

Carrying bread, Al-muski,
Cairo, Egypt. CC BY 2.0

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Masculinities and Transition in Egypt: Country Brief

“Every day I watch my privilege being eroded and my opportunities shrink.”

(27-YEAR-OLD MALE GRADUATE, UNEMPLOYED, CAIRO)

This brief is based on a larger study (Edström *et al.* 2019) (that also includes Kazakhstan, Turkey and Ukraine), which explores how transition in different countries has been experienced by different groups of men, and its impacts on gender relations. It aims to assist the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and other stakeholders to consider ways of engaging men as agents of positive change for gender equality – alongside women and girls – as well as to complement women-focused projects and investments to enhance both the resilience of transitions and equality of opportunity.

Since 2014, ‘transition’ in Egypt has focused on ‘economic and social rights’ instead of political rights, leading to economic reform which has not been matched by equal political reform. This is emblematic of the challenges of gender interventions in Egypt: a gender-equitable economy will continue to be forestalled by the absence of a masculinities agenda and a more holistic approach that seeks to engage with the social and cultural aspects of gender development work.

Gender inequalities continue to characterise the Egyptian economy; the country is ranked 132 (of 144) in the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index. Estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO) (2017) show stark and persistent gender disparities in labour force participation (21.9 per cent women, 66.8 per cent men), employment-to-population ratios (16.9 per cent women, 61.3 per cent men) and unemployment rates (23.1 per cent women,

8.3 per cent men). Research shows that private sector employers shun young women because their expected marital and family commitments will ‘reduce productivity’. This has resulted in the unemployment rate for recent female graduates reaching 20.5 per cent (compared with 3.7 per cent for men) (National Council for Women (NCW) 2017). Career progression opportunities for women are also limited: estimates suggest that just 17.8 per cent of Egyptian firms have female participation in ownership, while only 4.9 per cent have women as top managers (World Bank 2016). Gender differentials in wages have also risen sharply over the past two decades.

Similarly, among young people of working age (15–24 years), women are less likely to participate in the workforce (18.7 per cent compared with 38.7 per cent of young men) and more likely to experience unemployment (38.4 per cent of women compared to 25.7 per cent of men). The ILO (2012)

has estimated that employment in the informal economy in non-agricultural activities in Egypt was around 51.2 per cent in 2011. However, up to 60 per cent of women working in the informal sector undertake unpaid care work (CAPMAS n.d.).

Gender and development research in Egypt tends to frame questions about men solely in terms of barriers to women's economic advancement. Only recently have questions been raised about men's own gendered experiences and attitudes, and how they experience the changes in gender relations created by women's empowerment. For example, little is known about how men feel about their bodies, ageing and sickness, as well as the demands placed on them by work and the social expectations of their peers and families. Recent studies of Egyptian masculinities have highlighted that a significant minority of men hold gender-equitable views, are invested in child-rearing, and may require support for their mental and physical wellbeing (El Feki, Heilman and Barker 2017).

Policy context and study methods

Over the past decade, Egypt has made efforts to address gender issues in access to finance. In 2007, the Ministry of Finance identified gender gaps in policies, programmes and services that inhibit women's ability to establish and sustain small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and has taken measures to improve women's access to finance (Ministry of Finance 2007). In 2017, the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Agency (MSMEDA) reported that 50 per cent of the enterprises it had provided loans to were owned by women (MSMEDA 2017).

The government has also addressed gender issues in basic social protection. Approximately 2.3 million families have enrolled in the Takaful (Solidarity) (conditional cash transfer) and Karama (Dignity) (unconditional cash transfer) programme funded by the World Bank (2017), the vast majority of which (88 per cent) are female-headed households. The NCW also has an ambitious national strategy to improve women's political participation and strengthen their economic and social rights by 2030 (NCW 2017).

The study on which this brief is based drew from the EBRD's SME activities, specifically: (1) Business Advisory Services; (2) women's credit lines; (3) SME credit lines to banks; and (4) direct loans to SMEs. This reflects the EBRD's first Egypt strategy priority as well as the largest sector (55 per cent) of its Egypt portfolio (EBRD 2017: 4–6). The SME sector contains a diverse range of businesses engaged in manufacturing, artisanal and craft industries, and the knowledge and service economies. In total, 22 semi-structured interviews were conducted and five field visits undertaken in two metropolitan locations (Cairo and Alexandria) over a three-week period. These involved five female business owners, three male business owners, four male employees, two males working in the informal economy, and four gender experts, activists and social entrepreneurs.

Findings

Men are resistant to women's entrepreneurship

Women and men suggested that Egyptian men were not supportive of successful businesswomen. When asked to explain this, men tended to describe Egyptian society as 'Eastern' – a common trope denoting family values and gender roles centred around the primacy of male authority. While there are signs of changing attitudes on women's right to work, men still fear women gaining financial independence, and young women entrepreneurs are seen as 'unmarriageable'.

Traditional views of men's role as economic provider remain strong

Both men and women believed that under 'normal' circumstances, men should be the main provider for the family and that women's employment was a response to economic necessities (rather than rights, aspirations or choices). There is a widespread belief that when job opportunities are scarce, men should be given priority due to their 'natural' role as provider/breadwinner. However, a number of young men in social entrepreneurship and the tech sector distanced themselves from these ideas.

