunch of kids from the dregs of society, [sic] destitutes and sons of destitutes...They were poor and uneducated but once were given the chance for education, launched the 1952 coup” (Al Aswany 2004: 162). For Kamal who studied law in the Sorbonne, the education of the poor was a mistake that Nasser committed more than 50 years ago and for which Egypt was still paying the price. His understanding was that each person had a posi-

tion in the social hierarchy and everyone had to remain in his/her assigned positions and where they belonged.

The above, however, did not accurately reflect his attitude towards Nermeen, the 40 year old single woman who works for him as a secretary and for whom he feels personally responsible. She was handed down to him by another lawyer colleague in a series of work concatenations Nermeen experienced after she and many others were laid off from the joint venture legal office that opened in Cairo with the Open Door Policy and closed with the end of this short lived economic experience. Nermeen had been working there as an Arabic typist after graduating from a commercial school in the 80s. She had found the job by sheer coincidence when she was hired to write a dual column Arabic English contract in an emergency situation. She was found to be an excellent typist and then hired on a long term contract basis. In this joint venture mainly staffed by Americans and middle class Egyptian lawyers, Nermeen shared a back office with two other secretaries and all three were barely visible to the rest of the staff. She was naturally excluded from the office non-work activities as she had problems speaking English, but everyone was generally good to her.

For Nermeen, to be laid off had serious consequences. The job she had earned her a high salary which allowed her to be generous to her family of a mother and seven siblings in different stages of education. By the early 80s the economy was already in bad shape. The oil boom of the seventies had started to wane and Egyptians working abroad returned home and their remittances stopped from flowing. Unemployment, typically of the educated, began to show its ugly face. Nermeen could have probably still found a marginal job in a local firm or in a store, like most women of her educational background, but she was dreading this kind of downward mobility.

At that time, my social standard had risen and so did my expectations. I watched how my colleagues dressed and was able to buy nice and expensive clothes. I had stopped using public transport. If I wanted to go to Alexandria, I would take the super-jet (luxurious bus) or the train; no cheap vans. My life changed and my family at home understood and welcomed the change because they knew I was now interacting with a different class of people.

After a few months of uncertainty and fear of a serious demotion, the former local staff of the joint venture firm opened their own independent offices and recruited Nermeen for secretarial support. Although her salary went down drastically, and she no longer enjoyed the social and medical insurance she had, it was more important for her to maintain the same comfortable middle class work environment she had. Ever since then, she remained within the same circle of lawyers and was “handed down” from one employer in the same circle of professionals to the other and has been working with Kamal for 10 years now.

Despite his critical remarks about the half-educated above and his certainty that this situation applied to Nermeen and generally reflected her universe, Kamal realised that she was not responsible for creating this mess. Perceptively, he is also aware that Nermeen is experiencing a limbo situation wherein her luck and aspirations have placed her in one social world, while the uncertainty of the labour market and her own social background threatened to place her in another. He felt personally responsible for protecting Nermeen’s dignity against the vagaries of life and ruthless labour market. Bourdieu (1998: 86) calls “noblesse oblige” the aristocrat’s generosity that comes through loyalty to himself as a person worthy of being a member of the group. He argues that the behaviour of honour, noblesse and “permanent practice of virtue” in aristocratic and pre-capitalist societies have at their origin an economy of symbolic goods which produces a habitus that is not economic and rather disposed to repress the narrow interests of pursuing material profits (Ibid).

Given his old age and increasingly limited ability to work, Kamal has largely reduced his work load keeping only a few of the loyal clients. He and Nermeen occupy a two room office in down town Cairo. A cleaner comes for a few hours every other day to clean the office, so Nermeen is not expected to do any cleaning. He continues to pay her a good salary that even she believes is not commensurate with the small volume of work they now had. At the same time, he encouraged her to do additional work such as typing theses, while sitting in the office, so she could earn an extra income to augment her salary. She enjoys flexible hours and a generous holiday schedule.

Nermeen and Kamal have built a strong friendship that has extended beyond the call of work duty. She runs personal errands for him and his family and is present in their family events. At the same time, he has al-

ways been the first one she called upon when she had a family crisis. When her sister died, he was the first to turn up at the hospital and was active in organising the funeral. It raised her status among her family when they saw this old aristocratic man taking so much interest in her and her siblings' life.

In her personal and family life, Nermeen at the age of 40, is unmarried. She lives alone in the flat she bought after they lost the family flat in the earthquake of 1992 that hit many old buildings in the city. Unlike her sisters, and the overwhelming majority of women in her neighbourhood, she does not put on the veil and is recognised as "different" from the other women in her area. She has not progressed beyond the commercial degree but over the years, has picked up immense legal knowledge from long work experience in legal offices and earned the reputation of a "legal consultant" among her neighbours. She takes all the important decisions that pertain to her siblings and their families and is in charge of the education of her nephews and nieces. Although she has older brothers, she is now recognised as the family patriarch by virtue of her regular high income and the social and cultural capital she brings to her large family. Whenever there is an important social event, Nermeen always represents her family. She has been her siblings' window to the middle class.

The above story demonstrates how the exchange of services between individuals in the labour market acquires symbolic value that creates social links and gives rise to "domesticated" and "*attached*" individuals who largely incorporate the structure of symbolic capital and that render the system stable (Bourdieu 1998: 104). Such exchanges, like Mauss's "gifts", are not always object of exchange between rational, calculating, individualist and independent beings, but are more embedded in social relations and help us understand both social solidarity as well as superiority in society (Godelier 1999: 12) for gifts are reciprocal but not totally disinterested.

When Nermeen relies on the protection of her employer, she allows him to exercise his perceived moral sense of obligation as a privileged member of the middle class towards the less advantaged group. At the same time, she is also under obligation to return his gift in terms of her inalienable and flexible labour. When she does that, she is investing in and reinforcing her relationship with her employer, taking it to a higher level of friendship and exchange of favours in which debts and credits

do not have a place. The continued exchange of gifts implies the need to maintain this relationship and continue to give and receive in the same way. This work arrangement is a choice Nermeen has made that fulfilled the objective she had set for herself, namely to maintain and secure the status she has gained from her long association with the middle class through her work with its professional members. In the final analysis, however, it was a trade-off: She has willingly foregone her occupational advancement for work and life stability and a social status that is recognised by her family and community.

### 8.5 Alternative living and marriage arrangements

Among Arab families in general lawful marriage is the only socially accepted arrangement for individuals to pursue family formation and experience sexuality (see Rugh 1985; Hoodfar 1997). Once a family was formed, women were expected to remain in one. This explains why the divorced women in my sample either got married for a second time or were seeking to get married as they feared being ostracised in their new single status in their communities. Marwa (38) knew that even in the second marriage she was not making the right choice, but still went ahead with it. Like her first husband, the second husband was also not educated and had no stable job, but she married him anyway and had to go from one menial job to the other in order to provide for her family while he went jobless.

Violating community norms comes at a high cost especially what pertains to the “morality and propriety” in which women’s sexual and moral conduct are contested on a daily basis (Singerman 2006:14). For example, *Urfi* (customary-secretive) marriage is attacked as a type of semi legal adultery. Relationships outside marriage are also not common and are the subject of social and moral condemnation and a reason for honour crimes that are publicised in daily newspapers. Most people are keen on abiding by “family ethos” and what the family and members of the community regard as honourable and respectable behaviour. However, Singerman contends that “discrepancies between theory and practice” are not uncommon and people increasingly demonstrate a high degree of tolerance of a wide range of conduct. In such situations of discrepancies, driven in the case of CSGs by strenuous life and economic conditions, women question orthodox rules that determine what is right and what is wrong; they seek to “push back the limits” of the unsaid and what is be-

yond question by contesting those prevailing rules and effecting at the same time some change.

