ISSN: 2788-8037
Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:
https://rowaq.cihrs.org/submissions/?lang=en

Methodological Paradoxes in Understanding Rural Egypt: Deconstructing Young Women's Challenges in the Public Sphere

Hassan Hussein

To cite this article: Hussein, Hassan (2022) 'Methodological Paradoxes in Understanding Rural Egypt: Deconstructing Young Women's Challenges in the Public Sphere', *Rowaq Arabi* 27 (2), pp. 11-27, DOI: 10.53833/QXFK2069

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.53833/QXFK2069

Methodological Paradoxes in Understanding Rural Egypt: Deconstructing Young Women's Challenges in the Public Sphere

Hassan Hussein

Abstract

Despite noticeable efforts to include women in different facets of public life, rural women's participation is low compared to their metropolitan counterparts, and to men in general. This paper argues that rural young women face double discrimination: first, through disempowerment in regards to basic economic, social, and cultural rights which facilitate participation in public life, and second, that their challenges are not fully captured by most research. Utilising constructivist ethnographic qualitative research conducted in three rural villages in Egypt, this study navigates through disadvantaged young women's realities and captures the unique and unrecognised challenges they encounter in regards to participating in public life. In addition to sharing challenges common to most women, the findings reveal challenges specific to rural young women. Some of these challenges directly impede women's participation in the public sphere; such as lack of ID, early marriage, and limited mobility while others indirectly limit their public participation, such as social norms, migration of husband, and marriage cost.

Keywords: Women's Rights; Gender; Public Participation; Marriage; Rural Egypt

Introduction

Civic participation in general is low among Egyptians, with only 3.6 per cent of the entire population reporting that they have ever volunteered. Young women aged between 18 to 25 in rural Egypt are especially underrepresented in civic activities.[1] The recent nationwide Survey of Young People in Egypt (SYPE) concluded that there is a substantial gender gap in the participation of rural women, with only 1.5 per cent of young women participating, as opposed to 13.1 per cent of young men.[2] Several factors obstruct women's engagement in the public sphere. Some of these factors may be common regardless of gender and loci, such as education, income, and class. Scholarship in political participation tends to apply these socioeconomic factors as a quantitative explanatory model of behaviour to predict and understand public participation. Other factors are

specific to women and context, such as culture, social norms, and gender roles. As is the case in most Muslim and Arab authoritarian and patriarchal societies in the Middle East, young women in rural Egypt have far less freedom than men, especially in relation to restrictions on mobility.[3] This context is complicated by the role that marriage plays as one of the most important social events in the lives of young people, especially young women.[4] For young women in Egypt, marriage is a coming-of-age marker in which they are recognised as adults and gain some opportunities to participate in public life with less family supervision and restriction.[5] Young women's limited access to safe public spaces in rural areas is another reason for social restrictions on their participation in public life.[6] Examining these factors, which are specific to women and context, requires appropriate methodology to better understand how they impede rural women's participation. The paper questions whether less-advantaged rural women face additional challenges that impede their public participation in comparison to men, as well as their women counterparts in metropolitan areas. Straddling a constructivist qualitative approach, this paper sheds light on some of these unrecognised factors to demonstrate how they impede the participation of less-advantaged women in rural Egypt, and yet may be beyond the capture of the available quantitative research. The paper provides original knowledge on how less-advantaged rural women conceptualise the specific struggles that obstruct their participation in public life.

As is commonly established in most literature, women's full and effective participation in public life is a matter of human rights and indispensable to democratic governance. In Egypt, however, women are represented in a relatively low number compared with women in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa region.[7] Historically, the debate on women's participation in Egypt has focused on women's contribution to decision-making and policymaking in public institutions such as parliament, local councils, or government. Accordingly, women's participation is usually measured in terms of the legal rights that allow women to vote, express their opinion, and run for elected office. Nevertheless, although the legal framework is important to ensure women's right to participate, law alone is not enough to guarantee the practical exercise of legal rights. In addition, issues of gender and citizenship, as contended by Saud Joseph, are not limited to legal issues, but also raise issues of practice.[8] Joseph contends that what the law affords in principle and what women experience in practice is often quite different. The focus on the legal rights allowing women to vote and run for elected office raises two concerns: the first relates to women's empowerment and the other to assessing challenges to women's participation.

