

POLICY BRIEF **03.22.23**

Gender and Migration in Egypt: Searching for the Independent Migrant Woman's Voice

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

International migration literature has historically focused more on men than women. When early migration scholars began theorizing about the migrant subject, they generally disregarded gender as an analytical tool. Their main subject of focus in the field was the male migrant. Interestingly enough, Ernst Ravenstein, the founder of migration theory, gave considerable attention in his migration laws to the participation of women in migration. He wrote that “woman is a greater migrant than man,” noting that women “migrate quite as frequently [as men] into certain manufacturing districts.”¹ Despite Ravenstein’s reflection on gender in migration, the majority of scholars in the field have neglected the presence of women in migration theory and practice. This history of gender-blindness continues in the study of certain migration contexts today.

In criticism of traditional migration theory, some scholars have agreed that mainstream migration scholarship has been “gender blind or even overtly sexist.”² Before the 1980s and 1970s, it either neglected migrant women’s experiences or rendered them visible only as a secondary category dependent on the migrant man. When depicted in the literature, women (and children) were often studied as subjects that mainly migrated to accompany and reunite with the breadwinner migrant husband.³ However, as “women played an

increasing role in all regions and all types of migration,” the field gradually began to incorporate the study of migrant women.⁴ Meanwhile, there was a rise in the migration of independent and single women, rather than just wives, mothers, or daughters.⁵ From the 1980s onward, scholars began to not only highlight the presence of women in migration but also to criticize the idea that women only migrate to join their husbands, explaining that women also take the initiative to migrate.”⁶ By 2000, about half of the world’s migrants were women⁷ — making it increasingly necessary to employ gender as an analytical tool in understanding international migration.

Still, a gendered approach has not been adopted fully in migration studies. In the library on migration in the Middle East and North Africa, such an approach is still uncommon. With the exception of some examples from the Maghreb countries, particularly Morocco, migration literature on the region remains predominantly focused on the migrant man’s experience.⁸ And, despite the “increasing feminization of international migration in the past decades,” the migration of women still lacks attention, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa.⁹ The Egyptian context attests to this reality; independent Egyptian migrant women are underrepresented in both theory and practice.

This policy brief draws attention to the limited representation of independent Egyptian migrant women and discusses



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the likely factors behind the absence of women's voices in the field. It also highlights the positive impacts that can stem from Egyptian women's migration, including higher remittance flows and the empowerment of women in Egyptian society. Finally, the brief concludes with a number of recommendations for both researchers and Egyptian policymakers.

GENDER AND EGYPTIAN MIGRATION: THE ISSUE OF NUMBERS AND DATA

The literature on Egyptian migration reflects a male-centric research interest, where the majority of the knowledge produced is about migrant men, particularly those residing in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This literature, grounded in the numbers, reflects the reality of men's dominance in terms of migration participation. The result is that men are the standard subject of study, and men's migration is the principal experience investigated in the field. For example, according to a 2019 bulletin published by the Egyptian government, women held only 2.7% of the total work permits issued for Egyptians to work abroad that year.¹⁰ That being said, the reliance on numbers and statistics has entrenched a false perception that, compared to men, women do not participate greatly in international migration. According to Laura Ferrero, "the Egyptian migration practice and interpretative discourse that emerge create a dichotomy between the image of a 'mobile' man — entitled to act in the transnational sphere — and an 'immobile' woman."¹¹

To further illustrate the gap represented in the country's numbers, a sample of Egyptian migrants included in a 2013 Egypt Household International Migration Survey (HIMS) comprised only 2% women out of 5,847 migrants in total.¹² Other studies in the literature have also highlighted the existence of a significant gap between men and women in their intentions to migrate; approximately 6.7% of young Egyptian women intended to migrate in 2009, compared to 29.7% of young men.¹³

While these numbers appear to indicate a lack of participation among women in Egyptian migration, migration statistics should not be taken at face value. They do not fully capture everyone who is on the move, leaving many individuals and groups unaccounted for. In addition, in the context of Egyptian migration, numbers fall short of explaining why women appear to migrate less often than men, and they seldom help in understanding the phenomenon in depth. Thus, there is a need for more research that highlights women's experiences and employs gender as an analytical tool in the study of Egyptian migration.