Some of the divorced women in the sample had to move back to live with their natal families after their divorce and found the arrangement difficult to endure especially if they had children at school age. On their part, families also are not insistent on the move back given the financial burden it usually implies. Lubna (38) tried to live with her family after her divorce for a while, but soon realised that the family flat was too small for her three unmarried siblings, her parents, and now herself and her seven year old daughter. She insisted on renting an independent flat and moving out. When she did, her conduct and movements were constantly monitored by her new neighbours in this popular lower class area and she fell prey to male neighbours' harassment. She got numerous proposals for *Urfi* marriage as the men were all already married and had families. Until I met her, she was resisting these secretive marriage arrangements but did not know how long her steadfastness would last, particularly as she now juggled two jobs to make ends meet. Living far from her family, she could not rely on their support with baby-sitting her daughter.

In other cases, women relied on the absence of consensus in their families on the implications of new situations, to impose their own solutions without facing much resistance from them and the larger community. Aida is a 40 year old Muslim woman who felt quite confident about her decision to live with a Coptic man without marriage after her first husband died at a young age, leaving her with a commercial school degree that she had not tested in the labour market and two young daughters at different stages of education. Aida had to struggle to make ends meet by doing casual and menial jobs to provide for her children. She could not rely on help from her family and encountered major problems from the family of her deceased husband over inheritance. Poor life and work conditions had taken their toll over her male siblings. Their lives were not faring very well either and they could not help her out. Her first solution was to find a job, which she could not adjust to her responsibilities as a single mother, so she opted for a relationship that would provide her with a stable life and financial resources and guarantee that her daughters got the university education and the future she was not able to secure for herself.

Aida's confidence in her decision was based on her argument – which was reluctantly accepted by her siblings – that if the male members of her family could not take responsibility for her and her daughters, then they were not to interfere in her life.

As for my male siblings, they pretend that they do not know the truth and have not asked me for any papers to show that we are really married. But the fact is that I have relieved them of my burden. If I had not done that, they would have had to support me and my daughters. Now what happens is that they come to me for help and money and they know that the source of my money is my lover. Right now I don't know what is socially acceptable and what is not. On one hand, they do not accept him in the family and will not have him visit their houses. On the other, they are ready to make use of all the benefits and fun he provides. I say this is the situation. If they want to accept me with Saeed, let them do so. If they don't want, let them please themselves.

### 8.6 Contesting the dominant middle class

When I asked Nahed if we could meet so I could interview her, she gave me an appointment in the afternoon of a warm summer day at the open air coffee shop of the Marriott Hotel after she finished her work as a domestic maid. I had not met Nahed before and when I got to the hotel, it took me some time to identify her because I had an image in my mind that did not match reality. Suddenly I realised that I had been looking for a woman that “looked” like a maid, which Nahed was not. She was a perfectly dressed, meticulously made up veiled young woman aged 27.

The house helpers we had at home when I was a child were economically poor and also looked poor. Poverty in the early sixties had visible manifestations that one could not miss. The poor walked around barefoot and panhandled around houses for a loaf of bread. Forty years ago, domestic maids at homes were typically young girls who came from impoverished villages to work for families in the city for little money. This was at a time when education was rendered free and schools became accessible to the majority of the poor population. Thus for a family to still opt to send their young daughter away and live off her meagre pay as a domestic servant, was an indication of dire financial need.

The norm was for young girls to live in with the family they served and their parents would come on religious and other occasions for a visit



to take home some of their wages. The mistress of the house was usually responsible for saving some of the maid's monthly pay and adding to it some more and also contributing in a substantial way to her trousseau when the young girl was ready to get married. Once the domestic servants got married and had their own families, they stopped work, but were expected to visit their ex-masters' house on different occasions in respect of the ties of loyalty they had have developed with the families they served.<sup>2</sup>

By the seventies, as free education continued to attract an increasing number of young girls, they were replaced by older and married domestic workers who had their own families and houses and did not sleep over preferring to work as domestics on a daily basis. Often these local women had accompanied their husbands who came from the rural areas to the city in search of livelihood and found jobs as doormen or casual workers. In recent years, these women have become the main breadwinners in their families because they cannot rely anymore on the financial support of their husbands, either because of their death or disappearance, or male unemployment.

In my sample of CSGs, seven women now work as domestic servants while many others had worked as domestics in the past. There is no particular pattern of trajectories among domestic servants. Some have always been maids like Nagat (32) who inherited the *métier* becoming a servant in the same house where her mother worked as a cook, then worked independently from her mother in other houses also as a servant/cook. Others had different work backgrounds as waitresses in hotels, or combined domestic service with clerical work in offices.

The women in my sample were not in the business of changing employers which they saw as commercialisation, preferring to confine their labour to one household where they hoped to develop the comfortable quasi-family bonds of belongingness and loyalty. They also preferred to serve educated families that they knew would appreciate their status as educated women and treat them with due respect.<sup>3</sup> In her study of domestic servants in Turkey, Ozyegin (2001: 124-5) makes a similar observation about maids who see in their multiple employer service a reinforcement of their proletarianisation as "cleaners" carrying out heavy cleaning chores as well as repetitive, menial and dirty tasks. But mainly, working for multiple employers deprived maids of the social relations of

domestic work which they develop when they work for one employer only.

On their part, many middle class employers also prefer domestics who are different “yet not too different” (Moors 2003: 390). Local educated domestic servants are often preferred, for example to migrant domestics, for the former’s knowledge of Arabic and their familiarity with cultural, moral and religious norms. Religion in particular is an important consideration, and families prefer to have a servant from their own religion. These aspects often work in favour of CSGs women in their negotiations with employers, and unlike the situation with foreign domestic workers, reduce the possibility of their exploitation (Moors 2007: 221). CSGs earn a high wage in the range of US\$ 200, which is slightly lower than Asian and African domestic servants.

In my sample domestic service represented a parallel to a professional career. This is in contrast to the latter as a period to train young women on how to manage their own households after marriage, or as a stepping stone to establish their own business or move on to other non-manual jobs (McBirde 1974).

Two opposite forces are at work here. The obvious reason, referred to earlier (see the case of Sabah in Chapter 7) is that once women embark on a career of domestic service, they become unattractive to other employers usually of interest to CSGs i.e. government or private sector institutions – unless the job is office helper. On the other hand, although domestic service occupies the lowest level in job hierarchies when it comes to social prestige, it places domestic servants in a variety of ways in challenging positions vis a vis their employers; they are able to evoke discursive and material opportunities that allow them to actually experience some subjective aspects of social advancement and turn their attention somewhat away from office and clerical work.

In the following sections I will focus on relations between employers and domestic servants in navigating the tense process of exclusion from/inclusion in the family – how to treat servants kindly and benevolently without encouraging them to “feel too comfortable”, how to incorporate them “into the family household while simultaneously excluding them” (Moors 2003: 390). During this process, employers attempt to protect and reproduce their status as middle class vis a vis their domestics, but from the perspective of domestics, this process in fact destabi-

lises their employers' position by contesting the meaning of class, womanhood and femininity.