First, the focus on legal rights to increase women's representation may lead to discrepancies in women's empowerment. Evidence highlights that greater empowerment of women often leads to higher participation in public institutions and allows women to contribute to the decision-making and policymaking that impact their rights and lives.[9] Arguments about women's participation in these institutions, however, are often premised on the question of rights, as women represent half the population, rather than on the needs or requirements for women to participate.[10] In this regard, states play a mediating role in providing basic needs to carry out this empowerment. To understand the mediating role of the state on women's participation, we must see the multiple and conflicting interests represented and embodied in the society. It is also important that we recognise the

incongruous practices carried out by various agencies in relationship to women in general and less-advantaged rural women in particular. Basic education as an essential determinant to public participation is a good example demonstrating the incongruity between law and practice. While basic education is one of the rights protected by law and provided free of charge by the state, rural young women are underrepresented[11]. Scholars have provided plausible explanations for this underrepresentation of young women in rural Egypt, including the high dropout rate from school of women and girls in rural Egypt, and the poor quality of education.[12] This argument aligns with the recent results of SYPE where 50 per cent of youth who attained five years of school at a national level cannot read and write and 40 per cent cannot do basic math.[13] Samah Elbehary argues that unsatisfactory public education is another explanation. The dissatisfaction per se is due to several factors, including the weak role of the overburdened public education sector in preparing students, especially female students, to engage in society. Exacerbating this issue, ineffective instructional methods and other dimensions of school quality may be more favourable to boys than girls.[14] Furthermore, in authoritarian contexts schooling may not play the same role as it does in most democratic societies. The value and weight given to education in authoritarian contexts is downgraded by authoritarian regimes, where investments in human capital are influenced in important ways by the type of regime in power.[15] One example, as argued by Nadim Mirshak, is the focus of most authoritarian regimes on access and enrolment rather than quality and attainment. In contrast, other scholars recount the important role of education in some authoritarian contexts in the region, wherein school may provide a space for the participation of women.[16]

Second, the focus on legal rights as a form of women's participation in the public sphere contributes to the lack of research and diverse methodological approaches capable of examining other unique challenges faced by women at the local level. The limited available research focuses heavily on measuring public challenges affecting women's participation in general while failing to consider challenges that women face in their everyday lived experiences, in their families and societies. According to Lila Abu-Lughod, research in the field of women's participation has mostly focused on the big picture and whether there is a deficit of democracy in the macro-context of the Arab region with little attention given to questions of local communities and how young women practice citizenship.[17] Additionally, despite the emergence of recent literature on the organisational and civic capacity of groups, the focus of much research on the phenomenon of public participation in political socialisation and political psychology is rooted in the study of the behaviour of discrete individuals. Such research tradition tends to cut individuals off from their social context wherein their engagement and behaviour can be better understood as a part of their networks of social interaction.[18] Saud Joseph argues that, despite disempowered women's historical attainment of some legal rights to participate in public life (such as voting, running for elected office, and legal quotas), many of their struggles for equal participation remain unrecognised. Furthermore, less-advantaged rural women are suffering from constraining discourses that contribute to shaping their roles in public life. It shows how the lack of basic economic, social, and cultural rights impact young women's lives and roles within their communities. 'Rural women' is a label that creates contention for young rural women. While some may argue that this label is 'just language', it

represents a struggle over conflicting values and ideologies for rural women. Language, as maintained by Margaret Grace and June Lennie, constructs and engenders the hegemonic culture, values, and ideologies of rural women. Language is not just a neutral means of expression; rather, it is defined as a site of struggle in which some voices or discourses are heard and dominate while others are silenced and suppressed.[19] Finally, the literature shows the need for a suitable methodology to better understand the unrecognised struggles of rural women that impede their participation. There is a need for a methodology where less-advantaged women conceptualise and construct how they experience specific challenges in their everyday lives.