Women's care burdens are acknowledged but not addressed to ensure equal opportunities

Employers tended to cast themselves as gender-blind when hiring or argued for a 'common sense' gender complementarity at work. They tended to blame Egyptian society and culture for curtailing women's careers rather than questioning their own hiring and retention practices. Instead, individual women were seen to be responsible for creating the circumstances conducive to sustaining work while not compromising their duties as daughters, wives and mothers. These views were held by women and men alike. Egyptian gender and business experts also seem to echo these attitudes, suggesting that women needed to be better 'organisers' and 'planners'.

Gender stereotypes affect young men and young women in the workplace

Some employers reported negative experiences of young men of all social classes, believing that men no longer want the responsibilities of 'being a man' while still expecting to enjoy its privileges. Many employers feel that young men (particularly those who are unskilled or semi-skilled) are work-shy and



An Egyptian woman worker stacks bricks at a brickyard kiln factory near the town of Mansoura city, 210km north of Cairo. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

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unable to commit. A preference for women workers was also widely expressed, based on their 'diligence' and 'commitment' to work. Yet, employers were resigned to the idea that young women (both skilled and unskilled) were high-turnover employees, inevitably giving up work for marriage and motherhood. None of the employers interviewed reported offering maternity leave or any other support, despite maternity leave being mandated under Egyptian law.

Men's uptake of care work can help support women's economic advancement

When asked how men could help support women, ideas about being emotionally and practically supportive were the most common responses. Research suggests that few Egyptians consider it shameful for men to be engaged in caring for children and undertaking domestic work, yet 98 per cent of men and 85 per cent of women believe that changing diapers, feeding and bathing children are the mother's sole responsibility (El Feki *et al.* 2017). In-depth interviews suggested that in practice, many men do contribute to childcare, but to a far lesser extent – if

at all – to domestic duties. UN IMAGES data suggest that 44.6 per cent of men and 53 per cent of women would welcome a short period of paid paternity leave.

Many men struggle to fulfil the demands of masculinity in the face of transition

Egyptian culture creates inextricable links between being a provider and being a 'real man'. Many male respondents reported struggling to provide for their families in the wake of the flotation of the Egyptian pound (in November 2016). Migration was a prominent theme in men's accounts of the future. For young men in formal employment or in search of employment, inflationary pressures have forestalled their aspirations to move out of home, buy or rent property, get married, and start a family. For those in the informal economy, inflation has affected their ability to meet the costs of basic household provisions, adequate health care, or schooling. Most distressing for these men was the inability to gift their families or to provide for their futures. Their accounts spoke of anxiety about the future, feeling depressed, hopeless, and resentful of policies perceived as impoverishing the most vulnerable.

Strategic implications and recommendations

International financial organisations project a positive macroeconomic outlook for Egypt while maintaining that price hikes, a large informal sector, high youth unemployment, and low labour force participation and gender disparities remain perennial challenges and vulnerabilities. Gender-positive interventions must find a balance between creating new opportunities for women on the one hand and addressing the prevailing gender cultures across a range of work settings on the other.

In Egypt, a 'common sense' gendered division of labour exists, which further strengthens the gender stereotypes on which training and work opportunities are designed. Meanwhile, projects that involve men are not seen to include any obvious gender component, reflecting an assumed gender neutrality in relation to men at work. In order to continue to promote gender equality in Egypt, international financial institutions need to also address this 'masculinities blind-spot' and consider men's gendered needs at work by addressing the following:

- **Internal capacity:** Integrate men into the development process and encourage positive masculinities. This might include gender assessments for men, encouraging positive masculinities by inviting men to engage in work with/by women, giving prominence to the relationship

between work life and home life, inviting men to training sessions for women, offering men a period of paid paternity leave to promote men's reproductive role, and promoting *stereotype-defying examples to disturb gendered monopolies on work or training*.

- **Investments:** Include gender- and masculinities-aware human resources (HR) advice in business advisory services. This might include an organisational culture component within HR advice to encourage companies to see the benefits of offering maternity and paternity leave.
- **Technical support:** Involve and consider men in training that targets women. This is particularly important, as female entrepreneurs in Egypt are often in partnership with their husbands and share responsibilities for their businesses. Excluding such business partners from training initiatives not only limits their utility to many female clients, but can also result in dropout.
- **Policy dialogues:** Champion positive examples of supportive male partners to highlight that work-life balance is not solely women's responsibility. *More prominence should be given to discussions of men's reproductive roles, child-rearing practices, and their work-life balance in gender/needs assessments of businesses and projects that employ men.*

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Recommended citation

Aly, R. and Greig, A. with Edström, J. (2019) *Masculinities and Transition in Egypt: Country Brief*. Brighton: IDS

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which made this study possible through positive practical and material support. We would also like to express our sincere gratitude to the TaiwanBusiness EBRD TC Fund for financing this study.

Conclusions and opinions expressed in this brief and study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or official positions of either IDS or EBRD.

This brief is based on a study on Egypt under the EBRD-funded project 'Masculinities and Transition: Enduring Privilege?' available at <https://menandboys.ids.ac.uk/>

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ISBN: 978-1-78118-524-7



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