Respondents' employers make a point to be generous with money on religious and social occasions and to be there for financial emergencies (the latter in particular serves to enhance maids' negotiating position with prospective employers who have to measure up to this financial generosity). Employers might also have occasional heart to heart talks with their maids about children, motherhood and husbands. On the other hand, maids reported that internal household dynamics were always directed towards encouraging maids to "keep their distance". Often they are not allowed to call even family children by their first name or speak to the house mistress while sitting. There are limits to how much food they could have and they have to wait for madam to give them their portion. Matters pertaining to hygiene, odour and cleanliness are areas of contention and often used to justify segregation (Ozyegin 2002: 50). Describing this aspect of her interaction with her madam, Afaf (32) says:

She often looks at me like I am a repulsive thing. One time I had to tell her: 'Madam, I am not repugnant. I do not smell and I shower every day. My hair doesn't have lice either. You can come close to me.' Then she would get embarrassed and would laugh nervously. No matter how kindly they treat you and make you feel at home, at the end they always manage to make you feel you are their maid.

"Overt and covert" forms of resistance that are "neither full-fledged resistance nor complete acquiescence to hegemony (Moors 2003: 391), brings to the open how symbols – in this case of cleanliness for example – are used for disciplining and segregation. Afaf's response falls within the framework of rejecting the polarised contrasts of seeing domestic servants as either complete and oppressed victims or active resisters. Afaf understands her madam's dispositions and the limits of her generosity. In their discussions which are often wrapped in humour, she subtly makes her acumen and understanding of madam's attempts at exclusion and drawing borders clear to the latter. But at the same time, she gets on with her tasks of cleaning and cooking flawlessly and performs what is expected of her.<sup>4</sup>

Other respondents make clear to their employers their disappointment that the latter did not live up to the image of the imaginary middle class they had thought them to be and their expectations that they would

comport as educated, polite, cultured, decent and gallant individuals. While arguing with Asmaa (27), the madam had the tendency to be loud and vulgar “just like any woman from the lower classes” in ways that even Asmaa, as a member of that lower class would not do. “When madam shouts at me, she is rude. She is really loud and I often run to the windows to close them lest people on the street should hear her”. What is important in the story is that the moment Asmaa runs to the window to shut it, she shows madam that she is helping her maintain her public middle class image. However, between the two of them, by running to shut the window, she has exposed and challenged madam’s status as an accomplished member of the middle class. When the mistress recovers from her “yelling fit”, she apologises to Asmaa telling her “you are like my daughter”. But for Asmaa the apology comes too late and is often meaningless.

Consistent with this position, CSGs do not place themselves in degrading positions that display social disadvantage and acknowledge hierarchies. They are aware that employers’ wish to deny them the opportunity to adopt middle class values or luxuries which they regard as exclusive to themselves as members of this class.

Nadia (29) does not seek to inflict class guilt on her madam to acquire some gains. In a study from Turkey, Ozyegin (2002: 62) for example, describes how domestics complain about their poor food or inability to buy proper shoes for children, to invoke kindness and generosity on the part of the employer. To the contrary, Nadia is aware of the pain she inflicts on her madam when she denies her the pleasure of seeing her in the image of the poor, helpless servant. She is assertive about her middle class aspirations and desires and uses available resources to achieve this goal, to the resentment of her employer. She does not spare an opportunity to make clear to her madam her hopes for her children’s schooling and future, her taste in clothes and fashion, how she arranges her house and her views of what is modern and what is middle class (Skeggs 1997b). She openly speaks about her keen interest in procuring house electric equipment, even as she knew that her employer thought they were of no use to her. Her madam could not understand why Nadia needed to buy a water heater when she had constant water outages in the underserved popular area where she lived, or why she needed a cellular phone and later on had to worry about paying phone bills.

Most importantly, the madam did not understand why Nadia did not uphold the image of a “healthy, hardy, and robust” servant and insisted on “imitating” the frail and dainty middle class women (Skeggs 2001: 297). Skeggs argues that women from lower classes are not expected to inhabit femininity the same way middle and upper middle class women do. She adds that “...Distancing themselves from it is a requirement for the comfortable occupation of femininity by the upper classes who have the required capital and resources” (Ibid). Indeed, like all CSGs who worked as domestic workers in my sample, Nadia has always been concerned about her physical appearance. In her particular case, she has kept these interests from her first job as a waitress in an up market hotel where she was required to dress neatly and maintain a good figure. This, she was pleased to note, was a source of envy from her madam

It was like madam could not believe that I could be more chic and more beautiful than her. Her notion is that a maid is a buffalo and has to look like one. She thought I was making an effort to look decent and could not believe that I was indeed very decent and much better than her.

When she started working as a servant, Nadia also became mindful of her diet and health, which to her mind was her only “capital” as a servant. As it now seemed likely that domestic work was going to be a life-long career for her, she was careful not to over work herself. For example, in principle, she would not carry anything that could be dragged on the floor and she would not begin her work before eating a good and seated breakfast; as soon as she felt a little dizzy she would run to the pharmacy to have her blood pressure measured. But most importantly, she has observed that her madam also cares for her health and appearance, so why couldn’t it be her right too?

I heard numerous stories from both madams and maids about the potential threat to the former’s marital stability maids posed. Many a times servants quit work following incidents of sexual harassment by husbands, or were kicked out because of wives’ suspicions. As maids ensured that the house was properly kept and food prepared, they performed a role that husbands appreciated which was a source of self-gratification and complacent pleasure for them. Husbands appreciated the role of the “shadow wife” maids played and the fact that they filled gaps resulting from wife’s preoccupation with their professional careers and children. Several maids told me that husbands were more sympathet-

ic to their positions than madams and that whenever an argument erupted between maids and wives, husbands often took the maids' side even if they could not make it explicit to the wives.

Despite what is hard work and sometimes harsh treatment, working for middle class families allows maids to embody their values and life style. Going to work is an opportunity to experience luxurious and spacious homes, better views and facilities that work. For the eight or nine hours they spend at what is menial and low status work, they are away from their own family problems of unemployed husbands and children who perform poorly at school. Nagat (39) for example is divorced and has five children at different stages of education, each with his/her own set of unique problems that range between school evasion, drug use and sex. She is at work between 8am and 5pm and when she gets home, is too tired and not capable of dealing with her children's problems which are also constant reminders of her misfortune and poor luck in her two previous marriages. When she argues with her children after a long day of work over money and studies, she often tells them that *they* are not her children and her real children are the "polite and clean" kids of the family she has been serving for ten years.

Nagat's notion of a problem-free middle class life where people have more opportunities and enjoy better life possibilities appeals to the educated and aspiring side of her. Her work in this middle class neighbourhood also serves to detach her temporarily from the poverty and squalor of her own community and family back there. She told me that it shocked her when she stayed home on her day off to hear her neighbour, a young boy, call her son a bad name. "Where I work, they do not know these words. I forgot how they are uttered- that they existed." When she made a fuss and complained to the boy's mother, the latter sarcastically told her "pardon me lady, we are sorry; we didn't know that we could not say these words to your son. You don't seem to be spending enough time at home." Nagat's work as a domestic servant ensured a much enhanced financial status which she has used to better provide for her children schooling and other material goods. As Moors (2003: 392) states, her ties to her children have been reduced to "commodity based relations." Part of her rejects what her children and her neighbourhood stand for and remind her of.

When things go bad for Nagat and she is daunted by work and home pressures and demands, she puts on her best clothes, and goes off to the

mall, buys a pack of cigarettes, sits in one of the fashionable coffee houses, orders a cup of cappuccino and lets herself be served. Malls in Cairo, as noted by Abaza (2001: 118) have become accessible to all social classes and have thus had “democratising effects”. They became favourite places of entertainment for the poor and the rich replacing gardens and public spaces which in turn have become a rare commodity. When they stroll in the mall, the poor are lost in the crowd, are not conspicuous and enjoy the absence of social discipline and control (Abaza 2006: 216). Nagat’s afternoon visit to the mall gives her a great sense of pleasure even if it means spending the last pound in her purse. She stays there for hours and hours then goes home to her children and work routine.

