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# The Economic Imperatives of Marriage:

Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth  
in the Middle East

DIANE SINGERMAN

THE MIDDLE EAST YOUTH INITIATIVE  
WORKING PAPER



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# ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES OF MARRIAGE

Policy interventions and research agendas must be developed with sensitivity to the political and economic dynamics in the region, but this cannot occur without engaging young people. If they remain excluded, alienated, economically vulnerable, and perpetual adolescents, it is the region that will suffer both politically and economically.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Middle East today is a very youthful region, due to the consequences of the demographic transition. As mortality declined and life spans rose, youthful cohorts are now marrying later in life. Delayed marriage has become the norm, particularly for men who may not marry until their late twenties or thirties. The political and economic context of delayed marriage is causing debate and controversy in the Muslim world, since early and universal marriage had been the norm and sexuality had been linked to marriage.

The consequences and meaning of the youth bulge in the region, however, can only be fully comprehended if we examine the political economy of youth through the lens of the “marriage imperative.” It is not only the demographic transition, the greater participation of women in the labor force and education, changing gender norms, or globalization which has delayed marriage. The financial costs surrounding marriage (housing, dower, jewelry, celebrations, furniture and furnishings) themselves may be the source of delayed marriage as young people and their families wait years before

they can accumulate the massive sums needed to marry.

In Egypt marriage costs averaged four and a half times GNP per capita (LE 20,194 or approximately US \$6,000 in 1999) and eleven times annual household expenditure per capita. The marriage burden was particularly harsh for a household living below the poverty line in rural areas whose marriage costs were 15 times per capita household expenditures. For those marrying between 2000-2004, marriage costs had risen to LE 32,329 according to a new 2006 comprehensive labor market panel survey.

This extensive survey underlines the financial challenges which marriage poses for people across the Egyptian economic spectrum. In the poorest quartile of waged workers, fathers and grooms saved their entire earning for eight-eight months, or more than seven years, to accumulate the costs of marriage. The next-to-the-lowest wage quartile of grooms and their fathers saved their entire earnings for fifty-nine months or nearly five years.

Economists speak of the phenomenon of “wait unemployment,” or enduring long periods of unemployment, particularly by educated young people in countries with large public sectors, to secure a high paying ‘permanent’ position with good benefits. In a similar vein, many young people in Egypt and throughout the region experience “wait adulthood” or “wait hood” as they negotiate their prolonged adolescence and remain single for long periods of time while trying to save money to marry. Young couples and their families must simultaneously keep two goals in mind as they negotiate these issues: both work and marriage. Decisions and plans about one goal affect the other and ignoring one comes at expense of meeting the other goal. Unfortunately, there has been a resounding silence around the economic dynamics of marriage and thus many youth and parental attitudes and decisions as well as policy interventions surrounding the school to work transition seem to make no sense without incorporating marriage into the calculus. Policymakers must rather consider the school-to-work-to marriage transition when designing strategies to improve the lives of young people.

“Wait hood” places young people in an adolescent, liminal world where they are neither children nor adults. In this liminal state, young people remain financially dependent on their families (who, in large part finance the costs of marriage) for far longer than previous generations and they must live by the rules and morality of their parents and the dominant values of society which frown on unchaperoned fraternization and unmarried relationships. Yet, as more and more men and women delay marriage, the institution of marriage is changing and new marriage “substitutes” and sexual norms are emerging beyond the margins of society. The contortions that young people experience as they negotiate the risky field of dating and mating leave them feeling alienated as they live a “don’t ask, don’t tell” reality.

“Wait adulthood” not only refers to the consequences of delayed marriage and mixed feelings about parental dependence, but it also suggests “waiting” to negotiate one’s identity as governments or religious movements try to discipline youth as good Islamic subjects, nationalist and developmentalist rhetoric suggests they should become productive citizens who will develop the nation, or neoliberal frameworks encourage them to become ardent globalized consumers.

At the same time, young people object to inaccurate portrayals of them in the media and the frequent moralizing about their supposedly hedonistic, selfish, and Westernized ways. Many of them feel that policymakers bury their collective heads in the sand when it comes to their problems, and they are rarely, if ever, invited into the conversation about potential solutions.

If young people feel disempowered and politically excluded, even as they remain patriotic and nationalistic, then this only exacerbates overall exclusion of youth in the Middle East. Young people struggle to educate themselves, find employment, marry, and transcend “wait adulthood” yet they have few opportunities to participate in deliberations about their future.

Policy interventions and research agendas must be developed with sensitivity to the political and economic dynamics in the region, but this cannot occur without engaging young people. If they remain excluded, alienated, economically vulnerable, and perpetual adolescents, it is the region that will suffer both politically and economically.

Even though young people are more educated than ever and many of them are already contributing to their growing economies and polities, their predicaments deserve greater attention and further research, not only to ease their financial and social pressures, but also to improve and inspire their societies with their skills, their ambition and their energy.

## INTRODUCTION

In a recent article in *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, two experts were asked to explain why so many Egyptian men have become the male equivalent of spinsters. The sensationalized title of the article read: “By a Margin of 2 Million ... Egyptian Young Men are Ahead of Young Women in ‘Onoussa’ (Spinsterhood).<sup>1</sup> The gendered use of the term *‘Onoussa* is almost mocking of Egyptian masculinity, implying that men have been reduced to the status of old maids. Dr. Ahmed El-Magzoub, professor at the National Council for Social and Criminological Research, complained that Egypt has 9 million people over 35 who have never been married—5.5 million young men and 3.5 million young women. In Syria, another headline asks “Spinsterhood and Bachelorhood in Our Country...Where To?” (Dadeekhy 2006). Historically, bachelors were rare in the region as older men married younger women and rarely remained widowers or divorcees.

This genre of articles implies something problematic or threatening about the new cohort of permanent bachelors, *al-Ragil Al-‘Aanis*, in the region. Public authorities are also worried about the cohorts of Arab women who are no longer marrying during their teenage years. In Saudi Arabia, in an unusual session of the advisory Shoura Council—unusual because 50 female experts were invited—the guests and male council members explored the high cost of marriage (COM) and debated its causes and implications. In particular, they were critical of the high *mahr*, or dowry, which they argued was an impediment to marriage and thus responsible for producing a wave of spinsters that had reached 1.5 million women out of 16 million people (Al-Zubaydi 2001). According to this discourse it was the high cost of marriage which has led to delayed marriage rather than the demographic transition, globalization, educational gains for women, global norms of gender equality, youth culture, or reduced fertility rates. The sensationalized headlines about the numbers of spinsters reverberated in the press and provoked debates about the cost of marriage and new controversial substitutes for conventional marriage. Throughout the Middle East, it is clear that marital practices are changing and raising serious debate and concern among the public.

Demographers generally agree that delayed marriage has become a regional phenomenon and it is partially linked to the demographic transition. A variety of policy interventions and normative shifts ushered in the “demographic transition” as mortality declined, life spans rose, fertility declined, maternal and child health-care improved, and the literacy gap between men and women fell (Cincotta, Engelman and Anastasion 2003). The new age structure produced by improvements in infant mortality and delayed fertility declines has created a youth bulge typical of the demographic transition. Across the Middle East, 60 percent of the population is under the age of 25 (World Bank 2004, 5). Nearly one in five people is between the ages of 15-24 (Assaad and Roudi-Famhimi 2007, 1).

While demographers have explained these trends in detail, they have paid less attention to the political and economic context of delayed marriage and the troubling, unintended consequences of the demographic transition on youthful age cohorts and their parents. In the Muslim world, adulthood historically has been linked to early and universal marriage, and while adolescence is defined typically as the period between the ages of 10-19, as delayed marriage becomes the norm, young women and particularly young men remain adolescents until their late twenties and early thirties. The proportion of Egyptian women aged 20-24 who were married by age twenty in 1970 was 65 percent, while this proportion dropped to 41 percent in 1995 (Rashad and Khadr 1998). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the percentage of women aged 15-19 who were married dropped from 57 percent in 1975 to 19 percent in 1987 and to 8 percent by 1995. Similar strong declines are prevalent in countries such as Libya and Kuwait (Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Famhimi 2005, 1). In Egypt, according to the 2000 Egyptian Demographic Health Survey (DHS), while 43 percent of women aged 40-44 were married by age 18, among 20-24 year olds the proportion has fallen dramatically to just under 20 percent.

This has been welcome news to many policymakers who targeted early marriage as particularly detrimental to the relative power, education, and labor force participation of women. Improving women’s



education and labor force participation rates also were instrumental to declines in fertility and improvements in maternal health (Ali 2002). Yet, later age at marriage for both women and men has produced new social and economic difficulties for young people and their families as gender, social, and sexual norms, economic expectations, and the institution of marriage has not kept pace with these complex interrelated phenomena. This paper argues that the fertility “benefit” of delayed marriage has been compromised by the social, moral, sexual, and economic costs of protracted adolescence for both women and men. Prolonged adolescence compromises the full participation of young people in their societies. Unable to live up to societal financial and social expectations, alienation and dissatisfaction may follow. As some young people grow pessimistic about their future they also have become critical of the political and economic status quo.

The cultural meaning of adulthood is still defined by marriage—a girl (*bint*) becomes a woman (*sit*) when she is married, whether she is sixteen or sixty. In Lebanon, Tunisia, Algeria, and Palestine, we are witnessing more noticeable trends of what demographers call, “female celibacy,” or unmarried women between the ages of 35-39; it is assumed that women exceed the age at which they can marry after 35 (Mensch 2004; El-Tawila and El Khadr 2004). Most demographers still believe marriage is close to universal, although that is being challenged by these older cohorts of unmarried women. Anthropological and sociological scholarship is rich in portraying the significance of marriage in Middle Eastern society (Shafey 1998, 39; Tapper 1991; Hoodfar 1997; Singerman 1995; Rugh 1984; Mir-Hosseini 1993, 1999; Joseph 1996; and Sonbol 1996). However, the economic dimensions of marriage are only beginning to be addressed. In other words, we know more about the demographic picture of late marriage than its causes and consequences, and we know very little about the financial aspects of marriage and the presence of marriage in the larger economy.

Through statistical, economic, political, and anthropological data, this paper first highlights the financial pressures that marriage places on young people and their families. The paper argues that we

must conceptualize the political economy of youth through the lens of the “marriage imperative” because the financial investment in marriage takes years to accumulate and influences other key transitions of adolescence, including schooling, employment, education, and identity formation.

As this paper will show, delayed marriage for women, and particularly for men, leads to “waithood” as opposed to adulthood, where years of adolescence and an ambivalent, liminal social status produces anxieties for both parents and their children. We need to understand how young people negotiate “waithood” as they remain unmarried and financially dependent on their families late into their twenties and thirties. How are the expectations of young people changing as they forge new rules, institutions, identities, and social imaginations within particular cultural and political environments to realize their ends? Policy interventions need to be designed to ease the financial and social pressures on young people and capitalize on the productive and dynamic aspects of a youthful Middle East.

The paper begins with a statistical analysis<sup>2</sup> of the national costs of marriage based on the preliminary results of the Egyptian Labor Force Sample Survey conducted in 2006 under the auspices of CAPMAS, the Economic Research Forum, and the University of Minnesota, directed by Ragui Assaad (see details below).<sup>3</sup> It is only in Egypt where this data has begun to be collected as part of larger surveys, but comparative ethnographic research throughout the region has demonstrated that marriage costs are high in many other Middle Eastern countries as well (see Singerman and Ibrahim 2001).

The second part of the paper discusses some of the social and political repercussions of delayed marriage. These repercussions are reflected in the rise of new discourses and debates about sexuality and morality, generational conflict, the rise of a “marriage black market,” and conflicts about identity because youth are negotiating and trying to reconcile contradictory public and private norms, values, and expectations. The media, academia, and government policymakers have begun publishing debates on pre-marital sex, drug abuse, crime, suicide, dating, changing gender norms, and morality in the

*...we must conceptualize the political economy of youth through the lens of the “marriage imperative” because the financial investment in marriage takes years to accumulate and influences other key transitions of adolescence, including schooling, employment, education and identity formation.*

region, and although some of the sources used below may lean toward the sensational, their tone reflects the anxieties in the public realm about these issues. The second half of the paper on the social consequences of delayed marriage and high marriage costs are geographically focused, although not exclusively limited to Iran, Syria, Morocco, and Egypt.

“Bringing back the economic” to a discussion of demographic trends and delayed marriage must be understood in terms of the larger focus on social exclusion of Middle Eastern youth. While consumption, production, and employment usually are stressed in approaches to social exclusion, it is important to remember its relational aspects and the ways in which exclusion “entails distance or isolation, rejection, humiliation, lack of social support networks, and denial of participation” (Silver and Miller 2003, 8).

If adulthood equals marriage in the Middle East, exclusion from marriage or delayed marriage compromises full participation in society. Amartya Sen’s theoretical work on measuring the quality of life is also instructive (1981). This measurement uses the notion of entitlements, or what people are able to be—for example, healthy, well-nourished—and do (i.e., produce). Capabilities “refers to the set of entitlements that people are able to achieve, which defines the choices they have, and which ones they

can obtain” (Assaad and Rouchdy 1998, 8). In the spirit of Sen’s notion of capability poverty, it seems that one of the most basic understandings of an entitlement, or what people are able to do, is to reproduce the family, or marry; many young people feel that this goal is elusive.

For example, in a report discussing women’s rights, the project staff was surprised at the emphasis on economic rights when Egyptians discussed human rights. “Uniformly in these focus groups, regular Egyptians of all walks of life—younger or older, Christian or Muslim, illiterate or college-educated—almost exclusively focus on the most basic essentials of life—food, housing, and jobs that provide for these essentials. Younger Egyptians, particularly those unmarried or recently married, express anxiety about housing and their troubles finding a suitable and affordable place to live.” As one young newly urban Alexandrian educated woman said “[Human rights mean] financial rights, because the country is deteriorating. Things are becoming more and more expensive, and in general there is an economic slump. I’m getting married, and I can’t get everything I need” (Katulis 2004). New research on the costs of marriage, described below, has documented how expansive young people’s “needs” for marriage really are. In this paper, an argument will be outlined about the macroeconomic consequences these costs have for society and the economy.