Problem Statement and Methodology

The above literature situated women's participation in its context. One the one hand, it shows the importance of women's political empowerment as a requirement of democratic governance. It also highlights how women's empowerment can be measured in terms of the legal rights afforded women, such as voting, running for elected office, and participating in public decision-making. On the other hand, it shows a gap in the research that examines specific challenges hindering rural women from participating in public life. This gap is caused by the choice of research approach to examine challenges faced by rural women in regards to participating in public life. There are two distinct research traditions in the study of public participation; the predominant one, which focuses on individual characteristics such as education, income, and class, and the less prominent one, which focuses on the influence of context and social networks.[20] This paper fits into the second tradition and makes a contribution to it. The paper shows how using the first research tradition, which is usually quantitative, may contribute to the problem of misunderstanding specific challenges faced by young women in rural areas. While the explanatory model of individual characteristics may help assess common requirements for public participation (e.g., education, income, class), it fails to capture other unquantifiable challenges that are faced by young women in rural areas. I have suggested in other work that there are substantial differences between the two research traditions in examining women's political participation in rural communities.[21] This study, therefore, sheds light on unrecognised struggles for women's participation in Egypt where they lack the basic economic, social, and cultural rights to participate in different political activities in private and public domains in the country; and how these struggles are yet beyond the capture of most research. Contextualising this study in its authoritarian context provides an understanding of how and why existing hegemonic approaches to political participation do not account for how young women engage in public life in Egypt.

The methodology for this phenomenological ethnographic qualitative study is guided by a naturalistic research paradigm where women actively construct their own meanings and experience of socioeconomic challenges, and where meaning arises out of social situations and is engaged with through interpretive processes.[22] Naturalistic researchers, as contended by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba, understand reality as multiple and socially constructed, and thus subjective.[23] In addition, my choice of the naturalistic research approach is relevant as it considers how context

interacts with human experience to create and shape human reality.[24] The approach was conducive to understanding the public participation of rural women from their perspective, rather than from the perspective of the researcher. Thus, I employ phenomenological methods that helped the women to reflect on their lived experiences, and provided me with the opportunity to uncover these lived experiences. I draw on fourteen interviews from the data collected in my previous major research to assess political participation, informal learning, and entrepreneurship of rural women in Egypt conducted in 2017 – 2018. Forty-nine women from three rural villages participated in this study. Participants were interviewed in their locations, in the author's language—Arabic, and with help from three hired women research assistants. The three women research assistants were vital to selecting the participants, organising the interviews and facilitating my access to interview the young women and their families. The process of recruiting participants for this study was guided by my goal of providing an in-depth examination of women's lived experiences with everyday challenges to public or civic engagement. The rationale for selecting the rural Fayoum governorate is because it is one of the most impoverished governorates in Egypt with a high percentage of marginalized young women. Fayoum is geographically located in the north of Upper Egypt. To select participants, I used a purposeful sample framework that takes age, educational background and socioeconomic variables into consideration, as I was only interested in interviewing marginalized young women. The mode of inquiry of this study employs open-ended techniques to ensure elaborate description of participants' situations and emic. The open-ended techniques allow for prolonged engagement with participants in the field and were consistent with the qualitative nature of this study and its phenomenological and ethnographic considerations. In my analysis, I describe how collective identity is established and how the social roles and identities of young women in rural Fayoum are constructed. To better portray women's narratives of the various discourses of their everyday lives, the next section takes the form of 'writing against culture', a process which Abu-Lughod describes as more of a political project than an existential one.[25] I adopt Abu-Lughod's three-mode strategy of writing against culture: discourse and practice, connections, and ethnographies of the particular. An important benefit of this strategy, as noted by Abu-Lughod, is its potential for helping researchers to avoid the common problem of overgeneralisation. As explained by Abu-Lughod, when one generalises from experiences and conversations with only several people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenise them. The 'discourse and practice' strategy enables researchers to recognise multiple competing statements with actual consequences for particular groups in society. The 'connection' strategy, as asserted by Abu-Lughod, involves a shift in gaze to include phenomena in the community that are not limited to historical connections but also encompass national and transnational connections between people, cultural forms, loci, and other public issues or commodities as I discuss in the following section. Thus, the purpose of the 'ethnographies of the particular' strategy is not simply to privilege micro processes of presenting women's lives over macro, but rather to employ ethnographic writing that reflects prolonged engagement with participants, provides a discourse of familiarity in which the actions of women living their particular lives are better conveyed, and brings the language of their everyday life closer to the

intended audience of this research. Finally, the names of participants and villages used in this paper are pseudonyms for their actual names.

Challenges Facing Women of Fayoum in Public Participation

Despite women's presence in big numbers in the three target villages, they are rarely in the public sphere. Throughout the interviews, women narrated various challenges that limit their public participation. In this section, I cluster these challenges as constructed by women into six groups to explain why women are not present in the public sphere.