### 8.7 Social mobility? What social mobility?

In her study of female Muslim *Da’iyat* (preachers) in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) argued for the need to see women’s agency in what is thought to be the reproduction of their own domination, suggesting that what appears as docility and passivity from a progressive point of view may be a form of agency if understood from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. Mahmood thus emphasises the need to drop pre-fixed understandings of agency that are fashioned along Western liberal and individualist notions of freedom and look instead for agency that “emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity (Ibid 14-5).

The narratives of Entessar and Nour below undermine the notion that employment is the road to progress and present their views of an alternative modernity and a different route that promises them genuine prospects of liberation. The two examples discussed below are of women who had disappointing experiences with the labour market. As their jobs challenged their dignity as Muslim women, they pushed them to discover other paths which they believed were more worthy of their energy and efforts and offered them rewards in other worlds. From the Western liberal point of view, however, it meant subjugation to other structures.

Entessar (29) works as a librarian in a university department. She did not hesitate to tell me that she found my interest in the question of social mobility shallow and irrelevant to what she thought were the “real is-

sues” in life. For her it was much more important to investigate what she called the “big challenges” of the Islamic nation and the diligent attempts of the non-believers to divert people away from their religion. Work for Entessar was merely a way to earn money and only temporarily until she graduated from the Islamic *Da’wa* (preaching) school which was preparing her to become a *Da’eya* (preacher). Helping Muslims understand better their religion and showing them the right path is what Entessar really wanted to do.

In her current position, Entessar has been experiencing a situation of alienating work – almost a distinction between body and mind as individuals do things with their hands while their minds are roaming freely somewhere else and as they locate a sense of self outside of and in contrast to their role as workers (Wolkowitz 2008). She does her job conscientiously and is commended by her colleagues and library visitors for her helpfulness and efficiency. Her religious beliefs require her to do her work well, but she herself is disinterested in worldly rewards. She is not invested in the job and is no longer interested in having rewards at work. It does not bother her anymore that she has been doing this job for 13 years but is still on a yearly renewable contract and does not have medical and social insurance. She says: “The first few years, I was very keen on getting permanent appointment, but it was becoming obvious that this was not happening. I decided to leave it to God and not interfere and let things go as God wants”.

Her previous work experience in a shop for car accessories had placed her in compromising situations that put her principles and values at stake as she was forced to help her employer conduct fraudulent activities. At least in her current work at the university, she is not exposed to such situations. She feels much more secure as she does not have to deal with private business and now most of her work is with educated persons of students and professors. If she has no work to do, she is sitting in a quiet corner reading a book on Islamic jurisprudence or history and counts the minutes for the day to come to an end so she can go to her *Da’wa* institute.

The fact that Entessar has decided to rise above the ‘small details of work’ has been welcome by her employers as it also meant that she did not pay much attention to work politics and arguments about pay and improvement of work conditions. But that was not the case with other respondents of similar inclinations. For example, Nour (34), shared



Entessar's religious values and ideals. She is also a student at the *Da'wa* institute and has the same personal and professional plans, but makes her views about the "futility of mundane" character of work known to her colleagues to the extent that it has seriously undermined her chances for promotion to a para-medical position in the hospital where she works. Because religious duties have priority, Nour disappears from her desk to perform prayers five times a day regardless of the duties she has at hand. She also makes it known that she refuses any promotion that would place her in direct interaction with male physicians and staff. On top of it all, she announced a few months ago her plan to put on the *niqab* (face cover) in a clear challenge to the rules of her work place that forbid such an action.

The above narratives are similar to the experiences of Indian male Muslim men in their transition from education to the labour market. In their study of rural north India, Jeffrey et al (2009) observed that among different ethnic groups, Muslim men abandoned formal education before completing it and some formulated critiques of formal schooling based on appropriate Islamic masculinity which emphasised withdrawal from the pursuit of worldly goods and schooling qualifications. Particularly those who joined *madrasas* enunciated the immorality of school education and its encouragement of consumerism and promoting a false view of modernity. They also spoke about earning less, but leading a happy life because they were following a Muslim way, or that tomorrow is in the hands of Allah and that what people do in life prepares them for the after world (Ibid: 144-5). In that sense, the authors argue, the withdrawal of young male Muslims from the labour market provided an alternative modernity and a recipe of how to live distinctively in the contemporary world, especially as they identified other spaces as sources to obtain knowledge and skills (Ibid: 202). Unlike Indians from other religions, the authors have found that young Muslim men did not seem to mind manual work as long as it was not humiliating (Ibid: 149).

## 8.8 Establishing family connectivity at the expense of social mobility

Some CSGs have turned a disadvantaged waithood within family's constrained financial conditions and no imminent marriage prospects, into a privileged situation in which they asserted their status as educated and

resourceful women within their own families and the close surrounding network.

Fawzia is a smart young woman aged 23 who scored highly in her preparatory school and had plans to continue her general education. She has always been an enterprising woman and had the right aptitude and skills that qualified her to begin a small business. Describing herself, she says:

My ambition was not to work in a grocery shop. I wanted to trade in clothes and appliances. I love to go to the market and trade there. In school I specialised in marketing and I was very good. My brain worked well. I wanted to continue my education and would have done very well. Other girls did not like school and did not like to type, but I liked that. After school, I would go home and start typing school exercises and sell them to the girls and at the end of the month I collected 50 or 60 pounds. I also used to do saving groups at school I wanted to open a big shop and to do it myself so that no one will one day tell me that he/she made me.

However, even before the results of her exams came out – and they qualified her to enrol in general secondary – Fawzia was out working in shops to support her parents and two older married brothers. Her father had been a government office helper, applied for an early retirement so he could use the end of service bonus to support his sons with their marriage, and when he finally accomplished that, he was left with no resources to support his wife and three children. Her two brothers, a police assistant and an electrician, are *de facto* living with them in the family house because of their insufficient economic resources. Fawzia felt responsible for maintaining a dignified life for her parents and siblings and saw her strength in her “good brain” and her flexibility to take up any job as long as it would cover their expenses. Every month Fawzia cashes her father’s pension amounting to EP 390 (US\$ 71) and it is her job, with this limited amount of money, to manage the needs of a family of nine: her parents and her brothers, their wives and children and herself.

In order to meet all these needs, Fawzia engages in three different jobs: a morning job in a factory, an afternoon job in the family’s small grocery shop which gets open or closed frequently depending on the availability of money. Fawzia was dismayed that although she was capable of running the family business, she was unable to “apply scientific

rules of management'. Her family was the shop's most fervent customers for whenever the house ran out of stock, they just took what they needed without paying. In the evening, she works in a NGO that offers social services to local residents.

Fawzia is inundated by her family responsibilities, but clearly enjoying the role of the "man of the house". She was the one who decided to sell her gold, and then her trousseau and other things in the house when there was a need for money. She says: "While they [family] is sitting there watching TV, they find the merchant passing by to pick up the dining table, because I have decided to sell it to get money".

Although they continue to reiterate their desire to see her married, Fawzia's parents are aware that they are unable to provide her trousseau. They also need their youngest daughter's economic contribution for their own survival. Thus, marriage is not a popular subject in Fawzia's home, and since she is the one who takes financial decisions in her house, she would decide when she was ready to be married. But for the time being, Fawzia has fully indulged in family matters that have themselves constrained her educational and personal aspirations. On the other hand, this situation remarkably improved her status within her family. Fawzia established "connectivity" (Joseph 1993, 1994) with (male) members of her family, which basically nurtured on their financial powerlessness and inability to take full responsibility for their families. This elevated her status and contributed to the break-down of patriarchal barriers.