## I. A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA ON MARRIAGE COSTS

The high entry costs to marriage and delayed age at marriage for women and men has been addressed in ethnographic research, including my earlier study of the politics of the Egyptian *sha'b*—or popular classes. The question of marrying off the younger generation dominated the financial concerns and social strategies of many families and communities (Singerman 1995). Individuals, couples, parents, extended families, and the local community were engaged in facilitating this goal. The cost of marriage, divided into six basic component costs—housing, furniture and appliances, gifts of gold to the bride [*shabka*], dower [*mabr*], celebrations, and the bride's trousseau [*gibaz*, *kiswa*] including clothing, kitchenware, less expensive furnishings, and smaller household items—was so high that many young people spent years accumulating marriage costs—maintaining their status as “children” despite being 25 to 30-years-old (in graphs below the *gibaz* is referred to as “other”).

The lag between engagement and marriage in Egypt is reflected at the national level by a new census category which was introduced in 1986 by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS): engaged but not married. Between the 1986 and 1996 Egyptian census, couples caught in the stage between *katb al-kitaab*, or signing the marriage contract—which means one is legally married—and the final stage of establishing marital residence, *gawaz*, and consummating the marriage had increased four-fold. The material demands of marriage have unexplored ramifications as families pressure their daughters to marry any suitor with cash in hand, young men drop out of school or migrate abroad to work two or three jobs to save for marriage, and parents risk their financial future and indebt themselves to accumulate the sums for marriage.

Until the first study of the cost of marriage in Egypt, all surveys mapping demographic and economic phenomena almost completely ignored the costs associated with marriage, even though every Egyptian knew about the momentous effort needed to launch the next generation (Singerman and Ibrahim 2001). Unfortunately, the insights of ethnographers often fall on deaf policy ears if they are not generalized and supported by nationally aggregated data. Simi-

larly, the lessons of single case studies in the discipline of political science are routinely dismissed as too particular or quaint narratives that have no relevance to theory and policymaking (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Social scientists, more recently, have encouraged triangulating research—using various methods to support and expand one's empirical research (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). This project began from an understanding of the norms and requisites of marriage based on extensive ethnographic research and then collected aggregate data to explore the meaning and national impact of the financial struggle surrounding marriage in order to communicate with those disciplines and policy actors which are more appreciative of statistical evidence.

The first limited study of the costs of marriage was based on a national household expenditure survey in 1999 that the International Food Policy and Research Institute (IFPRI) conducted in conjunction with the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade and Supply.<sup>4</sup> A simple “marriage module” was designed for their survey about the cost of marriage, who bears those costs—the bride, groom, bride's family, or groom's family—and how parties to the marriage accumulated the large sums. In this way, it was possible to outline a national map of marriage costs in Egypt and examine its internal variation (Singerman and Ibrahim 2001, Singerman and Ibrahim 2001a).

Due to the richness of this data and a subsequent larger study, the paper concentrates on marital dynamics in Egypt. At the conclusion of the case study on Egypt, however, additional information on marriage costs elsewhere in the region will be provided. Adding a simple marriage module to national surveys in other countries can help to build a comparative database that can inform policymakers and further refine our knowledge of the systemic forces behind youth exclusion and ways to redress it.

Marriage costs averaged LE 20,194 in 1999 (about US\$6,000). This is four and a half times higher than GNP per capita and eleven times annual household expenditure per capita (Singerman and Ibrahim 2001, Singerman and Ibrahim 2001a). The average cost of marriage was equal to the entire expendi-

tures of all the members of a household for two and a half years—that is, the sum of the expenditures of all members of one household. The marriage burden was particularly harsh for those households living below the poverty line in rural areas—fifteen times per capita household expenditures. The generally lower marriage age for this group makes their situation even more difficult.

Another way to think about the magnitude of this economic campaign is to estimate the value of marriage costs in the national economy annually. Since an estimated one in twenty of all 13 million households in Egypt experienced a marriage each year according to the 1999 survey results, the national cost of all 650,000 marriages equaled LE 13.11 billion, or US\$3.867 billion. This figure, by comparison, dwarfs total economic aid to Egypt from the United States in 1999—\$2.1 billion. It also exceeds total foreign remittances (\$3 billion) from 1.9 million Egyptians migrants working abroad, and approximately equals tourist revenues (\$4 billion) from the 5.5 million tourists who visited Egypt in 2000 (Vignal and Denis 2006, 116; Saad 2002 as quoted by Williams 2006, 271). Clearly, marriage transactions

are financially significant in the national economy and deserve greater policy attention.

Due to the small size of this initial survey (N=405 households), further opportunities for research and collaboration were pursued with Dr. Ragui Assaad and a more extensive marriage module was added to the first Egyptian longitudinal survey, the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey of 2006 (ELMPS 06). This marriage module asks questions of women aged 15-49 nested within the larger labor force survey (N= 8,349 households; 37,140 individuals), allowing the creation of age cohort data far beyond the information available in the 2000 DHS or any other previous surveys. It further allows synthetic analysis of demographic, marriage, education, employment, and earnings questions.<sup>5</sup>

This new, much larger survey (8,349 households) suggests a similar range for the costs of marriage but the figures are actually higher than smaller IFPRI study (405 households) suggested. The nominal national cost of marriage for the same period in the ELMPS 06 survey was an additional LE 5,511 or LE 25,705 for those marrying between 1995-1999. Within five years, the nominal cost of mar-

**Table 1-1: Total Marriage Costs Relative to Annual Household Expenditures Per Capita, IFPRI '99 Study, N=405HH\***

	Total Cost of Marriage for Households			Total Cost of Marriage Relative to Household Expenditure Per Capita		
	Above the Poverty Line	Below the Poverty Line	All Households	Above the Poverty Line	Below the Poverty Line	All Households
<b>Urban</b>	34,012	8,822	24,969	11	9	10
<b>Rural</b>	19,680	11,219	17,373	10	15	12
<b>Total</b>	24,688	9,466	20,194	11	12	11

Source: IFPRI Study (1999)  
\* Figures are in Egyptian Pounds.

*The average cost of marriage was equal to the entire expenditures of all the members of a household for two and a half years—that is, the sum of the expenditures of all members of one household. The marriage burden was particularly harsh for those households living below the poverty line in rural areas—fifteen times per capita household expenditures. The generally lower marriage age for this group makes their situation even more difficult.*

riage for those marrying between 2000-2004 had risen to LE 32,329 a 25 percent increase. The greater size and complexity of the ELMPS 06 survey should clearly lay to rest any concerns that marriage is not a significant factor in the Egyptian economy.

Due to the richness of this survey, it is also possible to understand the interaction between employment, career paths, education, age, and the relative burdens of marriage across the population. In this preliminary stage of analysis, only the earnings data of waged workers were available—as opposed to those

who were employers, self-employed, housewives, students, and unemployed—and there was limited data on female earnings because of their low labor force participation rate.<sup>6</sup> Thus, to fully utilize the costs of marriage module, a merged data set was created of all married couples between the ages of 15-49 to link the husbands to their married wives in the module.<sup>7</sup> While a complete analysis of the economic and contextual trends surrounding marriage based on this data set is beyond the bounds of this paper, the analysis focuses upon younger married cohorts or those married after 1989.

## II. DELAYED MARRIAGE IN EGYPT

The sample confirms that delayed marriage is increasing with time in Egypt although the average length of engagement only has increased by two months to equal 13 months today. A quarter of ever-married men in the sample marry between ages 30-40 and about 15 percent of the women marry over the age of 25.

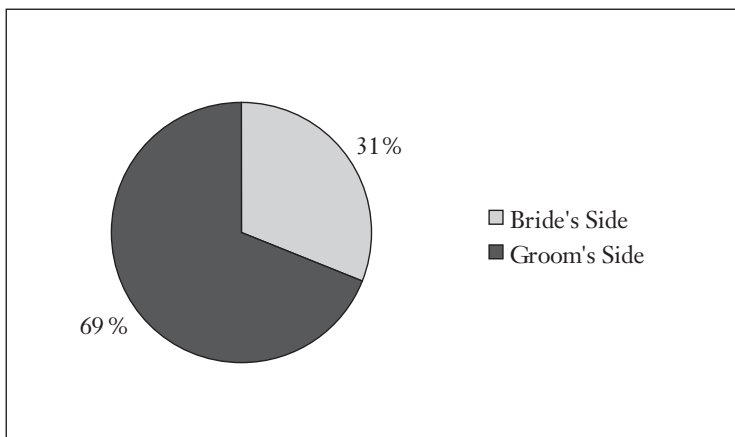
If we further divide the sample by region, we see that nearly 34 percent of urban males marry between ages 30-40 in their first marriage and about 22 percent of young women marry after age 25. It is also interesting that nearly 15 percent of rural males are marrying beyond 30 and 38 percent of them between the ages of 25-29. While the marriage age for rural women is shifting upward, still only about 1 percent marry between the ages of 30-34. Early marriage is a largely rural phenomenon, yet as we will see below, this may place considerable pressure on rural parents and their sons—who largely finance the costs of marriage—because they must accumulate money for the considerable costs of marriage faster (at earlier ages) than their urban counterparts. Actually, the length of an engagement, which can be divided into four stages in Egypt

is barely different between urban and rural sectors (urban 15.3 months; rural 13 months).<sup>8</sup>

While 75 percent of the population was married by age 27, a quarter were not. It is this quarter of the population, generally urban and educated, that is anxiously struggling to save money for marriage and to find an appropriate partner amenable to their parents.

Economists speak of the phenomenon of “wait unemployment,” or enduring long periods of unemployment in the hopes of finding a high paying permanent position with good benefits. Wait unemployment is particularly common among educated young people in countries with large public sectors (such as Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Morocco despite recent privatization). Using the same metaphor, a quarter of this survey experiences “wait adulthood” or “waithood” as they negotiate their prolonged adolescence and remain single for long periods of time in the hopes that they ultimately will find a higher status spouse. In trying to secure a permanent high status position or a high-status spouse, young people will endure unemployment, or seasonal, temporary, under-the-table,

Figure 2-1: Distribution of Costs of Marriage among the Bride’s Side and the Groom’s Side



Source: ELMPS 06



or informal sector work and queue for the greater, somewhat elusive goal of both a good match and a good job. Nearly all young people in Egypt live with their parents until marriage and parents expect to feed, clothe, and house their children until marriage. Thus, young men and women will work temporary jobs while waiting for a more permanent position and they can afford to do so because of the financial and moral support of their parents. At the same time, young men spend years accumulating savings for marriage and parents also contribute sizably to these costs and, therefore, parents also have great influence in the choice of a spouse.

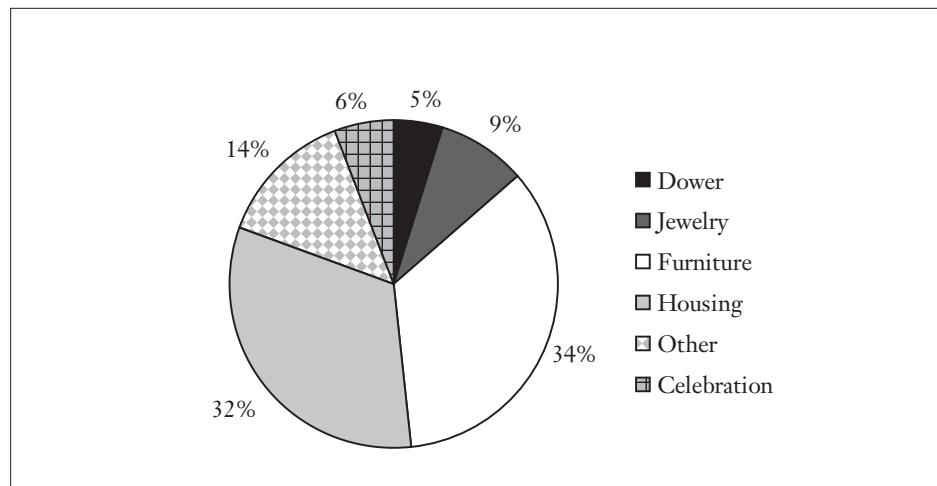
If we examine the link between education and median age at first marriage, as expected, better-educated women and men marry at later ages. While many might assume that this represents a normative or voluntary preference for delayed marriage due to changing norms or simply time spent in school, particularly at the secondary level, it also may reflect recent and continued high unemployment rates for educated males and females. Assaad explains that unemployment in Egypt is essentially “a

labor market insertion phenomenon, meaning that it essentially affects youth (2006, 19).”

The costs of marriage (COM) increase with the education of women, but this pattern could be offset by the older age of educated women, which increases the bride’s side of marriage cost—that is, the higher the age of women, the more her family has to contribute to marriage costs.<sup>9</sup> In an ordinary least squares regression analysis of women married in 1975 or later (2005 LE), we found that for every additional stage of education the bride completed, the cost of marriage can be expected to decrease by LE 2,029, all else equal. Yet, for every additional stage of education the groom completed, the cost of marriage can be expected to increase by LE 3,349, all else equal. Education is a premium for men on the marriage market but still a liability for women and their families.

If we are to understand the relative burden of marriage and thus recognize more vulnerable populations so that policy interventions can be designed, we must first understand how the costs of marriage are shared among the bride, the groom, the bride’s family, and the groom’s family. In short, the bride

**Figure 2-2: Average Component Costs of Marriage (N=4,696)**



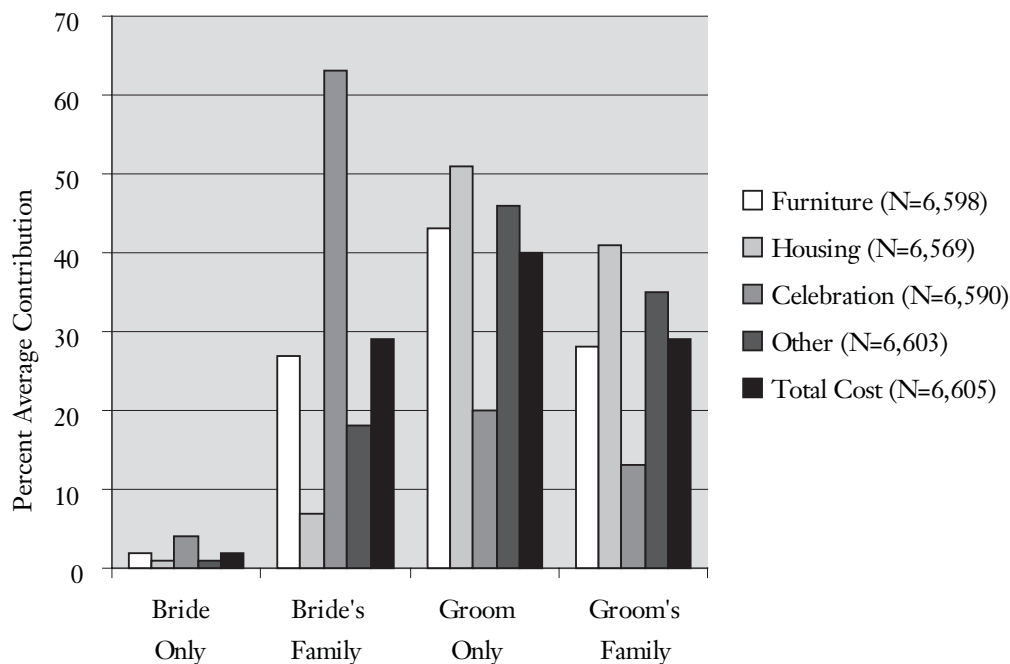
Source: *ELMPS 06*

pays very little of the costs of marriage, the groom pays 40 percent of the costs, his family pays slightly less than one-third and the bride's side contributes about one-third as well. More generally, the groom's side contributes two-thirds of the cost of marriage and the bride's side, a third.