Election fraud and sexual harassment

Almost all participants from the three villages explicitly or implicitly alluded to election fraud when I turned the discussion to their public participation, and they narrated different incidents that reflected widespread election fraud in Egypt. According to Emilie Hafner-Burton, Susan Hyde and Ryan Jablonski, electoral fraud and manipulation employed by authoritarian regimes take several forms.[26] These forms, however, may intensify when used against women to intimidate them and limit their participation.[27] Iman, a 25-year-old married woman from Dream Village, shed light on one form of election fraud when she narrated her voting experience. Iman told this story to justify why she decided to no longer participate in state political activities:

> Frankly, we [women in Fayoum] don't participate in elections because of the manifested widespread election fraud here…during election time they came to ask us if we have national ID or not. And when we said yes, they took us in a truck to the school [polling centre] and gave us 20 pounds each [equivalent to about $4 at the time of the incident and before the Egyptian Pound devaluation of 2016]… one kilo of sugar and a bottle of cooking oil and asked us to vote for a person whose name was handwritten on a small piece of paper given to us. Frankly, I decided to go get the money and the groceries. But when we arrived at the school, we were asked to get off the truck and leave the 20 pounds and groceries until we voted and were heading back to the village…I did vote, but I will never go again because I don't like that.

Iman's account supports the assertion made by Lisa Blaydes and Safinaz El Tarouty that election season in Egypt is seen by some as an opportunity for making additional income through the illegal recruitment of women voters, especially poor women.[28] While Iman's example represents a form of election fraud that may be welcomed by some voters, as noted by Blaydes and Tarouty, participants Hanan and Nora described election fraud techniques of a more menacing nature (i.e. sexual harassment and stigma). Hanan, a 22-year-old married woman from Hope Village, narrated how, in contrast to the election bribe technique, sexual harassment on Election Day is fearsome for every woman. Hanan said that she has never voted or participated in any public election. In fact, she said that her family has always banned her from going to the election because a lot of

'*maskhara wa taharosh*' ('sluttish behaviour and sexual harassment') takes place on Election Day. Hanan added that '…they [the regime] do that using thugs to block women from reaching election sites and to cause them to fear a scandal.' This conforms to Blaydes and Tarouty's assertion that, at elections, there are increased levels of harassment of women by hired thugs. Nora, a 22-year-old married woman from Hope Village, also talked about stigma surrounding elections. Nora, like Hanan, mentioned that she has never voted and will never do so. Then, to implicitly tell me that she thinks it is a meaningless process, she directed the question to me: 'Why should I?' When she realised I was not going to answer her question, she continued:

> Don't you remember what happened after the 25 January [revolution]? Do you remember when they scandalised those young women who participated in the referendum on the constitution and those who protested the regime? They tested their virginity! …and everyone heard about it in different media… Imagine if I participated with them, what should I tell my family? They would have undoubtedly slaughtered me.

Hanan and Nora's examples represent one of the many barriers that restrict women's participation, especially in conservative rural societies like their village in rural Fayoum. Their narratives may prove the effectiveness of the regime's use of threatening strategies to intimidate women from participating; where even the perceived threat of being sexually harassed or tested for virginity is seen as inflicting shame on a woman and her family. However, while what Iman, Hanan and Nora experienced are not exclusive to young women in Fayoum, as they may affect women in urban and other rural communities in Egypt, there are indeed barriers that are particular to people in Fayoum.

Historical mistrust

A common theme that was narrated by most participants is the historical mistrust between Fayoumi residents and successive national Egyptian governments since the assassination of former president Anwar Sadat in 1981 through the election of former president Mohamed Morsi in 2012 and then his ouster in 2013. Nadia, a widow from Bright Village in her sixties and the mother of one of my research participants—Nayera, referred to the deteriorated economic situation in Fayoum. Nadia identified the sixties and the seventies as the decades in which she thinks Fayoum dramatically changed for the worse. She said:

> Can you believe that Beni Suef [the neighbouring governorate], which used to be the poorest governorate in the entire Egypt, is now better than us? They have better roads and services than ours here in Fayoum. Young people there have a variety of jobs and economic opportunities available to them. Fayoum was a tourist destination for elite Egyptians who used to come to swim and fish in the splendid Qaroun Lake, including King Farouk [last king of Egypt before the military coup in 1952], who used to have a

> winter palace here in Fayoum. Look at all these good old Egyptian movies we enjoy today, they all pictured here in Fayoum. Today, we have no schools, no drinking water, poor medical service and only in the city centre, the roads are bad as you can see, no tourism at all, the land became heath unsuitable for agriculture, the lake turned to a swamp unsuitable for fishing, and there are no jobs at all. Our sons fled [migrated] to work in Libya, Jordan, and Italy and they end up dying there and return as corpses. Therefore, I wanted Nayera to get a small loan to run a small business from home to pay for her *gihaz* [sets of home furnishings as a contribution of woman to the marriage] so she could marry.