## 8.9 Conclusion

This chapter examined young CSGs strategies in accordance to their habitus which defines and enables an understanding of the limits and possibilities of the social game and based on resources available to them. With this in mind, I presented a range of individual strategies that reflect in different ways, various levels of adherence to the social order based on each woman's location in time and place. In some cases women took advantage of new employment opportunities and the presence of new social actors that could push forward their cause and fight their social wars amid contestations of counterparts from the old middle class. Other strategies lie in women's attempt to create egalitarian work environments, while still condoning social divisions as dictated by divine order, and abstaining from questioning that order. Within their understanding

of those divine constraints, they nonetheless seek to narrow the gap between themselves and their employers by introducing the concepts of complementarity, equality and family among co-workers. As mentioned earlier, dignity has subjective and an inter-personal components. Narrowing those gaps brings them personal gratification and some dignity. We have to also note that strategies are designed in piecemeal fashion. Women go through the steps of acquiescence, proving their abilities and creating work hierarchies before they could claim narrower gaps. Some are proactive in introducing those arrangements and hierarchies especially when employers take a back position.

Some CSGs who have had a chance to experience aspects of middle class life sought to maintain those gains by appealing to the old middle class sense of moral responsibility. However, this comes at the expense of halting their occupational advancement. In contrast, others choose to defy and challenge the middle class on discursive grounds. The challenge, the narratives show, is played out at the intersecting point of class and gender. CSGs destabilise the discourse of middle class femininity and womanhood and make an equal claim to middle class values and social practices.

Other CSGs choose to forego prospects of social mobility for a secure marital arrangement but one that nonetheless challenges acceptable social norms. Others dismiss all together the notion of social mobility as mundane and unimportant, for a more worthy and liberating cause that at the same time places them at the risk of subjugation to a patriarchal order. Still others attach more importance and value to their families than their own individual prospects of social mobility. The trade-off is that they win power and special status among their family members and ease patriarchal grips.

What does this gamut of strategies tell us about CSGs agency and stance towards social mobility? The narratives demonstrate that CSGs often do not have clearly delineated projects of social mobility, but rather seek durable arrangements that actualise the life they have chosen for themselves. In fact, some of the strategies they adopt consciously undermine their opportunities for occupational and social mobility. The diverse strategies are not confined to a specific repertoire; they present a broad arena in which women stand as knowledgeable and resourceful cultural actors. The life strategies they adopt may be contradictory (for example the position towards the middle class) but they reflect women's

individual choices that in turn mirror their varying social locations and stage in the life course. For example, the needs of married women for a stable and secure life and their subsequent strategies may not appeal to a younger and unmarried woman's desire for exploration and readiness to indulge in new experiences. Strategies adopted by women may also have far reaching reverberations that go beyond them as individuals to affect their entire families and surrounding network. When CSGs are successful, they extend opportunities to their entire household including husbands, and may also be the source of income and status for extended families.

The strategies I presented here sought to challenge doxa and the consensual social order. The choices women make are derived from and governed by the structures of gender and class constraints at the cross-road of which they are located. Their choices seek to restructure social relations and contest dominant classification systems. As they do that, they break established gender norms, seek to penetrate class barriers and present alternative paths to modernity.

But again, what they can accomplish is bound by the possibilities and constraints presented by those structures, their individual understanding of their ability to manoeuvre the social order and their identification of gaps and weak and contestable areas which they are able to defy. They are careful that their defiance should not run the risk of taking the debates into the arena of orthodoxy that clearly defines what is right and what is wrong.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is borrowed from Bourdieu (1998: 86).

<sup>2</sup> This is in contrast to the foster-girl institution in Turkey known as *evlatlıks* whereby girls were expected to similarly serve for little or no money and an indefinite period of time, but also to be available for sex for male members of the household (Maksudyan 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The debate around domestic service has focused in recent years on migrant Asian and African female workers who – as a mechanism of poverty alleviation – leave their homes to work in other countries and send remittances to their families. Female migration for domestic work is also finding its way into Europe as an increasing number of educated East European women are moving to West European cities to work as domestic servants and it is in the context of these recent developments that the emphasis has started to shift to-

wards the impoverishment of the educated class. Many of these East European women are holders of university degrees but suffer unemployment and consider domestic service a transitional occupation to earn an income and ensure their presence in West Europe until they are able to move on to other jobs (See Lutz 2002: 95).

<sup>4</sup> An important variant of the discussion on domestic service has focused on its feminist implications especially as it pertains to 'difference' between women, the hierarchical relationship between middle class female employers and their working class employees that domestic work creates, and the extent to which some women exploit other women (Lutz 2002; Moors 2003- 2007; 2003; Romero 1998).

## 9

## Conclusions

This thesis has sought to assess the relationship between social mobility and education and explore how this relationship has been reflected in the life of CSGs in Egypt. It has departed from modernisation theses that attach great value to education emphasising in particular its role in social mobility. Throughout the thesis, I have argued that this has not been necessarily the case. Some types of education, such as the technical variant in Egypt, have indeed acted as social sieves that have allowed some through while restricting opportunities of advancement and stabilising the social structure. In fact, the continued presence of technical education in its entirety is a living evidence of educational inequalities whereby disadvantaged education has become an inescapable destiny for the poor.

In this work I have sought to understand the dilemma of why women have continued to study in commercial schools when all signs were pointing to dim prospects of social mobility. I have found answers in the changing role of technical education in Egypt's changing socio-economic and political context.

We cannot understand the role of education in social mobility separately from the role of the state in social engineering. This started with the vast expansion of education, assigning to technical education a revolutionary mission, promising social mobility to its students and guaranteeing their employment through the entrenchment of the public sector. The success of heavy state intervention in enhancing the image of technical education and putting it into productive use lasted a short time from beginning to mid sixties. It was as brief as the country's economic leap and growth. Otherwise technical education has always been vulnerable, even under the Nasser regime. It was only the state egalitarian vision – which did not have deep roots in society – that kept it alive and

moving. Once this vision could not be upheld through economic growth and development, technical education became tenuous and untenable. The years that followed Nasser, characterised by state retreat from public services, could be described as the real litmus test of the viability of technical education when its graduates stood alone to fend for themselves in the informal labour market.

Within the technical stream commercial education has always been a paradoxical branch. Its history has consistently been gendered and closely identified with women's "natural" leanings towards domestic, indoors, and non-manual office activities. Even when industrial and agricultural education was opened for women, they have been enrolled in specialisations considered appropriate to their aptitude and abilities "as women". However, commercial education has grown to be their niche. The feminisation of this specialisation along with downsizing the public sector and stalling economic growth – all put together – resulted in its severe neglect and relegation to the lowest position among the three technical streams.

On the other hand, the very rationale and characteristic of commercial education as a specialisation that emphasises office and clerical work entailed an inherent promise of social mobility, even after the noticeable deterioration in its status and the poor prospects of its graduates in the labour market. It is also important to remember that all along families have viewed education as a force for assertiveness and change and associated it with possibilities for advancement even when more recently, this goal seemed vague and far-fetched. In this respect, the momentum created by the 1952 revolution has not waned. Post Nasser's regimes sought to continue to fulfil public expectations of education, but mainly under pressure of public demand as they had lost track of the original egalitarian and social equity goals outlined by the 1952 revolution. But this did not discourage the poor from sending their daughters to commercial schools. For these families commercial education has always been a proof of their keenness to educate their daughters to the extent that their resources allowed them; it has also remained a symbol of breaking the legacy of manual work that dominated the women's natal families. This tense relationship between continued interest in girls' education and the hope that it might help advance their lives, on one hand, and constrained financial abilities and the growing realisation that commercial education had few prospects, on the other, creates an enduring paradox. Readers



might ask: since poor people received poor education, what is the point of this thesis and why is the question worthwhile to begin with? I remind them that the answer lies in the discrepancy between the original vision and the legacy of Nasser that continued to linger in people's minds and shape their expectations, and policies and directions after Nasser that sought to disadvantage them.