The *shabka* is a gift of jewelry, usually two or three heavy gold bracelets or more expensive jewelry sets for the upper class. The *shabka* and dower, or *mabr*, is exclusively paid by the groom to the bride and thus is not included below in Figure 2-3.<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that as couples increasingly exchange a symbolic *mabr* these days because of their unease about a "bride price," the amount spent on jewelry for the bride—which becomes her personal property and is perceived as a form of savings—increases and makes up for the bride's loss of the *mabr*.

The norms surrounding marriage certainly are changing, but marriage is a financial contract regulated by the state and the exchange process is highly formalized and contested at times as parents of the bride and the bride strive to create a well-financed, comfortable, impressive home with all the trappings. Moreover, both the families of the bride and groom invest considerable resources in the marriage and are very involved in the selection of a spouse. In general, even in modest or poor families, parents and the couple will spend years accumulating the sums needed to purchase these new goods and the couple only will move into their new household or refurbished room in an extended family after all of the furniture, furnishings, pots and pans, new clothes, and even kitchen spices have been purchased and are in place. Of the six major component parts to a marriage, only the furnishings and electrical appliances are purchased substantially

Figure 2-3: Average Contribution to Marriage Costs



Source: ELMPS 06



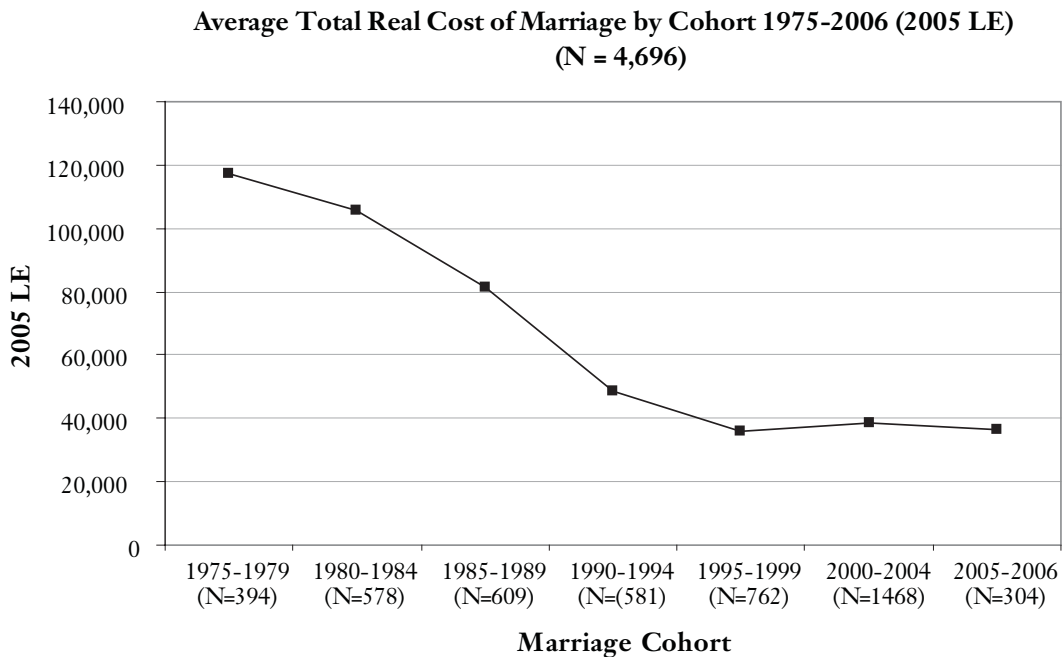
both by the groom and bride's side, although even within this category specific items—such as large appliances—are paid by distinct parties. Over time, there has been very little variation in the relative weight of specific component of marriage in the overall cost.

In urban centers where waged employment is more abundant for unmarried men, the individual groom bears more of the costs of marriage than his rural counterpart, who relies more on his family.

In popular discourse on marriage, complaints often are heard about over-consumption, extravagant celebrations, and the high costs of furniture, major appliances, and housing. Yet, when controlled for in-

flation—and pegged to 2005—the evidence suggests that the cost of marriage has been decreasing. This remains a mystery since public perceptions suggest otherwise and, in fact, the impetus for this research agenda was provoked by Egyptians who complained often and systematically about the high costs of marriage, even if they were very proud of the discipline and self-sacrifice it took to marry off their children. It is important to remember, however, that even if the real cost of marriage has been declining, there is widespread concern for rising prices and if daily prices for food, transportation, clothes, or health-care rise, it becomes more difficult to save the tremendous sums needed for marriage.

Figure 2-4: Average Total COM by Cohort 1975-2006 (2005 LE)  
(N=4,696)



Source: ELMPS 06

### III. THE BURDEN OF MARRIAGE COSTS

When we outline some differences in the cost of marriage by employment status of men and women, job stability, economic sector, contract status, and social security for marriage cohorts married in 1990 or later, our results are not surprising.

Although the number is small, we can see the huge difference in marriage costs between those in the foreign and investment sector as opposed to the public sector. Note above the relatively close sums for costs of marriage between permanent and temporary workers as opposed to casual laborers. And finally, the costs of marriage for those within the formal sector—who have a work contract or social security registration—are significantly higher (nearly double) than those working in the informal sector.

Although far fewer wives are employed than husbands, and the vast majority of employed wives are

waged workers, we can see a much larger discrepancy in their costs of marriage relative to self-employed women, those who are “unpaid” but working for family, and those in the informal sector. It is worth noting that the COM for housewives are quite similar to waged employees and those who are themselves employers, suggesting a high status for women who choose not to work outside the home on the marriage market. Regression analysis of the data found that holding all other variables constant, the cost of marriage can be expected to be LE 12,547 (US \$2,180)<sup>11</sup> lower for a bride who has never been employed than for a bride who has been employed. In a qualitative study of female waged workers in the new industrial zones of Port Said, Amin and Al-Bassusi found that many of the women were working to save for their marriage costs and expected to stop working upon marriage. “The need to work and save, particularly after a girl has

**Table 3-1: COM by Husband’s Employment Status, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Employment Status</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Waged Employee	40,824	1943
Employer	44,394	425
Self Employed	35,231	300
Unpaid working for family	22,144	95
Unemployed worked before	38,985	30

*\* Figures are in 2005 LE.*

**Table 3-2: COM by Husband’s Job Stability, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Job Stability</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Permanent	42,130	2356
Temporary	35,284	136
Seasonal	61,653	8
Casual	24,000	263
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,124</b>	<b>2763</b>

*\* Figures are in 2005 LE.*

made a commitment to contributing large installments to a savings pool [*gama'iyya*], [has] several implications for their working lives as well. They feel compelled to hold onto their jobs, however they are treated and whatever the terms of their contracts. Women who need to earn as much as possible see little advantage in making an investment in order to acquire skills that may reap them benefits in the future” (Amin and Al-Bassussi 2003, 23). In an explanation of why female labor force participation rates continue to be low in Egypt, they also found that none of the wage workers expressed any sense that they would postpone marriage because of a need or desire to work beyond preparing for marriage (prepare equals save and the *gibaz*, or Egyptian term for a bride’s trousseau, means “preparations”).

While these figures explain variations in costs of marriage and employment, we still need to consider the burden of marriage on various populations. To do this, we analyzed the earnings of waged workers (the richness of the earnings data awaits further analysis for other types of employment).<sup>12</sup> We then divided the monthly wages into quartiles for those

married in 1990 or after, established that quartile’s average cost of marriage, and then arrived at an average percent contribution of the bride or the groom to marriage. Thus, we were able to create an average bride’s (and groom’s) contribution to marriage and compare that figure to monthly wages. We were able to establish the relative burden of marriage on those in each quartile by estimating how many months it would take them to save for their costs of marriage.

Since brides report very low contributions to marriage, it does not take working waged women more than one-half to three-quarters of a year to save for various marriage costs. But brides in the second lowest wage quartile, what might be considered the lower-middle-class or working poor, labored the longest for their needs and spent more than nine months of earnings on their marriages. What is also interesting to note, and a pattern in other findings, is that the relative burden is not the highest for the highest paid wage workers, but for the middle quartiles.

When considering the savings burden on young men married after 1989, we can now see that the

**Table 3-3: COM by Husband’s Economic Sector, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Economic Sector</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Government	46,124	689
Public Enterprise	49,356	150
Private	34,901	1870
Investment	131,873	43
Foreign	124,511	2
Non-profitable NGO	66,053	5
Other including co-operatives	40,918	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,124</b>	<b>2763</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.  
Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-4: COM by Husband's Contract Status, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Contract Status</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Yes	51,075	1123
No	32,625	1640
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,124</b>	<b>2763</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-5: COM by Husband's Social Security Status if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Social Security Status</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Yes	50,033	1310
No	31,190	1453
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,124</b>	<b>2763</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-6: Wife's COM by Employment Status, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Employee Status</b>	<b>Average Total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Waged Employee	56,370	359
Employer	54,626	14
Self Employed	22,408	62
Unpaid working for family	23,146	204
Unemployed worked before	46,747	22
New unemployed	8,536	1
Housewife	56,457	187
Full time student	38,112	2
Unpaid leave for a year or more	77,524	24
Other	33,201	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>46,420</b>	<b>877</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-7: Wife's COM by Job Stability, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Job Stability</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Permanent	41,751	581
Temporary	51,776	50
Seasonal	17,676	2
Casual	38,544	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>42,430</b>	<b>639</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-8: Wife's COM by Economic Sector, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Economic Sector</b>	<b>Average Total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Government	53,241	282
Public Enterprise	85,824	13
Private	31,153	339
Investment	123,688	2
Non-profitable NGO	64,841	2
Other including co-operatives	44,892	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>42,430</b>	<b>639</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-9: Wife's COM by Contract Status, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Contract Status</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Yes	57,631	322
No	26,989	317
<b>Total</b>	<b>42,430</b>	<b>639</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-10: Wife's COM by Social Security Status, if Married in 1990 or Later\***

<b>Social Security Status</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>N</b>
Yes	59,313	307
No	26,818	332
<b>Total</b>	<b>42,430</b>	<b>639</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

**Table 3-11: Brides' Average Contribution to Marriage by Wage Quartiles if Married in 1990 or Later\*:**

<b>Wage quartile</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>Average % contributed to total COM</b>	<b>Average bride contribution</b>	<b>Average monthly earnings</b>	<b>Average number of months to pay for COM contribution</b>
1 (N=128)	44761	3	1269	191	6
2 (N=93)	54035	7	3160	351	9
3 (N=76)	59754	7	3825	501	8
4 (N=55)	84731	9	7579	2237	8
<b>Total (N=352)</b>	<b>39793</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>946</b>	<b>620</b>	<b>7</b>

\* Figures are in 2005 LE.

Source: ELMPS 06

lowest waged workers must work for three years and a month and save all of their earnings to raise their costs of marriage. In this analysis, the greatest burden is on the poorest worker, but even the best-paid grooms must labor for two full years to earn their marriage costs.

When differentiated by region, urban grooms, who contribute more to total marriage costs than their rural counterparts, must save for far longer. Again, the heaviest burden is on the poorest urban grooms whose marriage contributions absorb 46 months of their entire earnings (data not shown).

When faced with evidence of the relative burden of marriage for young men, the question really should be how any of them ever manage to marry. What happens to households with three sons rather than three daughters? How does this savings pattern for marriage implicate other financial needs of a family over time? And a further intriguing question might be how other economic projects or initiatives might have been strengthened if they were the recipients of these sums.

In order to further understand the burden of marriage on parents, we created a proxy for potential fathers of brides and grooms by averaging monthly earnings for male heads of households who are 35 years and older within the earnings quartiles of the waged worker sub-sample of the total survey sample (N=7,547). Since the cost of marriage module of the survey was only distributed to married females, this approach was necessary because we could not link married females to their fathers. However, the groom's family and bride's family shares of total COM were very similar and thus this approach can be useful.

For the poorest wage workers, the father and the groom must save their entire earnings for eighty-eight months, or more than seven years to accumulate the costs of marriage. The next quartile of grooms and their fathers must save their entire earnings for fifty-nine months or nearly five years. While grooms across the economic spectrum must all struggle for years to save—from 24-37 months—the father's burden is widely disparate and the highest wage quartile only directs nine month's earnings to marriage as opposed to fifty-one months from

**Table 3-12: Grooms' Average Contribution to Marriage by Wage Quartiles if Married in 1990 or Later\*:**

<b>Wage quartile</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>Average % contributed to total COM</b>	<b>Average groom contribution</b>	<b>Average monthly earnings</b>	<b>Average number of months to pay for COM contribution</b>
1 (N=486)	26650	32	8056	231	37
2 (N=531)	33472	35	10931	398	27
3 (N=484)	38929	42	16025	582	28
4 (N=433)	67555	46	31020	1920	24
Total (N=1,934)	39800	38	15524	743	29

\*Figures in 2005 LE.  
Source: ELMPS 06

the poorest father. The challenge of accumulating these funds for marriage raises many important questions about the financial impact this forced savings is having on the parent's financial status and future needs. As health-care costs rise and fewer segments of the population are covered by retirement benefits due to privatization of the public sector, older Egyptians might not be able to satisfy their future retirement needs, particularly considering that they are having fewer children—the traditional means of elder care.

