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# Survey of Young People in Egypt Policy Brief Series

SYPE Policy Brief No. 4

## FEMALE DISADVANTAGE IN THE EGYPTIAN LABOR MARKET: A Youth Perspective

By Maia Sieverding



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The 2011 Global Gender Gap Report ranks Egypt 122<sup>nd</sup> out of 135 countries in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity. This is due in large part to women's marked disadvantage in the Egyptian labor market. For young women, this disadvantage is intensified by the difficulties faced by all new labor market entrants, including delayed school-to-work transition and low-quality jobs (Assaad 2008). In other words, female youth face challenges in finding decent work both as women and as young people.

The doubly-disadvantaged position of female youth in Egypt's labor market must be addressed in order to narrow the large gender gap in economic opportunity. In this brief, three aspects of female youth's disadvantage in the labor market are analyzed: low labor force participation, high unemployment, and concentration in the public sector. These issues are closely interrelated and can be addressed through a set of policies that promote family-friendly employment conditions and the formalization of the private sector. The establishment of job search services for female youth is also critical to addressing the gender gap in unemployment.

## Key Messages

- Labor force participation among female youth is very low.
- Female youth face higher unemployment rates and longer unemployment durations than male youth.
- Female youth continue to show preference for public sector employment.
- Family-friendly work policies are needed to encourage more female youth to enter the private sector.
- Job search services can help combat restricted mobility and weaker networks among female youth seeking work.

## Data and methodology

The recommendations presented in this brief are based on an analysis of the 2009 Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE).<sup>1</sup> SYPE is a nationally representative survey of 15,000 youth aged 10–29 in Egypt. The analysis in this brief is restricted to the working-age youth population aged 15–29. Furthermore, the analysis is restricted to youth who are not currently attending school, because

<sup>1</sup> SYPE was conducted in cooperation with the Egyptian Cabinet's Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) and funded by multiple donors.

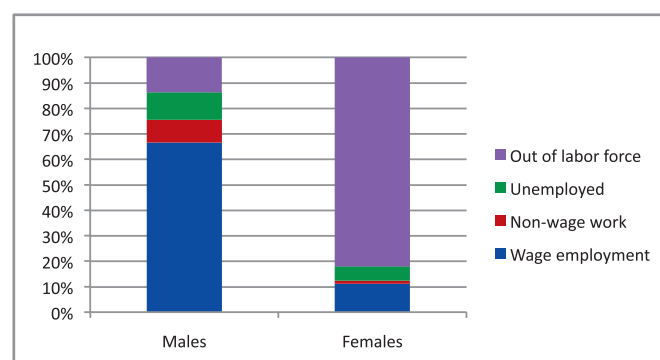
youth who are still studying are not expected to be available for full-time economic activity. Labor force participation among this group is therefore likely to be underreported.

## Labor force participation among female youth remains low

The level of economic activity among female youth is strikingly low relative to their male peers. As shown in Figure 1, fully 82.1% of nonstudent female youth are out of the labor force, compared with only 13.6% of nonstudent male youth. This means that 6.5 million female youth are neither in school nor working, a significant underuse of Egypt's human capital resources. Of these young women, 59% are married, which, as discussed below, may be the reason for their nonparticipation in the labor force. However, the fact that the remaining 41% are not married clearly indicates that even unmarried women face considerable barriers to labor force participation.

The difference in labor force participation (LFP) between male and female youth is largely driven by the small percentage of female youth who are engaged in wage employment (only 11.2%). The percentage of female youth who are unemployed is also smaller than that of male youth, indicating that females are less likely to be actively searching for employment. Female youth appear to face significant barriers to labor market entry, barriers that are dramatically reducing Egypt's productive labor force.