I asked Nadia what happened that led to these deteriorated conditions. She chuckled and paused for a moment, then asked in an ironic way, 'Don't you know?' When I intentionally did not answer her, she nodded her head toward Gamal, the husband of one of my research participants, and said, 'You tell him.' Gamal replied with only one word: 'Despotism.' Nadia continued, 'Yes, because we [people of Fayoum] are terrorists.' She paused for a moment, and then kept talking: 'We assassinated Sadat, we blew up America, and we blew up the bomb in the Beatrice church in Cairo.' Then, to make it clear for me why the people of Fayoum are portrayed as terrorists, she said, 'We even supported the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood and its president Morsi.' At that point, I understood what was behind her sarcasm. When I asked her to elaborate on the relationship between these specific histories, situations, and events and the deteriorated economic and social conditions of her village, Nadia explained that 'the deterioration of life in Fayoum is a result of the government's intentional neglect of the governorate since the assassination of the former Egyptian president Sadat after a fatwa made by Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman.' Nadia and Gamal then explained the connection between Abdel Rahman, President Morsi, the deteriorated situations, and the mutual mistrust between the government and the Fayoumi people.

They began by explaining the connection between Fayoum and Abdel Rahman, the famous blind Egyptian Islamist. Abdel Rahman, who was formerly an imam of a mosque in one of the Fayoum villages, was appointed as a professor at the al-Azhar University branch in Fayoum after obtaining his PhD. After the assassination of Sadat in 1981, Abdel Rahman was arrested by the Egyptian government. Later he was released and travelled to the United States. In 1993, he was convicted and received a sentence of lifelong incarceration for planning and inciting the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. He died in an American prison in February 2017.[29] Beginning in 2012 during the Egyptian presidential election - when Abdel Rahman announced his support for candidate Mohamed Morsi and later congratulated him as the elected president - Abdel Rahman and consequently Fayoum have been closely connected with Morsi. Additionally, Fayoum was the highest governorate in percentage to vote for Mohamed Morsi.[30] In his first speech as president, Morsi promised supporters of Sheikh Abdel Rahman that he would release him from prison in the United States; and in his first week as president, Morsi paid his first official visit to Fayoum during which he gave a speech and prayed the *jumma* (the weekly congregational prayer on Friday) at a mosque in Fayoum. Nadia explained that, since the assassination of Sadat until the

day of my interview with her, there is increasing antipathy from '*al-askar*' ('the successive military regimes') toward the people of Fayoum. This hatred, Nadia said, 'reached a peak after the election of Morsi, especially after he came here in Fayoum immediately after he became the president.' Then she added, 'He [Morsi] was the only president who ever came to Fayoum.' Both Nadia and Gamal said they voted for Morsi, and they both said 'it was the first and last time I voted.' I asked both why they had decided not to participate in elections after that point and if they participated in any of the elections after their first experience. To this question Gamal responded, 'No, we told you we won't ever participate again…who would participate in such a comic play.' Then, to get a sense of whether this sentiment represents a common attitude among the people of Fayoum, or whether it is exclusive to Gamal and Nadia, I asked them whether their daughter and wife shared the same attitude about elections. Gamal replied, 'They [the military regime] don't differentiate between old or young, we are all treated harshly. But they put extra effort into exploiting young people and confining their effort to meaningless elections or useless youth centres…their brute security apparatus represses any true community involvement.' Nadia agreed with Gamal about the harsh treatment inflicted upon young people in Fayoum. She highlighted the massive number of young people 'arrested' and the 'enforced disappearances' from Fayoum but did not want to provide detail.