In an attempt to complement our analysis of the relative burdens of marriage for the entire data set, including those couples who were not waged workers, we created a socio-economic profile (SES) using the sample's questionnaire about the household's consumer durables. Based on our admittedly imperfect estimates of consumer trends by various classes, the total sample (N=37,140) was stratified into three socioeconomic subgroups using the following criteria: upper socioeconomic status was limited to those households which reported owning either a freezer (fairly uncommon though refrigerators are ubiquitous), a dishwasher, a microwave, or

a private car. Lower-class status equaled anyone who did not have a stove and/or reported that his or her household was in possession of a black-and-white TV but not a color TV. The middle-class included everyone else in the sample.

Using this analysis, the lower-class comprised 25 percent of the population; the middle class 65 percent and the upper class 11 percent, which we feel crudely mirrors economic stratification in Egypt. We then used this SES/class distinction beyond those couples that were waged workers to revisit our "burdens" question with slightly different results. The SES analysis of the financial challenges facing brides was quite similar to our wage quartile analysis (data not show), but upper class—or highest SES—grooms faced the highest financial burden and it would take them an average of forty-nine months to save their entire earnings for marriage. When analyzed further by region, the only surprising result is that urban upper class grooms must save for exactly double the extent of their rural counterparts—52 months versus 26 months.

The burdens of marriage are complex in Egypt since highly educated, successful youth who are

**Table 3-13: Grooms and Fathers' Average Contribution to Marriage by Wage Quartiles if Married in 1990 or Later:\***

Wage quartile	Average total COM	Average groom's father's monthly earnings	Average groom's family % contributed to total COM	Average groom's family contribution	Average groom's father's number of months to pay for COM contribution <sup>2</sup>	Average groom's number of months to pay for COM contribution
1 (N=486)	26650	196	37	9917	51	37
2 (N=531)	33472	346	32	11177	32	27
3 (N=484)	38929	522	24	9386	18	28
4 (N=433)	67555	1659	21	15336	9	24
Total (N=1,934)	39800	839	29	11368	14	29

\*Figures in 2005 LE.  
Source: ELMPS 06

products of educational mobility still may have very limited incomes, particularly early in their careers. For example, only those who score the highest on the final competitive national secondary school examinations (*thaanawiyya 'ama*) can enter the Faculty of Medicine and become doctors. Because the educational system has produced too many doctors, they are both unemployed and underemployed in Egypt, and most of them work in one or two private clinics to augment their low government salaries at public hospitals, clinics, or medical colleges. Approximately 75 percent of all doctors were working in a Ministry of Health facility in 1995 and “70 percent were under 40 years of age, [yet] two-thirds [were] unable to afford the costs of a car, furniture, or property generally required to get married, [and thus they remained] unmarried” (Chiffolleau 1995, 521 as quoted by Clark 2004, 190).

One of the ways to reduce the financial burdens of marriage is to marry a relative, for a discount of approximately 25 percent. In the general population, the rate of consanguineous marriages remains at the fairly high level of 31 percent of all marriages, which has varied remarkably little since the early 1960s. In

our earlier, smaller study of the costs of marriage, we also found very high rates of kin marriages across age cohorts (Singerman and Ibrahim 2001). Couples that live within an extended family also reduce their marriage costs and extended family living arrangements are only slightly lower than nuclear family living—46 percent to 54 percent. The total costs of marriage for extended family living are only 57 percent of the nuclear family’s COM and thus a bargain.

Although modernization theorists argued that consanguinity would decline with time, it has remained quite resilient. This can be attributed to the role of the parents on both sides who would prefer their children to marry from “a family they know” as well as the reduced COM that encourages these kinds of marriages. Despite the spread of secretive intimate relations between young men and women and more public dating, some young people simply do not have relations with the opposite sex outside of the family context, and therefore the family provides the only pool of candidates for a marriage partner. It also could be argued that the dominance of family businesses in Egypt encourages rich families to

**Table 3-14: Grooms’ Average Contribution to Marriage by SES Group if Married in 1990 or Later:**

<b>SES (Socio-Economic Status)</b>	<b>Average total COM</b>	<b>Average % contributed to total COM</b>	<b>Average groom contribution</b>	<b>Average monthly earnings</b>	<b>Average number of months to pay for COM contribution</b>
Lower class (N=346)	21521	36	7,480	465	20
Middle class (N=1393)	37068	38	13,667	730	29
Upper class (N=195)	101214	44	47,596	1333	49
Total (N=1,934)	40754	38	15,981	743	29

\*Figures in 2005 LE.  
Source: ELMPS 06



*Although modernization theorists argued that consanguinity would decline with time, it has remained quite resilient. This can be attributed to the role of the parents on both sides who would prefer their children to marry from “a family they know” as well as the reduced COM [cost of marriage] that encourages these kinds of marriages.*

marry endogenously. Further debates about this point are beyond the scope of this paper, but through further analysis of the ELMPS '06, scholars will be able to link the influence of the cost of marriage, and particularly the cost of housing, to consanguinity as well as extended family living (see Casterline and El-Zeini 2003, 3).

Although this line of analysis needs further study, an examination of consanguinity by age cohort re-

veals that the younger a woman marries, the more likely it is that she will marry a relative. Eighty-six percent of the women who married under the age of fifteen married a relative, as did 61 percent of the women aged 15-19, 37 percent of the women aged 20-24, 25 percent of the women aged 25-29, 19 percent of the women aged 30-34, and none of the women over the age of 35.

#### IV. THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGE OF MARRIAGE BEYOND EGYPT

The ELPMS '06 offers rich data for the analysis of marriage costs in Egypt. When we turn toward other national discourses about marriage in the media and tangentially discussed by academics, religious authorities, and scholars, we also find evidence of the economic difficulties families have, even in oil-rich countries, in meeting the costs of marriage. The youth bulge, high youth unemployment rates, neo-liberal reforms, redundant education, and insufficient youth training programs are found throughout the region. Thus, accumulating the COM at a young age is a shared predicament among many throughout the region.

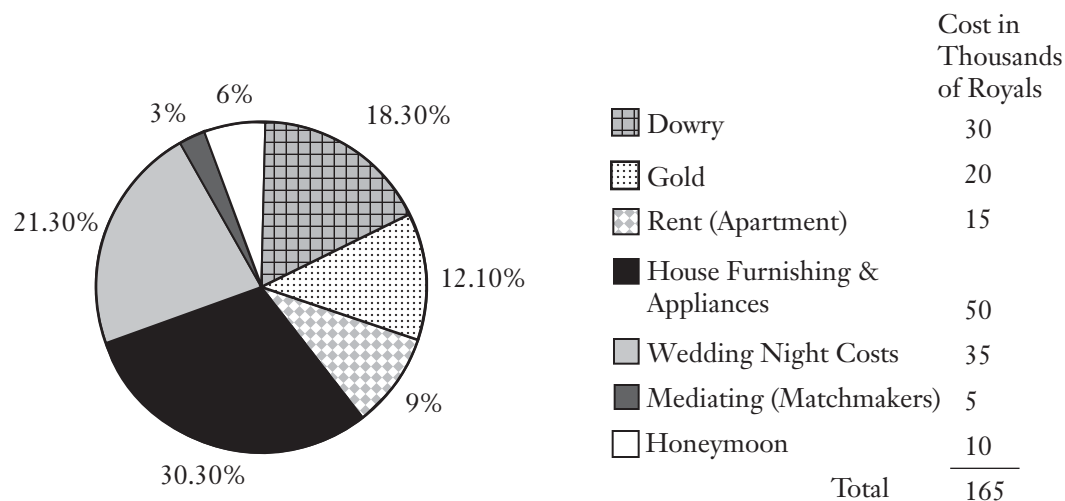
Many presume oil wealth and a high standard of living allows young people to marry at will, but it is oil-rich countries that have been most aggressive—perhaps because of government resources—in subsidizing the costs of marriage. Although it is difficult to learn the accuracy of this information, a 2003 article estimates the cost of marriage as SR165,000 per person (approximately US\$43,000 at 2007 exchange rates (Raid 2003).

Saudi couples spend far less proportionally on housing costs but equal amounts on furniture and appli-

ances—30 percent. The rental market in Saudi Arabia means that grooms do not have to buy apartments outright with cash, as they do in Egypt, where mortgage markets and installment plans largely cater to the rich. Key money, or the right to occupy an apartment, rather than rents (which are typically very low), constitute 32 percent of the marriage costs for Egyptians.<sup>13</sup>

These Saudi marriage costs are considered outrageous by the authorities interviewed in the article. In particular, criticism is directed toward the status-conscious receptions that account for 26 percent of the marriage costs—including honeymoon costs. By contrast, the celebration accounts for only 6 percent of Egyptian marriage costs, although the media and religious authorities often critique the lavish celebrations in five-star hotels in Cairo. Several articles not only discuss the loans that Saudi grooms depend upon from friends, families, and banks, but argue that some of this indebtedness leads to strains in the new marriage and eventual divorce.<sup>14</sup> One groom explained that these costs mean a young man cannot think of marrying before the age of twenty-nine and that employees with limited incomes—less

Figure 4-1: Cost of a Saudi Wedding



Source: Raid Qusti, "The High Cost of Tying the Knot." Arab News. 3 August, 2003. <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=1&section=0&article=29732&d=3&m=8&y=2003>.

than SR5,000 a month—(US \$1,333)<sup>15</sup> cannot marry until their mid-thirties and “prefer to travel abroad in search of change every year for a few thousand riyals,” which seems to be a euphemism for saying that they can find sexual partners abroad (Qusti 2003).

A gold merchant estimated that Saudis annually buy up to thirty-two tons of gold for marriage, and in some areas gold (jewelry) is given not only to the bride but to her female relatives. One authority, the president of the Jeddah Literary Club, “blamed mothers, many of whom only want their daughters to be married to wealthy men who can organize elaborate wedding celebrations. He also warned mothers not to go against religious teachings, which insist on a moderate dowry” (“Shoura Instigates Debate” 2002).

The Shoura Council and its Islamic Affairs Committee addressed this debate and invited “female experts” to discuss it, suggesting recognition of the problem. Invited guests and others urged the council to propose solutions and they urged private and public institutions and firms to create marriage funds.<sup>16</sup> They also suggested that those striving to marry should receive priority for jobs and housing since youth unemployment, particularly among the educated, is quite high, and 65 percent of the population is under the age of seventeen (“Shoura Instigates Debate” 2002).

In a small town near Hebron in the West Bank, the catastrophic economic crisis provoked by the Israeli occupation and the political and economic instability of resistance also has discouraged marriage. In the last decade or so, the average cost of a wedding had risen to about \$15,000 but, because of the economic crisis, young men in the village of Bani Naim were forced to migrate to larger towns and the village elders and leaders were concerned about the rising numbers of single, older women.

The leaders of the four prominent clans in the town created “The Decency Document,” which set specific limits on components of the marriage, including the amount of gold given to the bride, the value of the trousseau and furniture, the type of food served at the celebration, the extent of the *zifaf* (wedding procession), and the bride’s visits to a hairdresser—only one would be allowed. It took ten meetings over the summer to hammer out these details and clan leaders, Islamic foundations, the town’s sports clubs, agricultural association, and the Bani Naim Women’s Charitable Society signed or stamped the document, which apparently was accepted by nearly all in the area. One of the key proponents of the agreement celebrated by announcing he would soon marry off his three daughters, including a 27-year-old, and he was surrounded by young men kissing him and thanking him for his efforts (Wilson 2006, A20).

## V. MARRIAGE FUNDS, MASS WEDDINGS, AND MARRIAGE SOCIETIES

As an Omani newspaper headline suggests “The Marriage Fund [is] a Necessity for Omani Youth.” (Al-Zedjali 2006). While not quite creating them yet, the article suggests that Omanis should follow their Gulf counterparts in subsidizing the costs of weddings. In the UAE, a marriage fund (*sandouq al-zawaj*) provides large grants—\$19,000—and free or inexpensive weddings halls, but with a catch (“United Arab Emirates” 2006). These subsidies only go to Emirati-Emirati couples since the state is concerned with high rates of unmarried older women—because many Emirati men have married foreigners, raising the age at first marriage and high divorce rates (Hasso 2006, 13-14). As the Marriage Fund president, Jamal al-Bah, explained in 1999, “Before our organization existed, 64 percent of marriages were mixed [married to foreigners]; now we’ve cut it down to 26 percent” (Beattie 1999).

The UAE government Web site explained that the fund was created in 1992 because of the “novel idea of the President” Sheikh Zayed. By the end of 2002, 60,000 Emirati youth had received Dh2.3 billion [US \$626,225,223]<sup>17</sup> (“Marriage Fund a Huge Success” 2002). The Marriage Fund accepts applications from young men and is directed toward couples with more limited means—there are financial eligibility requirements as well as required fertility and AIDS testing for grooms. It encourages mass weddings to limit celebration costs, and attracts funding from both public and private sources. There are many announcements in official publications and online information services about the generosity of its sponsors and their initiatives such as partnerships with universities and religious authorities to provide support for unmarried youth and newlyweds with counseling, training materials and even an online dating service. On the official UAE Federal e-government Web site, prominently featured under the “How Do I Get” section, “a marriage loan” option is found between a button for information on educational scholarships and medical insurance, which probably reflects the fund’s popularity.<sup>18</sup> Sheikh Zayed’s official biography on the UAE government Web site also underscores the importance of marriage and is illustrative of the moral issues bound up with Muslim marriage:

Although he has attained international status as a statesman of wisdom and moderation, Sheikh Zayed’s main pre-occupation, as Sheikh, as Ruler and as President, has always been with his own people. One such concern has been the impact of the wealth now available in UAE society upon traditional values, and, in particular, the way in which those who are less wealthy are spending far beyond their means. He has been particularly critical of the growing habit of extravagant weddings and of the reluctance of some young people to contribute in a positive way towards society.

‘Extremely high dowries, extravagance at wedding parties and everything else which burdens young people with debt when they are on the threshold of their lives as a family are matters for which there can be no justification,’ he said. ‘Such are in contradiction with the principles of the Islamic Sharia law, and, furthermore, they are in contradiction with the customs of our ancestors.’