Figure 1: Labor force participation among non-student youth aged 15–29, by gender

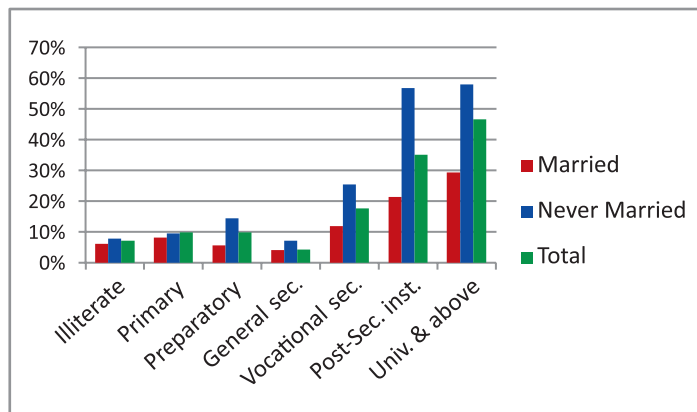


## Education and marriage are strongly associated with labor force participation

Education is a strong determinant of labor force participation among women in Egypt, and female youth are no exception. Higher educational attainment is associated with greater labor force participation (Figure 2), and particularly greater participation in wage employment, because individuals with post-secondary or vocational

secondary education have in the past been guaranteed jobs in the public sector (Assaad and El Hamidi 2009). Whereas less than 10% of female youth with a general secondary degree or lower are in the labor market, this figure increases considerably among those with a vocational secondary (17.7%), vocational post-secondary institute (31.5%), or university degree (46.7%).

Figure 2: Labor force participation rate among nonstudent female youth aged 15–29, by education and marital status



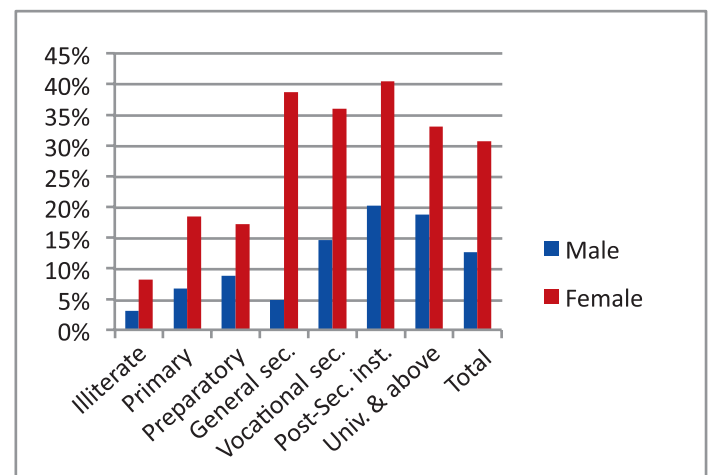
In addition to education, marriage is strongly associated with whether or not female youth are economically active. LFP among married female youth is 11.4% compared with 25.3% among those who have never been married. Overall, 66% of female youth who were not in the labor market said that this was because they were housewives. The fact that 87% of female youth with a university education who were not in the labor force gave this reason suggests that conflict between work and family roles can lead even highly educated women to leave the labor force. Figure 2 shows that the LFP rate among married female youth is lower than that of unmarried female youth at all levels of education. These figures clearly suggest that many female youth perceive or experience incompatibility between work and family.

## Female youth face higher unemployment rates than male youth

Unemployment in Egypt is a problem that primarily affects youth; more than 90% of the unemployed are young people (UNDP and INP 2010). For female youth, the problem is particularly severe. At 30.7%, the unemployment rate among nonstudent female youth aged 15–29 is 2.4 times the unemployment rate for nonstudent males (12.6%) in the same age range. This corresponds to approximately 426,000 unemployed female youth nationally. Despite the fact that fewer female youth enter the labor market than male youth, they face greater difficulty in finding employment.

Figure 3 illustrates that the unemployment rate among female youth is higher than that for male youth at all levels of educational attainment. The gender gap in unemployment is highest at low levels of education; among illiterate youth, the female unemployment rate is three times that of males, whereas at the university level it is twice that of males. However, the level of unemployment is higher at higher levels of education, reaching 40% among female graduates of post-secondary institutes.

Figure 3: Unemployment rate among youth, by education and gender



Unemployment rates are likely higher among more educated youth because they have increased expectations for the type of job they would like to get, expectations that are often not met in Egypt's difficult labor market (Assaad 2008). Among the university educated, 19% cited the lack of work suitable for their qualifications and 16% the lack of work with suitable pay as their main reason for unemployment. Female university graduates were particularly likely to mention the lack of jobs suitable to their qualifications, indicating that for this group employment conditions are very important.