Social mobility is a process that implies change and movement; studying it offers the possibility to investigate the form and extent of social change inter-generationally and intra-generationally. My focus has been on intra-generational mobility through the close examination of women's life stories. But those stories revealed aspects of family life and brought in the role of parents and siblings in ways that I did not expect. Also, by comparing and contrasting the life trajectories of young women with the previous generation of CSGs, I have also learned a great deal about inter-generational mobility.

However, in the course of the study, I learned that social mobility was not only about change but also and in many ways about continuity. I have compared and contrasted the situation of young women to that of the older generation of CSGs. These are two groups of women who essentially shared the same social background and education but experienced the latter in two different historical times. In juxtaposing these two groups and moving between the individual, household and institutional levels, I have learned about elements of continuity and change and also the changing meaning of social mobility in changing contexts.

Within changing contexts, not only has the role of technical education been modified, but also employment, marriage and status have played different mediatory roles between CSGs as individuals and their social advancement. Public sector employment that was taken for granted two or three decades ago as an undisputed path to social mobility has no longer been evident. Compatible and timely marriages and employed husbands have not been the norm. The status which came along with public sector employment has now been lost and needs to be struggled for. While gender, class and status structures have governed CSGs opportunities for social mobility, the dynamics of their roles have not been the same throughout the two main periods covered by this study.

The focus of this work has been young women in the informal labour market which did not help them advance occupationally or socially. As soon as they left school, they set their eyes on the government to test if

they could “usurp” a job, only to discover the pervasiveness of new forms of gender and class closures: labour markets have been segmented along class lines, *Wasta* has grown in power and the need for social and cultural connections have been entrenched. Securing a job often meant compromising oneself. On the other hand, CSGs’ gendered and classed human capital has been an asset in the informal labour market since jobs were accessible to them. The caveat was that those jobs came with specific social boundaries and status limits. Closures have been exercised in the form of the attempts to close off women’s opportunities to rise into non-manual jobs which fulfilled their dreams of departing from their own families’ manual backgrounds. The jobs young women accessed denied them those aspirations and persisted on cornering them in indeterminate, ill-defined tasks that added to manual work a clerical tinge.

On the other hand, by their very contents and requirements, those jobs challenged CSGs’ self perception as educated women worthy of dignified treatment. They acted as catalysts that engaged them in daily contestations over their status. Employers have placed women in situations where they had to defy subordination on a daily basis. They usurped some rights, re-defined their jobs and insisted on their status as educated women. They educated their employers that poverty was not synonymous to immorality, and proved capable of taking on professional tasks. The frequent change of places of work has been a form of resistance to subjugation to bad jobs that denigrated their status as educated women.

The emergence of NGOs as a new kind of employer of women in Egypt’s political economy has not fundamentally changed the gendered dynamics of labour markets. In one case discussed here, NGOs reinforced constraining gender norms and emphasised the “housewifisation” of married women and their vulnerable position in the labour market. Instead of empowering women and enhancing their self esteem, they provided work opportunities that created a false sense of actualisation, constrained women’s physical mobility, and exploited them financially. In the case of young women’s employment, old middle class NGO managers provided an egalitarian discourse and projected a liberal image of themselves which young women sought to emulate. However, they could not uphold their support to young women in terms of sustained employment opportunities that could help them grow and ascertain their status. NGOs are not a single actor; they are diverse groups of individu-

als with different gender and class ideologies and views far from being homogenous and uniform. Their ability to enhance young people's social advancement is limited by their own inherent weaknesses.

The concept of agency which has been established as the key to women's empowerment and operationalised as choice – not any mundane choice, but one that is strategic and signifying access to resources and control over one's life (Kabeer 2008: 19-20). Moreover, the agency that matters from a feminist perspective is one that leads to a "journey in a desired direction" and opens new "access routes" for women to claim their rights.

The phrase the "desired direction" is central here. I have shown that social mobility for the older group mobility was a collective state engineered project which they aspired for, were promised and they got; it was given to them. Their job was to consolidate it. Their agency lies in exactly that. They have used this employment opportunity to acquire a middle class status and entrench themselves in their positions. I have argued, however, that this has not been an open experience of mobility, but rather one that has to be understood within its spatial and temporal parameters. It is delimited by the written rules of the bureaucracy that govern occupational advancement and promotions, and by the culture of the institutions which is being reinforced and structured by the employees themselves. In small moves women have sought to manoeuvre with the system for some occupational gains to overcome monotony and rigid rules of work. But in many instances, they have allied with the bureaucratic system, internalising its gender and class norms and excluding others who do not fit. They have contributed to reproducing the system and stabilising it.

For the younger generation social mobility has been more elusive; it has been an individual project that needed to be struggled for and they had to decide if they wanted to pursue that journey. And again, in making these decisions, this is where their agency lies.

There is little doubt that most of the CSGs are empowered in their reflective power, choice and use of available cultural resources which are largely shaped by available alternatives and also shape them. Studying social structures from the prism of continuity and change has allowed me to ascertain that not all structures are constraining nor are they always smothering. The multiplicity of inequalities opens up possibilities of liberation in that if one does not do well on one front, one can try on the

other. The life course approach which juxtaposes personal trajectories to historical times has also helped me locate different versions of women's agency in their actual experience and trajectories, while still not losing sight of the influence of other actors, such as the family, in shaping their trajectories and conditioning their choices. Depending on where women are in their lives, structures can be either constraining or enabling.

However, my argument all along has been that CSGs largely desire and choose what the structures allow them to have. In their separate ways, neither the public sector employees, nor the younger women in the informal sector have achieved more than what the social structures allowed them to acquire. But this should not be read as a case of adaptation to changed constraints in a fluid situation. Women have been good players of the social game; they demonstrated a nuanced understanding of what is acceptable, their rights and duties as daughters, wives, mothers and sisters under changing circumstances, what could be changed and how far they could stretch their actions. Unlike social mobility propositions which predicted things would happen automatically without the exercise of agency, women in this study did exercise agency in acknowledging constraints, but making the best use of the resources that the objective structures of gender and class offered them. This explains the diversity of strategies and their appropriateness to the different situations. Those strategies have included active resistance, silence, dismissal or compliance, all in concordance to the options they have.

One might argue that the idea of a totality is negated as the strategies have been so diverse that each has to be understood in terms of the aspirations and outcomes specific to each subject. Did I end up with 90 different life stories that need to be assessed each on its own? Where is the commonality of experience across the two groups of women?

I have argued that both groups of women shared the same social background in which this particular type of education had promises for professional and social advancement. From a broad perspective, they are a totality. The genesis of their social vulnerability is the same, but the forms of those vulnerabilities have differed. And it is exactly those contradictions and divisions within this totality that this thesis grappled with. For example, I found particularly intriguing the sense of rupture between the two groups. In my interviews the sub-sample of older women distanced themselves from the younger group. They described them as "uneducated and not cultured." A woman from the older generation said

“their level is not even equal to my level when I was at sixth primary.” The older women are clearly indicating that for them the younger women belonged to the non-middle class, non-educated category. The irony, at the same time, is that the old middle class does not recognise either of the two as worthy of its class membership.