To counteract this trend, Sheikh Zayed ordered the creation of a special Marriage Fund to offer grants to young men wishing to marry, and also urged the country’s tribes to take action to discourage expensive parties and large dowries. The response was immediate, both from tribal elders throughout the UAE, and from young nationals, who flocked to apply for help from the Marriage Fund. Unique of its kind in Arabia, the Fund seems set to make a major contribution to the stability of society and the preservation of local culture.

At the same time, he has urged young people to be realistic, and to live within their means. He urges parents to take more care to ensure that their children are properly raised. Regardless of an individual’s wealth, or that of his family, it is important that young people should work, thereby contributing to society, Sheikh Zayed believes. ‘Work is of great importance, and of great value in building both individuals and societies, both of which are dependent on the strong arms of a country’s young people. The size of a salary is not a

measure of the worth of an individual. What is important is an individual's sense of dignity and self respect.'

In Iran, high youth unemployment rates and the youth bulge are well-known issues and provided a platform for the populist ambitions of the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, elected in June 2006 (see Saleh-Isfahani 2005 for more specific analysis of Iranian youth and political economy). The first piece of legislation he proposed to

parliament would create a \$1.3 billion "Love Fund," financed by the National Iranian Oil Company, to help reduce marriage and housing costs, and to provide jobs for youth. It is modeled after a program that he created at the Tehran City Council during his tenure as mayor, which provided long-term interest-free loans to encourage youth to marry. It is not yet clear if the "Love Fund" was really funded by parliament, but certainly the president redirected attention to Iran's youth with this publicity move.

## VI. MARRIAGE SUBSTITUTES AND CONTROVERSIAL INNOVATIONS

The challenging cost of marriage coupled with late age at marriage, for men in particular, is transforming marital institutions and intimate relations in the region. Newspapers, public discourse, sermons, and governmental and academic research centers engage in controversial debates about sexuality, gender relations, and morality. In the neoclassical model, economists tell us that if the price of a good rises and demand is inelastic—that is, marriage is a universal desire—then the market will find a new equilibrium by finding cheaper substitutes and/or create a black market in an environment of weak regulation. Whatever the reasons that young people are delaying marriage—the financial burdens outlined earlier, lack of a suitable spouse, or a preference to remain single, and new forms of desire—they are creating new approaches to long- and short-term intimate life and sexuality. In the process, they are provoking internal, generational, moral, national, and religious debates and provoking authorities and states to respond. If young people remain in this liminal state between child and adult, financially dependent on their families and morally obligated to them far longer than previous generations, then it is not surprising that social, moral, and political tension is mounting.

### ‘URFI MARRIAGE: AN EGYPTIAN WAVE OF SECRET MARRIAGES

In Egypt, common-law, or ‘*urfi*, marriages that are secretive—the couple’s family and the larger community are unaware that a marriage has taken place—and not registered with the government are increasingly popular among young people because this type of marriage reduces expenses when couples do not cohabit but only occasionally meet in hotels, furnished flats, or borrowed apartments. Secrecy denies families a role in supervising the financial aspects of the union and the choice of a partner. Estimates of the number of these marriages are crude and range from 20,000 to 30,000 a year (Al-lam 2000; Shahine 1998; Ezzat 2000).

In 2000, the Minister of Social Affairs had argued that the incidence of ‘*urfi* marriage among university students was 17 percent (Abaza 2001, 20). In the most comprehensive study of ‘*urfi* marriage, Saher El-Tawila and Zeinab Khadr estimate that ‘*urfi* marriages are prevalent among 4 percent of the to-

tal population of youth 18-30, increasing to 6 percent for university students (2004, xiii). It is much lower than popular perception suggests, but this recent report, laced with nationalist moralism, urges authorities and the media to emphasize its “religious illegitimacy” and label it “adultery” in hopes that further social stigmatization will reduce its popularity (El-Tawila and Khadr 2004, xiii, 94). The conclusions of the study emphasize the financial predicaments of young people and recognize that many of the ‘*urfi* couples want to marry conventionally but that they either lack the financial resources or familial approval for their spouse.

### MISYAR MARRIAGES

Another recent marital innovation is *misyar*, or ambulant, “passersby,” or transient marriage, which seems to have emerged from Saudi Arabia but has spread to other countries in the Gulf and elsewhere, including Egypt. Labeled a “marriage of convenience” by some, the husband is not contractually and legally obligated to provide housing for the wife but only visits her. Women in this type of marriage can also forego their rights to maintenance and equitable sexual access to their husband—if he has other wives—and having a child if both parties agree to add specific conditions to their marriage contract.<sup>19</sup> Any children from the union are considered legitimate. It seems to be financially independent unmarried women who agree to these marriages.

The benefits of the union are quite contested in popular discourse and many female critics of the practice suggest *misyar* marriages are only a step up from prostitution; much the same is said about ‘*urfi* marriages. One woman, writing tongue-in-cheek for an online news source, imagines a contemporary matchmaker’s form to guide a man through today’s marriage options. Professional matchmakers, often operating alongside a real estate business, have become more common in the Gulf recently, as have online dating services (see earlier chart on the component costs of Saudi marriages):

Dear Customer,

Please fill out the following form so that we can best serve you. Remember, we are here to meet all your needs. Our motto is: “All fun, no responsibility.”



I am seeking a wife between the ages of:  
(15-20) (21-25) (26-30) (30-35) (36+)  
Height \_\_\_\_\_ Weight \_\_\_\_\_

Complexion \_\_\_\_\_

Tribal affiliation (in order of preference)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Status: Virgin, Divorced (w or w/o children?)  
\_\_\_\_\_

Widowed (w or w/o children?) \_\_\_\_\_

Next, please mark the following choices so that we may decide which

marriage best suits your personal needs.

I would like a wife who agrees to relinquish the following rights:

- Right to housing
- Right to financial support
- Right to time (spending the night especially)
- Right to children
- Right to public announcement of the marriage
- All of the above

I would like a wife to meet the following needs:

- Owns a home or lives with her family
- Has her own job
- Enjoys traveling
- Speaks English
- Attractive
- Open minded (to do the things my current wife will not do)
- All of the above

Thank you for your time. The total service fee will be determined by your above choices (SR5,000-15,000). You are required to pay SR500 to initiate search (Al-Khalaf 2006).

Although the quote is long, it exposes some of the hypocrisy moralism/utilitarianism surrounding marriage:

If none of these three types of marriage meets your needs, then feel free to come up with your own. There is no limit to imagination and our scholars are only too eager to satisfy you by issuing *fatwas* legalizing all types of marriage. Recently, only '*misyar*' has been given the stamp of approval but if there is any consistency in their decision, the others will soon be approved as well. The only obstacle they say that makes the marriage illegal or invalid is intent to divorce—as if all those different boxes to check are not enough to show just how temporary they believe the marriage is going to be. The strange thing is that many of those same scholars have criticized the Shiite practice known as '*mut'a*' (i.e. pleasure marriage) which is a temporary union simply for sexual purposes. While I reject such a marriage as well, I must say I respect them for at least calling a spade a spade (Al-Khalaf 2006).

Scholars who follow marital trends in Lebanon, where Shi'a *mut'a* or temporary marriage has become more common, suggest that *mut'a* marriage is not rare among Sunni youth as well who enact these marriages for relatively small sums of money or even a few phone cards (Mervin 2006). Lebanese young people are also marrying later and later, and many young women cannot find appropriate partners of their same social class and religious affiliation since so many young men are working or pursuing their education in the Diaspora. In recognition of the contemporary context of youth in Lebanon, apparently Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the spiritual and political head of Hezbollah, has made public arguments that premarital virginity is a socially constructed norm that Islam does not privilege as much as contemporary society assumes.

In addition to marriage substitutes of '*wrfi*' and '*misyar*' marriage, some Gulf discussions speak of '*misyaf*'—summer marriage—enacted during the typical extended vacations which Saudis take abroad. To avoid illegitimate sex—sex outside of marriage—these short-term marriages are negotiated during trips abroad. They really are quite similar to '*wrfi*' marriages except that the bride knows it will end at a particular time. Gulf women supposedly also arrange '*misyaf*' weddings to have a *mabrem*, or “male

companion around for social and legal reasons.” Al-Khalaf also discusses what she calls “*mityar*”—a flying marriage—in which a man marries an attractive, English-speaking cosmopolitan woman as a second wife for his globe-trotting (al-Khalaf 2006). While these anecdotal stories may be dismissed as rare, inaccurate, or sensationalized, they reveal the “social imaginations” and innovations of people trying to reconcile intimate relations and legal, moral, religious, and social codes. Discourses around friend, or *misyar*, marriage include scathing critiques about women’s rights being trampled as well as testimonies by professional wealthy women praising *misyar* because it allows them to keep their “personal space,” financial independence, and professional ambitions (Jabarti 2005).

Finally, another quite common substitute for marriage that reduces marriage costs is marrying a foreigner. Whether Saudis marry Indonesians, Yemenis, or Egyptians, Lebanese marry Syrians, Moroccans marry the French, or Egyptians marry Americans or Palestinians, these marriages typically involve lower costs, financial incentives, or access to precious resources such as visas and foreign citizenship. One very long headline in an Egyptian newspaper speaks volumes: “Europe’s Old Women Search for their Femininity in Egypt: The Ghost of Unemployment is Hunting Our Youth. And the Easy Solution is to Marry an Old European Woman. ‘*Urfi* Marriage is the License for Prostitution for Girls Working in Tourist Villages” (Abdel Hakim 2005). The article describes a “geography of sex” that is made via globalization as European women flood the tourist villages of sand and sea and find willing sexual partners. While coastal resorts like Hurgada, Egypt, have encouraged sex tourism with older women, young Egyptian women also work in the coastal villages and wind up married in ‘*wrfi*’ contacts to taxi drivers, their customers at restaurants and nightclubs, or to other internal migrants when they are in need of a place to sleep or have lost their jobs.

After explaining that unemployment, the long period of education, and the difficulty of finding respectable women—since they are engaging in pre-

marital sex—have made it impossible to marry before the age of forty, a Moroccan young man suggested that migration was their only hope: “[t]hese poor conditions led many youth to take the boats of death or searching on the net for older women to marry in what is called ‘white marriage’” (Al-Abyad 2006).

In Egypt, parliamentarians have taken up the sensationalized rumor that more than 14,000 “desperate” unemployed men have “resorted to marrying Israeli wives, largely Palestinians. Mufti Nasser Farid Wasil in 2006 apparently proclaimed it was sinful to marry an Israeli due to Egyptian fears of Israeli spies, even if the wives were Palestinians (Gardner 2006). The “cold peace” with Israel must be supported even if Israelis can provide cheaper marriage substitutes.

The proliferation and expansion of marriage substitutes beyond the margins of society, where they had existed previously, reinforces our emphasis on the financial demands of marriage and its relevance to larger social, sexual, moral, cultural, and political trends. The extent of these unconventional and controversial marriage substitutes cannot be confirmed without more detailed and comprehensive research, but they clearly represent a growing phenomenon. Young people and their families are negotiating complex and changing terrains of sexuality, authority, and normative behavior. Yet the complexity of their lives is only superficially or paternalistically addressed by public, scholarly, and religious authorities. As outsiders to political systems in which citizenship rights and political participation is discouraged, young people have few vehicles to communicate their ideas and propose solutions to their problems (more on this below).

As in the multilayered approach to social exclusion, with which this paper began, policymakers need to examine solutions and prescriptions to some of these problems, both at a conceptual and pragmatic level. Toward that end, this section ends with a suggestion to reconsider many of the problems that this project will address from a slightly different conceptual framework.



## V. THE SCHOOL TO WORK TO MARRIAGE TRANSITION: MINIMIZING “WAITHOOD”

*“Employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment then employment, because it is the beginning, really,” responded a young man when asked about the more important public issues and controversies which affect young people (Personal Interview, Cairo, December 2006).*

The average cost of marriage for waged workers necessitates saving all of the earnings of a groom and his parent for 43 months, as mentioned earlier. Among the poorest wage workers, they must save their entire earnings for 88 months, or more than seven years, followed by 59 months, or nearly five years for the next quartile. Throughout this project, my colleagues, including many economists, will discuss the complex problems of youth unemployment, education, job insertion, skills sets, labor rigidities, and the school-to-work transition. Yet, young couples and their families must simultaneously keep two goals in mind as they negotiate these issues: work and marriage. Decisions and plans about one goal affect the other and ignoring one comes at expense of meeting the other goal. Unfortunately, there has been a resounding silence around the economic dynamics of marriage and, therefore, the dynamics of the school-to-work transition remain imperfectly understood and good policy outcomes are more difficult to design unless we include marriage in the calculus.

One headline in Egypt reflects a common perception in the business community: “The Youth Complain about Unemployment While Refusing 10,000 Job Opportunities” (Fatehy 2006). It bemoans the pickiness of Egyptian youth, who are supposedly desperate for jobs but fail to flock to job training programs in new investment zones and satellite cities sponsored by the private sector. Others are far more qualified to debate employment strategies and aligning the labor market’s supply and demand. But

it is worthwhile to point out that young people often prefer to hold out for a permanent job because, beyond the security and benefits it offers, it also signals marriage eligibility. Concerned about the status of the match and the long-term financial position of their daughters, many families will insist that a young man have a permanent job, even if he has sufficient financial resources to marry and a history of lucrative temporary jobs. The logic of hypergamy induces the families of potential brides to reject grooms with a lower status. A permanent job, a high-status profession and financial resources all improve a groom’s eligibility, but calculations of marital eligibility go beyond merely financial resources.

As Salehi-Isfahani points out in his research, high-status permanent jobs are procured due to one’s diplomas, and a meritocracy pervades the Iranian educational system. But there are certainly not enough jobs to go around, and many well-educated young people are still unemployed. In 2002, the male unemployment rate for the 20-29 age group was 23 percent, and for women it was 46 percent (Salehi-Isfahani 2005, 142).

### UNEMPLOYMENT

In Egypt, unemployment is clearly a youth phenomenon since 83 percent of the total unemployed in the ELMPS ’06 were between the ages of 15-29 and 47 percent were among the 20-24 age group in 2006. Even though overall youth unemployment has been cut substantially since 1998, it still remains high at 11.5 percent.