## Female youth stay unemployed longer than male youth

In addition to suffering from higher unemployment rates, female youth face longer periods of unemployment than their male counterparts. The average duration of unemployment among youth in Egypt is 120 weeks, or more than two years. Among males the average is 109 weeks, and among females 141 weeks, which approaches three years. The longest unemployment durations are experienced by female youth with vocational secondary degrees (173 weeks) and vocational post-secondary degrees (177 weeks). Although vocational education is generally intended to provide youth with employable skills, these figures indicate that it is not helping young women find jobs more quickly. This may be due in part

to the low quality of vocational education in Egypt (Population Council 2011) as well as to the mismatch between skills taught in vocational education and those needed in the private sector (Assaad and Barsoum 2009).

The average unemployment duration among female youth is 2.7 years.

Geographically, youth residing in Upper Egypt face the longest unemployment durations (163 weeks). Married female youth also experience longer unemployment durations than unmarried female youth, at 171 and 123 weeks, respectively. This suggests that those who are married have a harder time finding employment that they are willing to accept.

### ***Female youth are less connected and less mobile in their job searches***

One reason for the high unemployment rate and long unemployment duration among female youth may be that they are disadvantaged in terms of job search methods. As shown in Table 1, unemployed female youth are more heavily dependent on the government in their job search. Actively searching male and female youth are equally likely to register in a private employment office, but female youth are much more likely to register in a government office or enter a government job competition. The gender gap in government office registration is even larger at higher levels of education, as a result of the history of employment guarantees for vocational secondary and university graduates. Thirty-two percent of female youth with a vocational secondary degree and 44% of those with a university degree use government office registration as their only job search method. This is strong evidence for female youth's continued willingness to queue for public sector jobs and shows that they have not yet fully adjusted to the freeze in public sector hiring.

In addition, female youth are less likely to use methods of finding private sector employment that require mobility, namely inquiring at work location or contacting an employer. Furthermore, only 36.5% of female youth asked friends or relatives for help in finding a job, whereas 60.4% of male youth did. This is despite the fact that just over half of female youth (53.5%) said that a connection (*wasta*) is more important than skills in finding a job. Finally, female youth were half as likely as male youth to use either a landline or a mobile phone in their job search. Young female job-seekers thus appear to suffer from limited social connections relative to their male peers,

placing them at a considerable disadvantage when trying to find employment.

**Table 1: Youth's methods of job search by gender, percent of active job searchers reporting use of method**

	Males	Females
Register in a private office	11.3	11.0
Register in a government office	14.4	35.5
Enter a government job competition	13.7	50.7
Sent job application	39.8	42.7
Inquired at work location	34.2	15.0
Contacted employer	26.8	7.8
Asked friends or relatives for help	60.4	36.5
Used landline in any of above methods	47.4	23.7
Used mobile phone in any of above methods	45.1	20.1

### **Female youth are concentrated in the government sector**

The continued preference for public sector employment among female youth is further demonstrated by the fact that 37% of employed female youth are in the public sector, compared with only 10% of employed male youth (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The public sector appears to be particularly attractive to married female youth who are working, 52% of whom are in this sector. Female youth are correspondingly less likely to be working in the private sector, and particularly in informal and irregular wage work.

### ***Many female youth report poor working conditions in the private sector***

Continued preference for the public sector may be related to reports of poor working conditions in the private sector. Youth of both genders were more likely to complain of maltreatment by employers in the private sector (21% of males and 25% of females) than in the public sector (18% of both males and females). Likewise, both male and female youth were more likely to experience long work hours (41% and 52%, respectively) or an exhaustive workload (38% and 45%, respectively) in the private sector. Notably, women in both the private and public sectors were more likely to report having long hours and exhaustive workloads than males, possibly because of the added burden of housework that they bear.