SHIFTING THE FOCUS FROM DEPENDENT TO INDEPENDENT EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN

In the context of Egypt and, more broadly, the Middle East, scholars have explained that gender and family dimensions have not been common tools in the study of migration because of "the lack of independent female migration from the Arab world."¹⁴ With regard to Egypt, the majority of the literature focuses on women who are left behind by migrant husbands and woman-headed households of migrant men living abroad. Only a few studies have focused on unmarried Egyptian migrant women. In addition, single migrant women from the Arab world — and particularly Egypt — who seek work do not form a major category of migration.¹⁵

Local customs and traditions — often rooted in patriarchal norms brought forth by post-colonialism and the project of modernity¹⁶ — may play an important role in limiting the migration of women. As Swati Parashar writes, "the postcolonial state is gendered in its constitution and practices, historically privileging men and hegemonic masculinity."¹⁷ The result is the distinction between men and women in different spheres, including migration.

With this in mind, I emphasize the idea that, in the knowledge produced about Egyptian migration, independent and single migrant women's experiences remain sidelined, thus deserving greater

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attention and interest from the part of scholars. The inclusion of their voices is of great significance, for their experiences can contribute to a better understanding of Egyptian migration, the dynamics that shape it, and the role that factors such as social norms play in decisions about migration.

SOCIAL STIGMA AND 'HONOR' DRIVING IMMOBILITY AMONG WOMEN

In the Egyptian context, a woman migrating is seldom a mere individual or economic decision. The migration of women needs to be understood within a larger framework that takes into consideration family and society. These two influence migration decisions through social norms and traditions that can stigmatize the mobility of women's bodies. In the words of Ferrero, "not only women's mobility but also women's aspirations to mobility have to be considered within the family framework."¹⁸ This framework takes social standards and norms into consideration in the study of migration.

Families tend to abide by social norms in order to fit in and to be perceived as "good" or "honorable." This applies to the case of migration; mobility, especially, that of women, can be subject to social stigma from family members, relatives, neighbors, or friends. This stigma toward the mobility of women is not a surprise when we investigate migration within the structure of patriarchy, which often excludes women from the public sphere and limits their role to the confines of the home and family. In the literature on women's migration, we find examples that attest to this reality. In the case of Bangladesh, for example, "social stigma is strong enough to discourage the vast majority of lower-middle and middle-class women from leaving the country."¹⁹

In this context, patriarchal morality also plays a role in dictating women's confinement to the private sphere and the fixation on their principal role as mothers and wives. It justifies the control over their freedom and right to seek opportunities away from the home, where they may interact with foreign men. As such, it is important to study women's migration in

Egypt in light of the social structures that can influence their imagination, decisions, and mobility. As Ferrero writes, "female ambitions of mobility in a country like Egypt can be expressed in accordance with the roles assigned to women by their society,"²⁰ meaning that, when deciding to migrate, women do not simply make individual decisions, but rather perform and abide by the social norms that supposedly apply to them.

While this is important to emphasize, it is equally important to highlight that women often challenge social norms and move beyond what society and their families expect of them, oftentimes choosing to participate in international migration. Moreover, it is essential to note that migrant women need not be considered as one homogenous category; rather, we should pay attention to the differences and similarities that exist among them — including their education level, skills, social class, religion, and geographic background, among other things — which all can be important elements influencing their prospects of mobility.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EGYPTIAN MIGRANT WOMEN

Due to limited gender-disaggregated data on Egyptian migration, it remains difficult to provide a comprehensive description and categorization of Egyptian women's migration. Indeed, as established earlier in this brief, the single migrant woman has not historically been the common profile of migration among Arab, and especially Egyptian, women.²¹ However, several studies have presented some numbers and data from surveys that included Egyptian migrant women in their research samples.