Female unemployment, particularly among the educated, is much higher than male unemployment—14 percent rather than 9 percent, respectively—and the vast majority of females aged 15-29 are inactive since 23 percent are studying and 39 percent are out of the labor force since many of them are housewives (Amer 2006, 11). Kabbani and Kothari also emphasize that the Middle East in general not only has the highest unemployment rates in the world—12 percent of the workforce—but the highest youth unemployment rates globally—over 25 percent of the young, economically active population (2005, 3). In addition, in both absolute terms and compared to male youth, it has the highest unemployment rates among females and female youth—32 percent (Kabbani and Kothari 2003, 7).

While credentials may lead to jobs for the educated in Iran, young people in other areas of the Middle East complain bitterly that they are qualified for jobs, but it is informal networks, *wasta*, and connections which really matter. As one Egyptian young man said in an interview:

There are two kinds of young people: someone whose financial situation doesn't allow him to wait for his ideal job and someone whose [financial] situation allows him to wait for the job he wants. Usually the former works as a salesperson and ends up forgetting his college education. To work in a big company, you've got to have *wasta* [connections or, literally, a middleman]. Regardless of your qualifications, you must search for someone to secure the job for you. In some cases, you have to pay money (Personal Interview, Cairo, Egypt, December 2006).

Reports in Egyptian newspapers claim that youth must pay a bribe of LE30,000 (US \$5,212) to secure a position in the petroleum industry, LE20,000 (US \$3,475) in the electricity sector, and LE10,000 (US \$1,737) for a job in the Ministry of Religious Charities, *Awqaf* (Zaki 2005). The same young Egyptian who was interviewed about the problems of young people added: "The absence of equal opportunity means the insufficiency of your educational and personal qualifications to allow you to get a job and your need, beside these, for a *wasta* and relations. If

others have *wasta* and connections, but they lack your skills, they will still get the job. The inequality of opportunity is not only revealed in applying for jobs, but even after you get the job you won't be promoted without *wasta*" (Personal Interview, Cairo, December 2006).

In April 2003, a troubling story rocked Egypt. After graduating from the prestigious Faculty of Economy and Political Science at Cairo University, a self-made young man from the provinces, Abdel Hamid Sheta, had applied to the Ministry of Foreign Trade but was denied a position there because he was socially unfit—his father was a poor farmer. Devastated by the rejection and apparent meaninglessness of his hard-earned educational qualifications, he committed suicide by drowning himself in the Nile.

Suicide is relatively rare in Egypt, but recent reports suggest that it is becoming more common, particularly among young people. It is the ultimate exit option of dashed hopes and dreams. Ayman Nour, the then-leader of the opposition party Al-Ghaad (Tomorrow), who ran unsuccessfully against President Hosni Mubarak in the first contested presidential elections in Egypt in May 2005, raised the problem in parliament during his presidential campaign of corruption and unemployment following Sheta's suicide. He implicated the policies of Finance Minister Youssef Boutros-Ghali as being responsible for this new phenomenon of youth suicides, Sheta's in particular (Essam El-Din 2005). Unfortunately, shortly before the campaign began in earnest, Nour was arrested for suspect reasons and while freed for a while to campaign, he was soon back in jail where he remains.

The story of Sheta's tragic death resonated more widely in Egypt than it might have because Alaa Al Aswany's popular novel *The Yacoubian Building*—released recently as the most expensive Egyptian movie ever made—recounted a similar story. One of the main characters in the novel, a young man, had been dreaming of entering the police academy all of his life and had the test scores and grades to qualify. But he was refused admission because he was the son of a *bowab* (doorman) and thus "socially unfit," like Sheta.

He then entered the still-prestigious Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University, where he became interested in the teachings of a radical sheikh who called for the establishment of an Islamic state in Egypt. The sheikh asked him to participate in a demonstration against the government and he did, although he still was not yet a militant. Nevertheless, the police arrested him for his role in the demonstration, which went beyond the university grounds. In prison, the police interrogated him to learn more about the sheikh, and they raped and sodomized him. After he finally got out of prison, he joined the militants at their hideout in the outskirts of Cairo, where he plotted revenge in an attack against the police during which he was killed—but not before he killed the police officer who had tortured him. Interestingly, in con-

nection with our focus on marriage, the radical group arranged for him to marry a woman allied with the movement with only a symbolic dower before he went on his fatal mission.<sup>20</sup>

Another story which refers to Sheta's suicide reports on the high numbers of Egyptian men who have migrated to Iraq to work as private security guards after the American occupation. "This actually puts them in front of insurgency attacks. This is a catastrophe. The youth are seeking death. They're already dead at home. What difference does it make to die outside home ...You wouldn't be the last of them, Abdel Hamid [Sheta]!" (El-Desouki 2003). We can infer that the notion that they are "already dead" at home refers both to their financial situation, their political exclusion, and their unmarried status.

## VI. PROVOKING LIMINAL, HYBRID, AND AMBIVALENT IDENTITIES

Clearly the issues raised here are deserving of far more empirical verification and research. Nevertheless, the words of young people and screaming headlines are pertinent because they alert us to the beliefs and perceptions surrounding these issues. The way in which commentators raise issues that they perceive as interrelated can be very revealing, and it is these contextual issues that help us understand the meaning of social exclusion. Young people, structurally constrained by the financial burdens and educational and employment limitations described thus far, also face challenges to their identity as they negotiate a sense of belonging and meaning amidst often contradictory messages.

This section focuses on these negotiations and resulting social and political conflicts. It does not attempt to provide a conclusive argument in this regard but highlights avenues for youth participation and government failure. The previous section concluded that marriage is still ignored as a factor in policymaking. With a marriage black market and widespread youth detachment from their societies, the governments need to act in a way that understands youth and includes them in the decision-making process. As will be argued in this section, governments as well as opposition forces, including Islamists, fail to understand the importance of marriage and the way it interacts with education, health, housing, and employment issues and policies. The result is that government interventions are less successful and rarely address the concerns of youth and their families.

The discussion in this section will proceed in three main parts. The first discusses specific avenues through which youth express their dissatisfaction. The second section discusses manifestations of youth resentment to the status quo and the reflections of this resentment on the family. The third section addresses citizenship questions and youth participation.

### FAILURE OF THE YOUTH-GOVERNMENT CONTRACT

In her wonderful analysis of Moroccan youth, Mounia Bennani-Chraïbi argues that this generation has “imbibed...the collective dream of post-independence, that of universal education, the engine of upward social mobility...[they have] internalized

meritocracy as a legitimate value, and yet their hopes have been dashed. Education, to a large extent, failed to act as an agent of social mobility (2000, 147).” They have fulfilled their end of the bargain by staying in school, investing in private educational lessons, and succeeding. But then the state does not meet its promise to provide employment—as it did under the Nasserist paradigm—or to provide a dynamic labor market after neo-liberal reforms. Reiter and Craig point out that education systems are “structural elements of the modern role of the citizen” and schooling is really a “citizenship performance” originally designed by the state to supplant child labor and create a modern, disciplined, productive worker (2005, 26).

In this sense, schooling is both an obligation that creates citizens but it is also a benefit of the state’s commitment to social citizenship. Because political citizenship rights are so weak throughout the Middle East—though gaining strength—the state’s provision of social rights is even more critical and sensitive, particularly after neo-liberal reforms have reduced social welfare benefits. Thus, as Reiter and Craig argue “a responsible social policy that considers education policy should...be accountable for educational outcomes and their matching with labor market needs” (2005, 26).

Young people in certain countries have been questioning the content and pedagogy of their educational systems and trying to hold their governments accountable to provide something beyond redundant education. As Salehi-Isfahani writes in reference to Iran, “what sort of system would encourage its young to learn the wrong stuff” (2005, 129)?

In Morocco, for example, the Unemployed University Graduate’s Association, founded in 1991 and now represented by more than 120 branches throughout the country, has organized demonstrations outside Moroccan ministries demanding jobs, training programs, legal changes, and for their voices to be heard in policy circles—but to limited effect (Amrani 1998; Bennani-Chraïbi 2000). In one of these protests, four unemployed male graduates set themselves on fire to protest their situation. These four young men had middle technical degrees and held the so-called *Rasa’el Emiriyya*

(Princely Letters) that should have helped them secure a job but hadn't after seven years of waiting ("Unemployed Graduates Immolate Themselves in Morocco 2006).

In Egypt, under the auspices of an opposition political party, *Al-Tugamu*, another Union for the Unemployed was established in 2005 to raise the banner, "I want my right." The union established branch offices in the provinces and conferred conferences and symbolic protests as well. Some members of the union argued that they would take any job, even if it was seasonal, and decided to sell Ramadan lanterns (*fawaniis*) at the ministries where they felt they should have been employed. Ramadan lanterns are relatively inexpensive items sold by street peddlers. One young woman sold the lanterns at the Ministry of Scientific Research to "show her bitterness for not having a job" before the offices of those "who have forgotten that they are responsible for us" (Abdel-Salem 2005). Another report about the union suggested that "the relative importance of this movement comes from the repertoire of anger and suppression in these young people" (Mos'ad and El-Sab'a 2005).

#### **DEPENDENCY & RESENTMENT: THE EMPLOYMENT/MARRIAGE NEXUS**

In my previous work on political exclusion in Egypt, I argued that the family acts as a political institution, aggregating the needs and demands of individuals through a diverse, horizontal, and vertical web of informal networks.<sup>21</sup> In my discussion of political participation in Egypt, I emphasized that the state intentionally and systematically excludes people from political participation to maintain its control and minimize any opposition. Yet, that does not mean that people are apathetic or repressed but have devised alternative means to aggregate their interests, which largely include informal networks. These networks are not without costs, since some people cannot even afford to participate in them due to severe poverty or their inability to offer services in exchange—which are critical to the working of networks. It is beyond the bounds of this paper to repeat those arguments here, but we must situate a discussion of youth exclusion in the Middle East in a similar framework (see Singerman 1995; 2005).

Almost all young people continue to live with their families. Throughout the Middle East, the family not only financially supports the children until they marry, but it also supervises community norms and morality. Families are intimately and extensively involved in nearly all realms of social, political, moral, and economic life such as educating children, childrearing, securing employment, negotiating the bureaucracy and engaging with the political elite, establishing and maintaining businesses, saving money, promoting morality and status, distributing resources and information, securing credit, organizing migration, and policing sexuality.

A "familial ethos" provides the moral authority and legitimacy of the family's position. The argument here is that the familial ethos goes beyond a cultural construct. It is produced within a specific structural and political environment in which the legitimacy and authority of the state is ambivalent and the freedom to associate is heavily prescribed by legal and illegal means. The familial ethos supports channels of arbitration, conflict resolution, economic assistance, and cooperation in the community and it is made, and remade, daily. Many of the values and mores it seeks to ensure involve the continued reproduction of the family, which holds such an important place in Egyptian society.

Thus, the moral and economic presence of the family is pervasive and, since the state has slashed its social welfare policies after neo-liberal reforms, if anything, young people are more than ever dependent on their families. Bennani-Charaibi argues that the "army of unfortunates is growing. Their exclusion is primarily defined by their frustrated wish for participation. They therefore concentrate their energies, for better or worse, in alternative directions. The socioeconomic functions of the family—prolonged financial support, a social network and other benefits of closeness—although diminished by the increased importance of the state and the modernization of the economy, have been revived. The construction of the subject has progressed far enough for any dependence to be a source of resentment" (2000, 147).

Since many first jobs are in the informal sector, or involve unpaid family work, parents often supple-



ment wages and certainly provide valuable exchange services by housing, feeding, and clothing their adolescent or unmarried children. Financial dependence is the norm, and it is a largely well-accepted norm that is affirmed by parental discourses of love, caring, and sacrifice. At the same time, this role is supporting the status quo by creating security for young people, thus controlling the repertoire of anger that results from exclusion and the inability to satisfy the basic social need of housing, employment, and marriage. Therefore, this anger falls short of transforming itself into outright massive opposition to, or revolution against, the regime, finding expression instead in increasing rates of suicide, marriage to foreigners, searching for jobs in Iraq, illegal migration, and drug use. While not meaning to deny the warmth and caring of families, financial dependence can foster ambivalent feelings among young people: both gratitude and unease. As we all know, dependence can also come with strings attached and, when living with one's family, one is also expected to abide by their rules and norms.

While I have just suggested that financial dependence on parents is significant, we also know that young people are transgressing the largely conservative norms of the familial ethos that limits sexuality to marriage. This is not the only social phenomenon that causes tension between parents and unmarried, older children, but it is the one most related to our discussion of the financial burdens of marriage. Obermeyer notes in contrast to popular Western conceptions of social norms in the Middle East, "Islam has a generally positive view of sexuality, seeing marriage as a desirable state and the fulfillment of a religious duty and sex as a 'divine gift.'" But "sex is only permissible within marriage; outside marriage, heterosexual encounters are deemed to be fornication (*zina*), and represent punishable offenses, and homosexuality is considered a perversion" (2000, 241).

Here, I find the work of Roxanne Varzi particularly instructive. In her discussion of Iran, she asks, "how [do] people occupy the same strict ideological space and yet live in completely different realities. What happens when young people are forced to try to occupy various realities before they have formed their own" (Varzi 2006, 12)? While the Islamic Republic

of Iran may represent the extreme end of the spectrum, young people throughout the Middle East are living different realities when they date without the knowledge of their families or marry in the *'urfi* style and hide their marriage from their families sometimes until the birth of a child.

A recent short Egyptian documentary film, which has barely been shown because of its provocative story exploring the schizophrenia of youth, is called *The Fifth Pound* and describes the weekly ritual of a young couple riding the expensive air conditioned and thus relatively empty bus in Cairo for many hours to find a place where they can "steal some clumsy, guilty physical contact in the back seat" by bribing the bus driver (Lindsey 2005). In Egypt, youth are "in a 'double bind' caught between the impossibility of conforming to accepted social norms and denying them" (Tourné 2003, 1). In a recent national study of university youth, the majority of the sample "perceive[d] widespread relationships outside of marriage" and "one-third of young males and one-quarter of females report having had a previous relationship," although the definition of relationship is still somewhat vague (El-Tawila and Khadr 2004, 60-61). In a study of students from four universities conducted by El-Zanaty and Mohamed (1996), 26 percent of young males and 3 percent of females report having had sexual intercourse at least once (as quoted by El-Tawila and Khadr 2004, 3).