Figure 4.1: Composition of employment among male youth

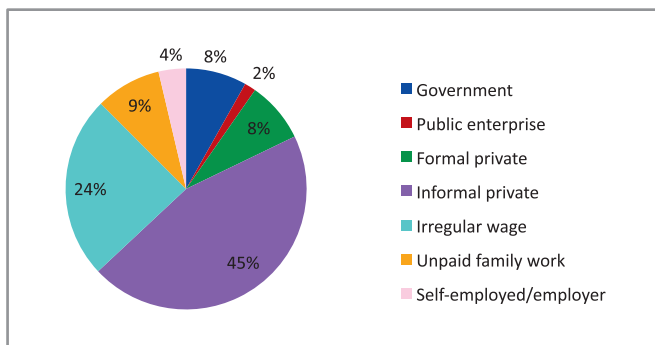
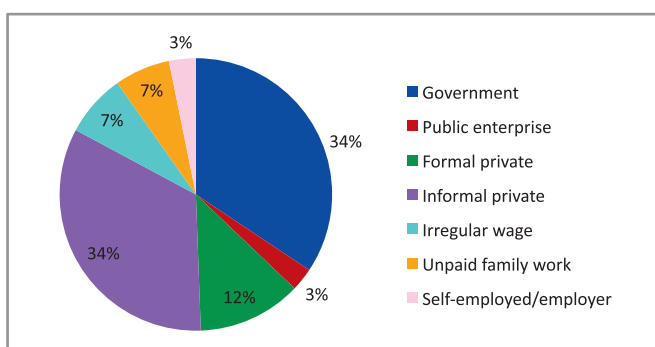


Figure 4.2: Composition of employment among female youth



In addition, 62% of employed female youth said that they had ever been exposed to sexual harassment, 58% of those in the public sector and 64% of those in the private sector. In general, female youth were also much more likely to be concerned with harassment as a daily risk on the street, with 32% saying it was one of the most serious risks they faced on the street, compared with only 2% of men. Pushing, crowding, and theft were also daily safety issues that female youth were more likely to be concerned about than males.

## Policy recommendations

The three aspects of female youth's disadvantage in the labor market discussed in this brief—low labor force participation, high unemployment, and concentration in the government and services sectors—are closely related and can be addressed by some of the same policy measures. The evidence provided in this brief suggests that the Egyptian labor market presents difficult, discouraging conditions for young women that severely restrict their desire and ability to be economically active. In order to increase labor force participation among female youth and to encourage them to stay in the labor market at older ages, policies need to promote “woman-friendly” work environments. This includes measures to help married women balance work and family roles, as

well as measures that address issues of harassment, job security, and workers' rights that affect all women in the labor market.

### *Improve “family-friendly” employment options*

That female youth perceive incompatibility between employment and their other social roles as young women is evident in the lower labor force participation of married female youth at every level of education. Incompatibility between work and gender roles contributes to young women's continued preference for public sector employment as well as their greater likelihood of being unemployed as they queue for such employment opportunities. Young women's continued attachment to public sector employment, which is more accommodating of women's family roles (Assaad and El Hamidi 2009) and more likely to provide social protection benefits, is evident both among employed women and among those searching for a job.

Improving “family-friendly” employment options in the private sector could help overcome the work-family incompatibility that keeps female youth at home. This includes providing more part-time employment and work-from-home options. Increasing the number of employers that offer benefits such as maternity leave, nursing breaks, and health insurance is also critical to encouraging female youth to enter the labor market. Improving quality child-care services, particularly at work locations, is another important step toward this goal. Furthermore, the introduction of family-friendly employment policies in companies and sectors that do not traditionally employ large numbers of women could encourage female youth to expand their employment options.

### *Encourage formalization of the private sector to make conditions more welcoming for women*

In addition to being concentrated in the public sector, female youth are less likely than male youth to be employed in informal and irregular wage work, suggesting that they see these forms of work as undesirable. Complaints of poor working conditions are also higher among female youth working in the private sector. These findings concur with other studies that have found that conditions in the private sector are an important issue for young women workers (Barsoum, Rashed, and Hassanien 2009). In combination with the preference for public sector employment, this indicates that formalization of the private sector could help create a work environment more encouraging to female youth. Enforcing the

issuance of contracts, social insurance registration, and the fair provision of pay and benefits is important to making the private sector more attractive. Establishing an effective agency that can receive and act upon complaints regarding workplace treatment is also critical to creating a more secure workplace environment for female youth.

### ***Provide job search support for young women***

The fact that female job seekers are less likely to rely on personal connections or to use phones in their job hunt suggests that they have weaker networks than male youth when it comes to finding work. Adult women in the Egyptian labor market have similarly been found to be less active in their job searches and more dependent on registration at government offices (Abdel Mowla 2011). This suggests that women are systematically disadvantaged in terms of their ability to find jobs, a problem that begins during the period of school-to-work transition. Job search services should therefore be provided at vocational schools and universities to teach female graduates employment-related skills, including soft skills, and link them to employers that provide good working conditions. These services will help female youth build a skill set that will help them find employment and be more upwardly mobile throughout their careers.

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