One of the main characteristics of Egyptian migrant women presented in the literature is a greater level of education in comparison with their men counterparts. In a study about Egyptian returnees, the European Training Foundation (ETF) found that "although few females migrate, those who do are better educated than male migrants."²² According to the ETF,

approximately 80% of Egyptian migrant women who returned to Egypt were highly skilled. In terms of language skills, for example, “87.6% of women spoke at least one foreign language besides Arabic, while 43.4% of male returning migrants said they did not speak any foreign languages.”²³ When it came to their primary field of study or expertise, the ETF showed that the major field of study was educational science, followed by health and the humanities.²⁴ However, to learn more about the current trends and characteristics of Egyptian migrant women, it remains important to conduct new and thorough research.

Another characteristic to underscore in this section is that, while Egyptian men most often migrate to the countries of the GCC, where family reunification is not allowed, most Egyptian migrant women follow their husbands to countries in the West or migrate independently to seek economic opportunities or education. More than half of this population has a university-level education.²⁵

POSITIVE IMPACTS ON THE HOME COUNTRY AND THE INDIVIDUAL MIGRANT

Also important to highlight are the potential positive impacts of women’s migration. The limited literature regarding this theme suggests that there is a weak link between Egyptian women’s migration and development in the home country.²⁶ In the broader literature on women’s migration, however, there is a relative consensus that the “migration of women within and from developing countries affects the development process itself for those countries.”²⁷ This belief stems from claims that, for example, migrant women seem to remit more money to their families than migrant men do, which may contribute to the improvement of their families’ living standards and alleviate poverty.²⁸ The literature also suggests the existence of a social value to women’s migration, since “the empowerment of women will affect subsequent generations, providing children with different female role models

and helping to influence ratios of girls to boys in primary, secondary, and tertiary education.”²⁹ Not only that, but regarding gender and migration, “achieving greater gender equality, or developing gender-specific migration policies, would not only benefit individual migrants, but also enhance the development effects of migration.”³⁰

This is why, Nadine Sika suggests that there needs to be an implementation of “positive migration policies” for Egyptian migrant women to contribute to development in the country as a whole.³¹ For Sika, the patriarchal Egyptian context, as well as government policies, impedes the right to free movement and mobility of Egyptian women, which, in turn, impedes development.³² Middle Eastern and North African countries in particular tend to be “protective of their female migrants,” in that the state in some of these countries can be strict about issuing passports to women. The issuing of passports can be “dependent on the agreement of either the spouse or the father of the female concerned.”³³ These restrictions, according to Sika, also exist in Egypt, where the government enables mostly those women who want to join their families abroad to get a passport, whereas “females who want to migrate alone and attain a work permit abroad find the government far more restrictive.”³⁴

By 2010, the Egyptian government had become even stricter with the issuing of working permits to migrant women abroad, especially in the Gulf.³⁵ Sika argues that these policies and approaches are restrictive of women’s rights and equality as required by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, while these are important arguments to highlight, state policies toward women’s migration in Egypt and how they translate into reality remains an important subject for further research, hence the following recommendations for researchers and policymakers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reduce the social stigma and shunning of women's migration through campaigning (media, education, and awareness campaigns) and highlighting success stories and achievements of migrant women abroad and the value they add to their home countries and communities.
- Raise awareness about the potential contributions of women's migration to society. This could be, for example, through acknowledging the impact that their remittances have on alleviating poverty for their families and increasing investments in human capital back home.
- Engage migrant women living abroad with their home countries' consulates and embassies to strengthen their transnational ties and keep them informed about national matters.³⁶
- Promote good governance in order to gain the confidence of migrants abroad, including women, to enhance their transnational ties to their home countries and their contributions to the countries' development.³⁷
- Raise awareness about investment programs and incentives for migrant women. For example, provide information for migrant women abroad, as well as pre-departure guidance and training, and give them resources that they can use to help manage their remittances.³⁸

RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage more studies to provide gender-disaggregated migration data and promote both qualitative and quantitative research on Egyptian women's migration to develop a better understanding of the subfield.
- Focus on the role that the Egyptian state plays in encouraging or discouraging women's migration, as well as policies related to migration and their implementation.

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