How can young people reconcile this new "geography of sex" in Egypt, Morocco, Syria, or Iran with parental norms that limit sexuality to marriage, particularly when parents are investing huge sums in their marriages and supporting their education? Despite being the targets of the Islamization project, "drug use, suicide, and prostitution rates in Iran have skyrocketed among the very youth who should theoretically be ideal Islamic citizens" (Varzi 2006, 10). The contortions that young people experience as they negotiate the risky field of dating and mating leave them feeling that no one has won as they live a "don't ask, don't tell" reality. In Iran, "[w]hat is hidden and buried by denial is not yet lost in them but remains just below the surface, a surface that is ready to collapse at any moment" (Varzi 2006, 11).

In Tunisia and Jordan, recent surveys of young unmarried women suggest that the incidence of premarital sex—including high risk sexual practices—is increasing and the age is decreasing while young people are ill-informed and misinformed about sexual diseases, contraception methods, and reproductive health (Foster 2006). Some Moroccan men explain that the rising age at marriage is linked to the availability of pre-marital sex while others suggest that due to sexual freedom in Morocco, partners tend to distrust each other and it's harder to form long-term relationships (El-Abyad 2006).

Despite Saudi Arabia's conservatism and policing of religious morality and gender segregation, a small survey of male university students (N=147), conducted to learn more about attitudes toward AIDS, revealed that "49 percent of the respondents estimated that at least half of their respective social circles were engaged in sex before marriage. Thirty-four percent estimated that a fourth of their friends and acquaintances were engaged in premarital sex... while 35 percent admitted that it is possible to pay for sex inside the Kingdom as well" (Akeel 2007).

A young Egyptian man linked together several of these issues when he suggested that sex education is a problem for both sexes. "There's sexual illiteracy. Young people watch porn movies, and believe that this is everything about sexual life. Any young person will completely deny that he or she watches porn and will avoid speaking about the topic. A young man will believe that any girl who talks about porn movies is unrespectable, although he does the same thing. This also leads to depression in marriage. The woman shies from asking her husband for certain sexual activities because she fears that he might misunderstand her. The man is depressed because his wife doesn't do with him the same as he watches in movies."

The reality of pornography, widespread through globalized media and consumerism, meets the reality of gender norms in marriage in problematic ways. The social construction of desire and "natural" youthful sexual needs are usually gendered in male, heterosexist ways. The point here is not to exoticize sexuality in the Middle East or even to de-

scribe it fully since it remains a very controversial and under-researched topic. Rather, it is to present the predicaments of young people and their parents as they negotiate changing marital and sexual practices, circumvent taboos, and reconcile contradictions.

Hania Sobhy's analysis of the rise of a liberal, consumerist ideology targeted at youth leads us to examine the collective action of young people in the region in this final section of the paper. What is compelling about her analysis is the link she makes between economic struggles, marriage, public and private discourses of morality, and religious movements of both liberal and radical variety.

Due to the housing crisis, youth must typically rely for the most part on their parents' saving and their ongoing support to start a new home. When parents are themselves suffering from low income, youth must make tough choices to support them and wait many years to compile enough resources to start a home. In addition, the increasing period of time that youth must now spend between adolescence and being able to marry and leave their parents' home, coupled with the global and local media portrayals of more liberal sexual behavior, has created an increased anxiety about the changing sexual code of youth. The increasing sense of guardianship and scrutiny of parents over youth and their behavior—well-reflected in the new religiosity—is closely related to the increasing dependency of youth on parents, given the rising costs of their education, the unemployment situation, and the cost of housing for [marriage] (Sobhy 2004, 1).

#### **COLLECTIVE LIFE, "WAITHOOD" AND CITIZENSHIP QUESTIONS**

My earlier use of the term "waithood" not only refers to the consequences of delayed marriage and mixed feelings about parental dependence but also suggests "waiting" to negotiate one's identity as governments or religious movements try to discipline youth as good Islamic subjects. Nationalist and developmentalist rhetoric suggests they should become productive citizens who will develop and protect the nation. Neoliberalism encourages them

to become ardent consumers who will “live globalization”<sup>22</sup> rather than watch it go by if they make the right investments in their education and the right strategic choices in their careers and become rich.

Young people object to inaccurate portrayals of them in the media and the frequent moralizing about their supposedly hedonistic, selfish, and Westernized ways<sup>23</sup>. Yet, they feel that governments and policymakers bury their collective heads in the sand when it comes to their problems and they are rarely, if ever, invited into the conversation about potential solutions. For example, in Saudi Arabia, the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice launched a “Guidance Caravan” for young people and used buses with large screen television to display films “focusing on the one hand, on the negative aspects of joyriding, drug trafficking and drinking liquor and the real happiness of keeping away from evil and deviant practices and being good citizens.” Like many other programs, the philosophy of the effort encouraged Islamic behavior and values and warned them “against the negative aspects of sins” (“Guidance Caravans” 2006).

Oppositional Islamist movements have fed on public debates about such issues as morality, female modesty and veiling, the supposed demise of the family through increased divorce rates, sexual freedom, Westernization, and delayed marriage. Some of these movements take up issues of economic justice—and speak about corruption, speculation, and inequalities—but many religious movements, particularly those tolerated or embraced by governments, argue that the threat to Muslim youth is “Westernization and liberal sexual behavior...not injustice or lack of opportunity” (Sobhy 2004, 4).

Thus, the linkages in this paper between delayed marriage, “waithood,” and financial issues find themselves at the crux of national debates, not due to essentialist, Western fixations with making the Middle East exotic, but because the “deep structures” and cultural icons of the family and early marriage are changing in controversial ways. The critical dimension in directing the social interactions in most Middle Eastern countries in a positive

way is for the political process to include the controversial dimensions of marriage, sexuality, and educational outcomes in debates about solutions to the region’s social anxieties in all their complexity and diversity.

It is a generalization to argue that youth have a difficult time representing and voicing their complaints in public discourse and public institutions. The more affluent ones among them join computer dating services, spend their time in Internet cafes, or cruise the net from their own computers (Ali Abu Hashish and Peterson 1999). They voice their ideas, share information, and, at times, organize online, as became apparent in the so-called “Cedar Revolution” in Lebanon and during the demonstrations of the Movement for Change in Egypt, or *Kifaya*, (Enough!). Some students participate in the largely depoliticized activities of Ministries of Youth throughout the region where sports, “moral guidance” and career training activities dominate their agendas. More corporatist bodies such as youth student unions, youth councils, youth auxiliaries of political parties, and rural youth organizations survive in many places. But most of these organizations have little autonomy from the state and little collective representation of youth.

One of the most important priorities of these youth councils is surveillance rather than inclusion, particularly on university campuses where students traditionally have been very politically active. Many young people still fear the security services of Middle Eastern governments and intentionally distance themselves from political activism out of fear. A Syrian youth activist argued that most opposition party leaders were quite elderly and rarely allowed young people to participate in a serious way with the direction of the party (Marron 2007). Ageism pervades the ideological spectrum of politics and men aged 40 and 50 often represent themselves as “youth” candidates.

The quintessential “youth” candidate in Egypt is Gamal Mubarak, President Mubarak’s younger son, who is 43 and being groomed for succession, despite public denials to the contrary. He established the Future Generation Foundation to develop the country’s “business culture” and train young people



in basic business skills. More importantly, he “chairs the Policy Committee of the National Democratic Party, Egypt’s dominant party. From a base in “youth promotion” and “youth activities,” he is cautiously negotiating his succession to power with major help from his father and a new Western-educated technocratic elite. Many young people and political pundits are skeptical of his motivations and dismiss the benefits of the short training courses primarily for graduates of public universities that the foundation offers (Arvizu 2004).

If young people feel disempowered and politically excluded, even as they remain patriotic and nationalistic, then this only exacerbates overall exclusion of youth in the Middle East. Young people struggle to educate themselves, find employment, marry, and transcend “waithood,” yet they have few opportunities to participate in deliberations about their future.

High youth unemployment and economic pressures exacerbate perceptions of economic injustice in society as well, yet as Shafir points out, the beauty of the idea of citizenship was that it would ameliorate economic inequality in order to enhance social solidarity among selected individuals in the face of continued inequality (2004). If liberalism proposed citizenship as a salve to political inequality, one wonders if nationalism or Islam will continue to provide enough solidarity to maintain the state’s domination in the Middle East if nations do not offer their subjects more political rights.

In the post-colonial and post-Oslo world, will governments still be able to maintain their rule and legitimacy through nationalism, secularism, monarchical rule, developmentalism, anti-globalization sentiment, or anti-Americanism? Or will states need to embrace or enhance citizenship rights as a solution to inequality? The previous developmentalist and nationalist eras provided solidarity to much of the nation, but since then the mantra of economic growth has decreased social solidarity as many feel more economically vulnerable, and Islamists have associated neo-liberalism with Westernization, foreign domination, globalization, and corruption.

The school-to-work to marriage transition is negotiated in a larger economic context in which less educated young people are working more in the informal sector than ever before or in unpaid family work, at least in Egypt, according to the ELPMS ’06 survey. While this has meant that unemployment rates have lessened, these jobs are lower paying and they do not have social benefits attached to them (see Assaad 2006). While governments have invested in youth education, in terms of the labor market, young people are receiving less of the public patrimony than their elders. Future policy interventions and political initiatives must take into account the multiple realities they are living rather than obfuscating their challenges by isolating some aspects of their lives from others.

## VII. FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDAS AND POLICY INITIATIVES

If one takes seriously the notion of “capability poverty” and social exclusion discussed earlier in this paper, far more research needs to be conducted to understand the school-to-work-to marriage transition. Some governments have experimented with loans, charities, mass weddings, and subsidies for the costs of marriage, but those programs seem to avoid the more structural and culturally controversial aspects of the issue.

For example, while rental markets ease the cost of housing in some Middle Eastern countries, in other nations housing has to be bought outright in one lump sum and mortgage markets and long-term installment plans to purchase housing are only for the wealthy. Mortgage markets and restricting rent control to those on limited incomes probably would decrease housing costs, but mortgages often are attacked by religious groups as being un-Islamic and many middle-class citizens benefit from rent control laws and thus would fight against its repeal.

Economic and policy initiatives to lower housing costs and, more importantly, to provide housing for low-income groups and to young people deserve far more serious attention from development agencies and policymakers. Throughout the Middle East, affordable housing units have not kept pace with middle-class and luxury housing, which often has been subsidized by cheap bank loans and infrastructure subsidies from the state. Who will purchase the hundreds of thousands of flats that are being built in these new luxury gated communities?

Denis suggests that Greater Cairo includes approximately 315,000 families who are upper middle-class or upper class, representing the wealthiest 10 percent of the population (2006, 10). But he also notes that 320 companies have acquired land in the desert on the margins of Cairo and announced projects that potentially would construct 600,000 residences, which equals the number of residences that were built in the Cairo region, for all segments of the population, between 1986 and 1996 (Denis 2006, 10). Clearly, in Egypt and elsewhere, resources, loans, and government licenses have been found to build luxury housing, and surely more effort could be directed at building affordable housing. Finally, in formulating employment policies and

evaluating youth responses to them, more attention should be directed to what youth expect from their work, which means including the marriage dimension in the equation.

While this paper analyzed the financial burdens of marriage, I do not mean to suggest that this represents a poor, inefficient, or wasteful investment. Egyptians and others throughout the Middle East invest admirably in the reproduction of the family and the next generation. While some argue the severity and extent of poverty is increasing in the Middle East, the stability of the family and marriage may be one of the factors protecting the region from the type of poverty that one sees in Latin America or other parts of Africa. Rumors of high divorce rates—true in some countries but not others—provoke fear and unease because if entry costs to marriage are quite high and involve multiple generations, an exit from marriage represents wasted effort and leave the couple in a precarious financial and social state. In short, the financial aspects of marriage and the implications of this savings pattern on other macro phenomena are worthy of far more analysis.

At another level, we might ask about the direction of causality in relation to the costs of marriage. Perhaps a case can be made to consider the cost of marriage as a factor in job stability for young people or even perhaps low wages. While most sources admire the financial support that parents give their children, and assume that without it young people would be far worse off, is it also plausible that this dependence reduces wages for young people? As Marxist feminists pointed out in the 1960s, the unpaid domestic labor of women subsidized the costs of capitalism, and is it possible that unpaid parental services and free parental housing subsidizes low wages—particularly in the informal sector—paid to young people? If young people had to pay for their own housing and subsistence costs, what would be the short term and long term effects?

In a paper analyzing the relationships among marital stability, job stability, and earnings in a longitudinal study of American youth, Ahituv and Lerman found that “changing jobs and having a large number of jobs end up lowering earnings and reducing

marriage rates” and that “marriage enhances job stability” even after taking account of the fact that job stability and higher earnings increase the likelihood of marriage (2003, 27). They also suggest there is robust evidence for a marriage premium on wages that suggest a “virtuous cycle” set off either by an increased propensity to marry or by increased stability of jobs. For example, a higher propensity to marry would improve job prospects and job stability, which, in turn, would increase the duration of marriages (2003, 28). Considering our evidence from the ELMPS '06, might it be possible to suggest that delayed marriage might be depressing wages in Egypt and leading to job instability? How do high costs of marriage affect educational choices, career paths, migration patterns, and employment status? Again, far more research is necessary to further understand these relationships.

I also have suggested in this paper that the high cost of marriage and delayed marriage means that young people are dating and mating in ways that run counter to prevalent norms and become fodder for political and moral critiques. To argue that we should lower the age at marriage for youth, as some religious figures have done, is not necessarily the answer since many young people have not finished their education and increased age at marriage has probably given women more decision-making power in their families and the ability to further their education, reduce their fertility, and engage in the labor force. Even the term “delayed” age at marriage suggests it is counter to the norm to marry at age 25 or 30, yet what are the social, cultural, and economic implications if marriage at this age becomes the norm?

At the very least, public health officials should begin to address the need for both sex education and health-care for unmarried men and women rather than to assume or pretend that sexuality is only confined to marriage. Similarly, laws and government

policy must be examined so that young people are not penalized or demonized for engaging in premarital sex. Denial, guilt, fear, and punishment are not positive experiences, and sociologists warn about the dangers of self-destructive and extremist behavior when young people feel alienated and cannot live up to the expectations of their parents and authority figures (see Epstein 1998). Public discussions must go beyond superficial moralizing and include young people in the conversation.