There has also been an inherent assumption in this study that the experience of the older generation of women has shaped the aspirations of the younger generation of CSGs. Young women have had no close or concrete knowledge of the experience of the older generation in the public sector. With very few exceptions, the older cohorts were not the mothers, aunts or sisters of the younger ones. Parents of the latter were still mostly uneducated manual workers, just like the families of the older generation, indicating both the rupture in the experience of social mobility and that social change has missed many groups.

It is worthy to mention that the main interlocutors in the education decision dialogue for the young women were their parents, siblings and others in similar objective situations that relayed information they had heard or experienced in the labour market. Rather than identifying with the older generation as their living evidence of a past strong link between commercial education and social mobility, young women and their families were more fixated on the state as the main mover and driver of employment. This explains why even when messages had been passed that centralised employment was no longer enforced, a large number of young people still sought to approach the government for jobs. Bayat (2006: 148) argues that “an imagined social contract continued to linger on in the minds of most Egyptians” about the continued role of the state in organising their work and life.

The other part of my answer about totality lies in the nature of women’s strategies. As I argued, both on the family and individual levels, these have been largely un-calculative and based on the respondents’ general understanding of their position as a particular socio-economic and cultural ensemble. They are also rooted in their common sense understanding what their chances in life and possible realistic gains are. But once more, within those limitations, CSGs have devised strategies that reflected a remarkable amount of cultural astuteness. Their practical sense of strategies reflects a rich cultural repertoire, knowledge of how social structures work and the ability to take advantage of opportunities. Depending on CSGs social location and position in the life course, strat-

egies have ranged between the opposites of contesting the middle class to allying with it, attempting to restructure work relations and narrow class gaps between co-workers, dismissing social mobility as false consciousness and locating power and empowerment in what seems like patriarchal control and domination. Some of these strategies are employed to render work situations and social relations more humane and liveable, and ensure stability and some degree of professional and social upwards mobility. Others succeed in pushing back the limit of what is acceptable under changing conditions. Some of the innovative strategies that break gender and class norms confirm the point made in the introduction that just as habitus provides women with a sense of limits, it also offers them “a legitimate transgression of limits, on the basis of knowing and ordering of the world and strategies of handling necessary or unavoidable breaches of that order (Bourdieu 1977: 124).<sup>1</sup>

Certainly the details of the strategies have differed each according to women’s own circumstances and position in the life course. But behind each strategy is an endeavour to put in place dignified life arrangements not only for the women themselves but also for their parents, families and children. The dignity they seek has a social meaning. It is one that the more established members of the middle class seek to challenge and one that also epitomises the entire question of what education should do to people.

Relationality and emotional connectivity have played an important role in family and individual strategies. Women take responsibility for their families of parents, husbands, siblings and children. They are emotionally connected to their families and take up the burdens of care for others. They are aware that this sometimes comes at the expense of their own flourishing, but in the final analysis, it also establishes their positions as indispensable individuals and allows them to break some gender and patriarchal barriers.

Social structures are both sources of empowerment and constraints. As women make choices, they also make compromises. They may compromise a marriage for a job, or a compatible husband for financial stability or a career for a stable life or for narrowing social distances. As a result of different strategies, the outcomes have also been not the same. But those too have in common that they represent small gains and victories and have not shattered the intersecting structural constraints of gen-

der and class. CSGs extend the limits of the possible but they do not transform the social order in major ways.

Reading women's trajectories along the life course shows that choices vary; social mobility means different things to different women at different stages in their lives; some had an interest in pursuing their occupational career regardless of the tension it created within their families; for others social mobility was utterly meaningless. Many women did not have a social mobility project in the sense of aspirations to become rich or acquire the status of the more entrenched middle class. Their "desired direction" is not necessarily or deliberately a move upwards, but rather a stable and secure life. Their aspirations have been to be respected as educated women and be allowed to lead a dignified life.

How does the commonality of experience relate to men? Both men and women face together the same predicament and challenges of class and status structures. The general acceptance of class divisions as a divine arrangement but at the same time the plea for recognition as educated beings worthy of dignified treatment is common among men and women. Both may earn respect even admiration for disparate and specific acts such as their ability to juggle more than one job, their solidarity with their families and managing to survive on the little they earn, but on the other hand, the narratives have shown that they are paralysed by restrictive notions of status and class positions, by impositions on their mobility, both physical and social and most saliently, by job degradation. They had hopes that their education would break those barriers, but it did not. It did not bring them dignity.

Yet gender is also central to the study. To begin with commercial education is important because of its gendered nature. Also, there are indications that waithood might be experienced differently by men and women. As mentioned earlier, men do not remain without work for a long time and tend to take up casual jobs and have more access to the formal private sector. On the other hand, the fear of an extended marriage delay and spinsterhood for women, as well as their constrained access to private sector jobs has negative effects on their waithood and increase the pressure on them. Moreover, I have demonstrated that the trend towards clandestine migration with its connotation of adventure, the pursuit of freedom, risk taking and physical mobility is a monopoly of men. I have also shown that young men's restlessness and disappointment with the failure of their social mobility projects and their plea

for fraternal understanding for their persistent pursuit of a dignified life often find attentive ears. This is in line with conceptions of the proper masculine role of men as principal bread-winners even when this is no longer the case. It also assumes that unemployment is a male problem and domain, which the narratives recounted here have shown is not true.

Women suffer silently their ordeal with undignified jobs, hiding their low status occupations and maltreatment from their own children and resorting to symbolic acts – like not allowing their husbands to use the money they earn to buy unimportant things, to show the extent of their pain and the value they attach to the money they bring home at the high cost of their loss of dignity. The problems are the same but they are gendered in that men and women experience them differently and their strategies have been gendered. The point to make is that despite the centrality of gender to this study, it is not a polar concept of sharp opposition between women and men. Thus, it is not a question of which is more important: gender or class, but rather to discern in different situations, the intersection between the two, how they both work together and when one or the other is at work.

As we address continuity and change, it is useful to get a sense of where the older respondents believed they were heading in relation to their own children's education and their aspirations for the children's future. The picture is very mixed and requires further analysis which is beyond the scope of this study. However, many of the children of the older group of respondents in the public sector had also attended technical schools. Parents had assumed they would be able to secure them jobs in the public sector. Indeed some have been able to place them in jobs on temporary contract basis and have been struggling to change it into a long term open appointment. A few were trying to help their children open their own business. Some were considering non conventional types of work. One participant who was growing impatient with her daughter's daunting job search had been encouraging her to become a pop singer.

The younger respondents with younger children, on the other hand, have sent their children to public schools or other similar variants that are not costly but have good reputation. As was the case with them when they were students, they now have to deal with teachers' pressure for children's private tutoring and are at the same time struggling to ensure that it is not discontinued so that the children could have a smooth tran-



sition to higher levels. While some are adamant that the kids would follow the general (academic) track and go to university, others left their options more open and did not rule out technical education but hoped to send children to the more auspicious technical schools, products of joint cooperation with foreign countries like the Mubarak-Kohl schools.

Marriage has been brought up in the literature on social mobility as women's gendered route to social advancement. It has been viewed as central to women's lukewarm relationship with the labour market and therefore the inability to rely on them as agents of social mobility. In this thesis I have discussed the role of marriage in several locations within the framework of continuity and change to make different points. In the first incident, I have referred to marriage in the context of women's public sector employment, emphasising the compatibility of married partners and uniformity of their aspirations and experience (Chapter 4). I have also emphasised the tendency among young women to marry men of the same or lower social level, and how the status of married women in search for work at later points of the life course disadvantaged them (Chapter 7). Also in Chapter 7 I presented an example of a 'successful' across-class marriage, which thirty years after the marriage took place, left the wife unable to identify with her husband's middle class membership.