The research agenda that has sponsored this paper problematizes “youth exclusion” in the Middle East. Thus it suggests, by definition, that youth inclusion is a path worth encouraging. Policy interventions and research agendas must be developed with sensitivity to the political and economic dynamics in the region, but this cannot occur without engaging young people. Young people comprise the largest demographic cohort in the history of many Middle Eastern countries and if they remain excluded, alienated, economically vulnerable, and perpetual adolescents, it is the region that will suffer both politically and economically.

More importantly, the historical benefit of a youth bulge has been the contributions that young people make to their societies as age-dependency ratios decrease and the society has a larger workforce to support children and the elderly. This period has been a boon to East Asian economies in the past and ushered in long-needed political change as well in other countries. Throughout the Middle East, young people are more educated than ever before and many of them are already contributing to their growing economies, but the predicaments of young people deserve greater attention and further research, not only to ease their financial and social pressures, but also to improve and inspire their societies with their skills, their ambition, and their energy.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See “By a Margin of 2 Million” 2006.
2. The analysis in this paper could not have been accomplished without the extremely helpful statistical expertise provided by Anna Olsson, a Ph.D. candidate at American University. Anna’s insights, suggestions, and ideas have greatly contributed to this paper and I am deeply appreciative of her perfectionism and creativity. Mohammed ‘Alaa Hassan, also a Ph.D. candidate at American University, initiated many interviews of young people through an online questionnaire and personal interviews in Egypt, and I am indebted to his initiative and his critical help in collecting and translating sources for the paper. In addition, the earlier research support of Mary Breeding, Ali Ozdogun, and Mee Young Han, all Ph.D. students at American University, is greatly appreciated.
3. I am very grateful for the generosity of Ragui Assaad and the Population Council in providing access to the data and for their collaborative support in designing and conceptualizing the marriage module and its relationship to the larger survey.
4. Special thanks are due to Akhter A. Ahmed and Lawrence Haddad at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) for sharing their data and agreeing to add a battery of questions on the cost of marriage in Egypt to their survey. The Population Council in Cairo, the American University Senate Research Award (Washington, D.C.), the New Arab Demography Project of the Social Research Center at the American University in Cairo, and the Mellon Foundation supported this project. Invaluable research assistance was provided by Amina Hegazy, David Spielman, Fatma El-Hamidi, Rania Salem, Maria Buzdugan, and David Richards.
5. The sub-sample for the analysis of costs of marriage included 4,696 <sup>ever</sup>-married (married, divorced, or widowed) female respondents aged 16-49 who reported values on all six component costs of marriage and who married in 1975 or later.
6. See Assaad 2006 for far more detailed analysis of the preliminary results of the ELPS ’06 survey and changes in female labor force participation rates.
7. The *Merged Married Couples* comprised 7,301 individuals and included all currently married females who could be matched with their husbands and whose husbands also were part of the survey sample. The final sub-sample included 4,139 women in the cost of marriage module who were currently married—thus excluding the divorced and widowed respondents to the marriage module—and whose husbands also were part of the survey.
8. An engagement informally begins with both families agreeing to the marriage, negotiating its terms, and then reading the *fatiba* (the opening *sura* or chapter of the Qur’an). The *shabka* ties the couple with a gift of rings or gold jewelry and is typically given by the groom to the bride when the marriage contract is signed, but this can vary. The *katb el kitaab* is the formal signing of the marriage contract, which may or may not take place with the *dukbla* or consummation of the marriage.
9. For example, the bride’s family of women aged 20-24 that never have been to school contributes 29 percent of marriage costs, but those families whose daughter has more than a university degree contribute 35 percent. As they get older, the families of women aged 30-35 with no education contribute 30 percent and university educated women 37 percent to the costs of marriage. In an analysis of education-discrepant marriages, the higher the bride’s education, the greater the bride’s share of marriage costs, although it is not such a linear relationship when the groom is better educated than the bride.
10. It is expected by the groom’s family, however, that if the bride’s family insists upon a high dowry, they will use that sum to purchase rooms of furniture for the new apartment and the bride’s family will add an equal sum to the furniture fund from their own resources. This tradition is supported by the data: the average real cost of the *mahr* in the cost of marriage cohort was LE 1,106 and the average real cost of the bride’s side’s cost of their share of furniture and appliances was LE 2,368—an almost perfect double.
11. US Dollar price conversion for 2005.
12. The monthly earnings dataset included 7,547 individuals who were all waged workers. The merged monthly earnings dataset included

4,140 currently married females who could be matched with their husbands, whose husbands also were part of the survey sample, and whose husbands reported monthly earnings. Our sub-sample thus included the earnings data of 2,706 men aged 16-49 whose wives reported values on all six component costs of marriage and who were married in 1975 or later.

13. The new Rent Law of March 24, 1996 which went into effect in 1997 permitted fixed rental contracts for a limited time, significantly increasing the rental market beyond furnished and luxury apartments available only to the rich. These new limited, fixed period rental contracts allowed some middle income young couples to avoid having to pay much higher sums in key money to find an appropriate marital home. In addition, the new mortgage law (Law 148 of 2001) may soon account for decreased urban real estate prices. More importantly, the repeal of land reform that removed rural land rent guarantees in 1992, implemented in 1997, is no doubt the cause of increased rural housing costs.
14. One article told of the unfortunate government worker who earned SR2,000 a month but took out a SR150,000 loan to augment the funds he had saved for his marriage costs, including a SR30,000 *mahr*. He soon had difficulties repaying the debt, which led to marital disagreements and fear since Saudi Arabia has a debtor's prison. "I was the one that took the risk of borrowing the money just to build the house for her. She was so selfish for refusing to help me. She let me sink," he said. "To get revenge against her, I sold all the furniture in the house to pay back some of my debt and divorced her. Now I am happy again living next to my mother" (Ahmad 2006).
15. US Dollar price conversion for 2003.
16. In 1987, the Minister of Justice commissioned a study on dowers ("The Shoura and the Dowry" 2003).
17. US Dollar price conversion for 2002.
18. <http://www.government.ae/gov/en/gov/index.jsp>.
19. Due to the efforts of women activists, it has become much more popular for women to add "conditions" to their marriage contract which

can give them more rights, such as the right to education, divorce, or to work. After a long campaign in Egypt, the standard state-issued marriage contract now includes these conditions as "check-off" options (see Singerman 2005).

20. To mobilize supporters, there were many reports of radical Islamist groups in Egypt in the 1990s arranging extremely low-cost marriages among the group's members since the Islamists objected to late marriage and the consumption surrounding familial expectations which they say is tied to Westernization and globalization.
21. At the same time, we must remember that rather being dismissed as a "backward" pre-modern institution in the paradigm of modernization theory, the family is also a resilient political form in the Middle East as the monarchies, emirates, and clans of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, and Somalia, tell us. And we should also include the familial dynasties appearing in secular or nationalist regimes such as Egypt, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Libya.
22. This phrase was used by an Egyptian young man in response to an electronic questionnaire about youth issues in Egypt.
23. This objection was also voiced in a number of responses to electronic questionnaires sent to Egyptian young men and women.

## ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST YOUTH INITIATIVE

### Our Mission

*To develop and implement a regional action plan for promoting the economic and social inclusion of young people in the Middle East.*

### Creating Alliances for Maximum Progress

The Middle East Youth Initiative's objective is to accelerate the international community's ability to better understand and respond to the changing needs of young people in the Middle East. By creating an international alliance of academics, policymakers, youth leaders and leading thinkers from the private sector and civil society, we aim to develop and promote a progressive agenda of youth inclusion.

The Middle East Youth Initiative was launched in July 2006 by the Wolfensohn Center for Development at the Brookings Institution in partnership with the Dubai School of Government.

### Connecting Ideas with Action

The initiative blends activities in an attempt to bridge the divide between thinkers and practitioners and utilizes robust research as a foundation for effective policy and programs. The initiative has three complementary pillars:

#### Research and Policy: Pathways to Inclusion

With this initiative, cutting-edge research advances the understanding of economic and social issues affecting young people. The main target group is youth 15 to 29 years old, with a special focus on young men and women who live in urban areas and have secondary or post-secondary education. In addition to addressing needs of older youth, the initiative will also focus on strategies for promoting development of youth 15 years and under in areas such as primary education, skills development and community participation.

The research framework focuses on youth making two major transitions to adulthood: i) the transition from education to employment; and ii) the transition to household formation (marriage and family). Research will concentrate on strategies to achieve inclusion in:

- Quality education
- Quality employment

- Marriage
- Housing
- Civic participation

Our goal is to examine the relationship between economic and social policies and generate new recommendations that promote inclusion.

### Advocacy and Networking: Creating Vital Connections

The initiative aspires to be a hub for knowledge and ideas, open to all stakeholders who can make change happen. Strong partnerships with policymakers, government officials, representatives from the private sector and civil society organizations, donors and the media will pioneer forms of dialogue that bridge the divide between ideas and action. By bringing in the voice and new perspectives of young people, the initiative will revitalize debate on development in the Middle East.

### Practical Action: Life-Changing Impact

Outcomes matter. With a focus on areas with the greatest potential for innovation and impact, the initiative will mobilize partners for practical action that can improve young people's lives. The initiative will help develop policies and program interventions which provide youth with skills, expand opportunities for employment and facilitate access to credit, housing and civic participation.

## ABOUT THE WOLFENSOHN CENTER FOR DEVELOPMENT

The Wolfensohn Center for Development at the Brookings Institution was founded in July 2006 by James D. Wolfensohn, former president of the World Bank and member of the Brookings Board of Trustees.

The Wolfensohn Center for Development analyzes how resources, knowledge and implementation capabilities can be combined toward broad-based economic and social change in a four-tier world.

The following principles guide the center's work:

- A focus on **impact, scaling-up and sustainability** of development interventions
- Bridging the gap between **development theory and practice** to bring about action
- Giving **voice** to developing countries, with high-level policy engagement and
- broad networking
- A **rigorous, independent research** approach that draws from multiple disciplines
- Working in **partnership** with others

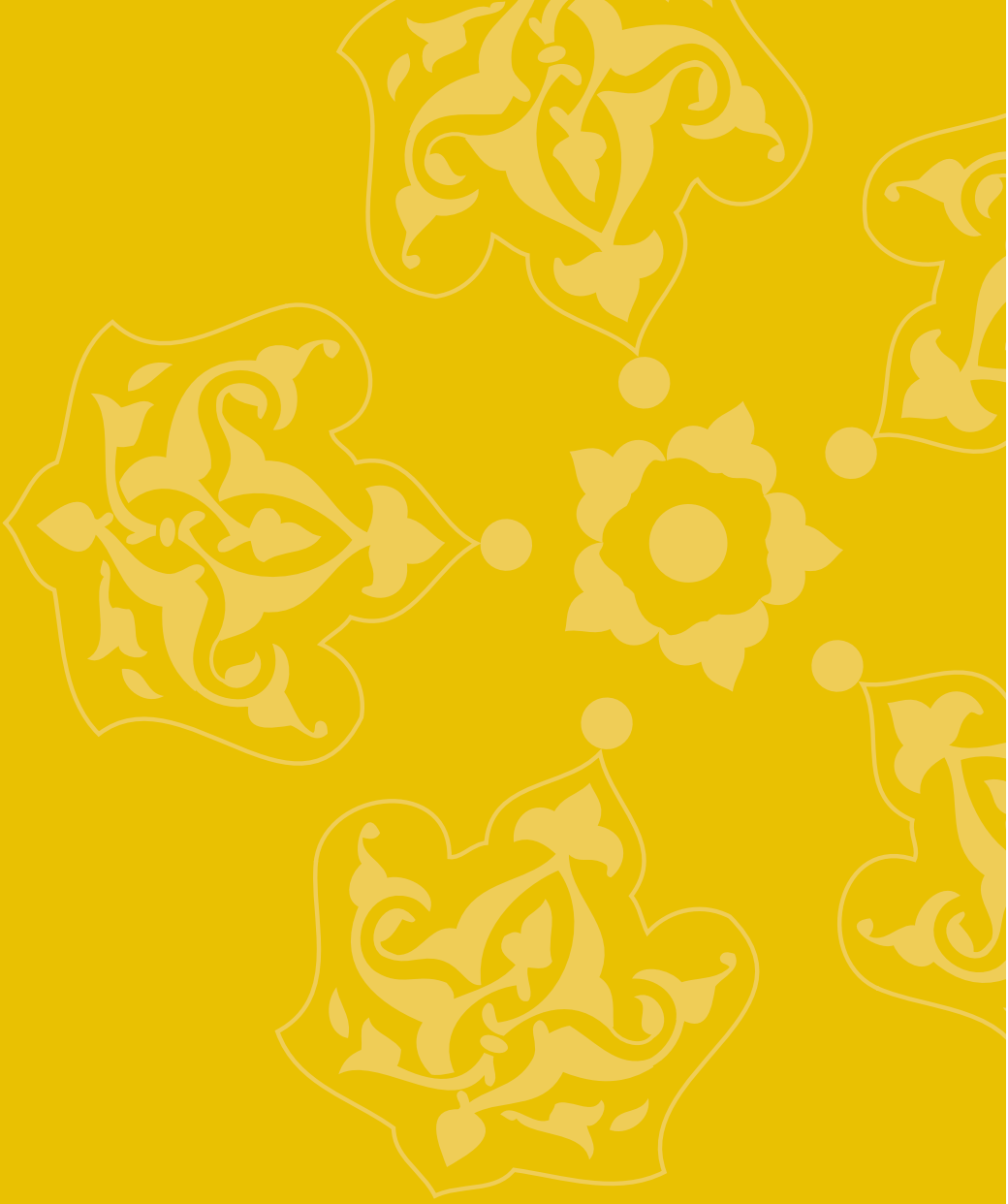
## ABOUT THE DUBAI SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT

The Dubai School of Government is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2004 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, the school aims to promote good governance by enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

Toward this goal, the Dubai School of Government collaborates with international institutions such as Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in its research and training programs. In addition, the school organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world.

The school is committed to the creation of knowledge, the dissemination of best practice and the training of policy makers in the Arab world. To achieve this mission, the school is developing strong capabilities to support research and teaching programs including:

- Applied research in public policy and management
- Masters degrees in public policy and public administration
- Executive education for senior officials and executives
- Knowledge forums for scholars and policy makers



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