How do these narratives diverge from the claims about marriage made in the literature? First, marriage per se does not tell us much about women's social mobility; rather what matters is when it took place and under which socio-economic context. Second, this thesis has demonstrated that income or occupational advancement is not synonymous to social mobility in the Egyptian context; young married men who graduated from technical schools are no more agents of social mobility than their wives are; third, rigid status structures have minimised across class marriage and even when they do happen, it is not likely that a young CSGs would ever "pass" as middle class; fourth, while marriage may cause interruption of women's work and complicate insertion into the labour market at later stages, it is not women's intermittent relationship to employment that precludes their social mobility but rather the gender and class segmentation of the labour market and immanent status structures that have restricted their social advancement.

Paradoxically, it is often when marriage fails to enhance women's social mobility that their agency becomes visible as they balance the intri-

cate relationship between their gender roles and employment with the aim of stabilising their family life and creating favourable work conditions that they can live with. CSGs have demonstrated a high degree of resilience in accepting jobs they considered undignified for their status as educated married women. Often they had to deal with the tension of having to protect their status as married women, with the image of the man as the provider of the family and settling in jobs that are acceptable to the community. However, even when the jobs are satisfying and promising, CSGs do not fully enjoy their rewards or pay enough attention to the prospects of career making, as they walk on a tight rope to balance their responsibilities as wives and mothers with the demands of their jobs.

In this work I have provided a critique of the theories of social mobility whose propositions provide a blueprint of processes accompanying economic development, and hence lend themselves to criticism in light of opposing experiences and contrasting empirical evidence. My work has shown that social mobility does not come automatically as a result of education and work, nor is it necessarily a desired objective in life. I have presented a more varied picture of occupational movements in the less theorised horizontal and downward directions and emphasised notions of inertia, standstills and moving in vicious circles. Using the same tools of education, status, marriage and employment referred to by social mobility theorists, I have provided a different picture of gender and class dynamics in non-Western settings. I argued in this thesis against the parochialism of the early propositions that un-problematically viewed marriage as a route for social advancement for women while confining employment to men. Neither marriage nor employment per se guarantees occupational or social mobility for CSGs. While the narratives have pointed to the malleability of gender structures in the face of societal exigencies, this thesis makes the strong point that status constraints are immanent and represent a central source of social closure and perpetuation of inequality.

Where is technical education heading? We must remember that tracking into technical and secondary schools is the policy that has ensured that demand on university is kept under control. In order to control admission into universities and limit young people's demand on jobs, the government has created a group of young people who do not see themselves qualified to pursue general secondary education. At the present

time, the majority of graduates of preparatory schools see technical education as their destiny. Once they are in technical schools, they rarely make it to university while about 80 percent of the general secondary students – essentially the wealthier group – do. Recent policies have sought to create a balance between technical and general secondary enrollments, and expand the proportion of young people who attend university. In order to do that, it would be necessary to expand the pool of technical secondary graduates who are eligible for university admission. The question is: are they going to fill these additional places?

In order to move toward equity in higher education access, it would be necessary to provide more good quality general secondary education for students from poorer backgrounds. A policy that seeks greater equity in university access will have to address not only the number of seats available, but also the financial and social reasons poor students shun general secondary and university education. These policies must address directly the needs of students from poor families and begin well before students are at the secondary school stage.

Increasingly the Egyptian government has been concerned about upgrading the quality of education in technical schools, paying more attention, as mentioned earlier to industrial schools because of their direct link to industrialisation and economic growth. Both agricultural and commercial schools seem to fall by the way-side and the government has not yet addressed the central question of whether there is any real need for them in their currently expanded form.

To date, the government has shown no understanding of how previous policies have contributed to the consolidation of technical education as a low status type of education. In a TV programme in May 2010 in which the minister of education was a guest, the anchor tried in vain to emphasise the point that the problem of technical school graduates was much more profound than the question of quality of education. He stated that bad quality may partly justify the massive unemployment of technical school graduates, but it could not explain why the minister would not marry his daughter to a technical school graduate.

During the last five years, the government has been sending out messages on the need for a “new social contract” the essence of which is that welfare services could no longer be afforded and it was time for a “paradigm shift” to re-arrange state society relations. The government planned to continue to cut down on central provision of public services;

it has continued to encourage the active participation of civil society organisations in generating employment opportunities and has emphasised the values of entrepreneurship and innovation. The state has been rewarding social entrepreneurship and encouraging diligent, pro-active and forthcoming citizens who did not wish to rely on the state for livelihood. The bulk of the state budget for public services is now earmarked for SMEs and training on new skills appropriate for the labour market.

Simultaneously, there has been a discourse about the procrastination of young people and their reluctance to follow the jobs where they are as well as an alleged mismatch between skills of graduates and the needs of employers. Others wonder whether we are not over-blaming the education system and not paying enough attention to the more structural deficiencies of the labour market. A major labour market survey is now underway to find out what the labour market needs and expectations of employers really are. Meanwhile, there is a strong trend in the government that has been pushing for remedial solutions in the form of teaching the disadvantaged young people foreign languages and computer skills. My sense is that such a course of action is likely to be a misnomer that would further disadvantage technical school graduates. This study has demonstrated that the problem goes way beyond knowledge of foreign languages and computers.

In January 2011 millions of Egyptians from all walks of life took to the streets in the events that led to the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak. On February 11, after 18 days of massive public protests, Mubarak was brought down. It was a revolution led by Egypt's youth. Foremost and across the board, young and educated men and women made deafening demands for "freedom, bread and social justice". Young men and women stood shoulder to shoulder in *Midan El Tahrir* shouting for a dignified life: end of corruption, their right to decent jobs and life for themselves and their children. They have also demanded good education and end to nepotism and *Wasta*.

Since January 2011, the revolutionary scene and political priorities have been changing by the day. At the moment, the concern is to put in place a civic and democratic system of government. To date, no attempt has yet been made to ponder reform measures and policies to bring about more equity and social justice. Standing<sup>2</sup> claims that the precariat "... is a mass of people, but as yet it has not seen itself as a class for itself. They may change, for better or for worse." The next months, per-

haps years will reveal if young people would continue to resort to collective action or if they, especially women, continue to strategise individually again.

However, amid the current mayhem when it is still not possible to discern clear directions for the future, one thing is certain: young people have made themselves visible as they took their lives in their hands and created enough national momentum that there will be no going back. There is every reason to believe that political and socio-economic contexts are changing again, that the old common sense has become dysfunctional and no longer appropriate for the future. Young people are pushing for a new doxa in which political freedom, equity and social justice poses itself as a viable demand.

I want to end with the following: we have not stopped believing in the transformative power and value of education especially for women. The MDGs and human development paradigm seem to be reiterating many of the claims of modernisation theory seeing education and employment as the road to progress and enhancement of freedoms. I think we should keep on asking what education and employment do to us and what they enable us to achieve. My hope is that by bringing some insights into the role of education in social mobility, we have learned more about the nuanced and intersecting relations of class and gender in contemporary Egypt.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Bourdieu appears in the introduction, but I would like to remind the reader of it again here.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/italia/documents/news/ue\\_e\\_societa\\_civile/forum\\_poverta\\_napoli\\_-\\_guy\\_standing.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/italia/documents/news/ue_e_societa_civile/forum_poverta_napoli_-_guy_standing.pdf)



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**Laws**

Labour laws no. 112 of 2003 and 137 of 1981

Education laws no. 261 of 1956; 22 of 1956; 75 of 1970 and 139 of 1981

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