The narratives recounted by Nadia and Gamal highlight various strategies that have typically been employed by authoritarian regimes to restrict public participation, as conceptualised by Holger Albrecht.[31] Like Nadia, several young women revealed mutual mistrust between people in Fayoum and what they call the 'military government.' In a meeting with young women in Hope Village, Rasha and Zainab claimed that their apathy towards participating in state activities is due to the harsh treatment they face because of their *niqab*—a veil worn by some Muslim women in public, covering all their face except the eyes. Rasha said, 'My friends and I are not affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but officials of the military government treat us badly because they mistakenly identify us as members of the prohibited Muslim Brotherhood organisation.'

National ID and citizenship

Another complex theme that is closely related to the women's poor participation in state civic activities is the issue of national identification. Several young women in the three villages do not have any government documents (e.g., national ID, birth certificate, marriage certificate). The women that I interviewed explained that undocumented early marriage, mandatory military service, and Libyan ancestry are three intertwined factors that contribute to their lack of identification and participation in civic life, and crosscut several other areas of their everyday lives in rural Fayoum. While this complex theme may indicate that these women have 'incomplete citizenship', undocumented early marriage, avoiding mandatory military service, and Libyan ancestry seem to be a widely recognised and accepted reality for all those whom I interviewed in Fayoum, including young women, parents, husbands, and other individuals with whom I had informal conversations during my stay in Fayoum. Early marriage in rural Upper Egypt is a social phenomenon produced by family traditions and social conservatism that negatively affects various

aspects of the lives of young women, including educational prospects and public participation. Several young women I interviewed said that their marriages are undocumented and that this is common in their villages. The stories of Menna and Nabila represent two dimensions of this complex undocumented early marriage issue, and although the situations surrounding the undocumented marriages of these two women are different, they share the same consequences. Menna, a19-year-old mother of two children from Hope Village, married her cousin when she was sixteen. She has been married for more than three years and neither she, her husband, nor their two sons have birth certificates. Her husband's parents never registered his birth to avoid mandatory military service. Upper Egyptian parents may choose not to register the birth of their sons with the state to keep them from serving in the military so that they can help with agricultural work.[32] While this practice may help young men avoid mandatory military service, it also unintentionally excludes them from being eligible to benefit from social benefits, such as attending public school or the right of obtaining national ID. Menna shared the following about her husband's situation: 'He cannot work fulltime and currently he is working in construction on a day-to-day basis…sometimes we stay weeks without subsistence, but his mother lets us eat and drink with the rest of the [extended] family.' I asked Menna how long she, her husband, and their two sons have lived with her mother-in-law, and she replied, 'I married there and have lived there since then.' When I asked her how big the family is, she replied, '*Mashallah* [God bless], my mother-in-law and all her nine sons along with their wives and children live in the same house…it's a big house.' Unlike Menna, Nabila, a married 24-year-old mother of three from Dream Village, has a birth certificate and a national ID. Despite this, Nabila does not have a marriage certificate to prove the validity of her marriage of eight years because she married a man from the neighbouring village who has neither a birth certificate nor an ID. Consequently, their two daughters and son do not have birth certificates either. Nabila explained that although she has a birth certificate and an ID, her marriage is undocumented because, like Menna's parents, her husband's parents decided not to register him upon his birth. However, her husband's parents had a different reason for their decision. Nabila said, 'My husband and his family are Libyan, but they all were born here.' I asked Nabila why they hadn't then documented their marriage at the Libyan embassy in Cairo. She replied, 'He doesn't have Libyan documents either…there are too many people in the neighbouring villages of Libyan descent, but they live here because their lands and homes are here.' I followed up by asking Nabila why she did not register her children with her ID instead. She responded in an ironic and angry tone: 'My birth certificate and national ID are not enough to register them because they [the government] register based on the father's name, and I cannot pass citizenship on to my children.' Nabila later explained that her husband and all his brothers go to work and trade in Libya from time to time where more opportunities are available compared to Fayoum. Nabila also attributed her apathy towards participating in state civic activities to her stronger loyalty to Libya, as her husband and his entire extended family, which she is now a part of, are Libyan. Similarly, several young women from Dream Village and Bright Village mentioned the lack of belonging among their families as one of the reasons they feel that voting is not a civic obligation. Although many of the men in the village hold the Egyptian

nationality as a prerequisite to live in Egypt, they believe that their ancestry belongs to Libya. I enquired about the possibility that young women could benefit from the efforts by the state and local NGOs to support the issuance of national ID. Women reported numerous difficulties in obtaining national ID through these avenues. Rasha, a 24-year-old married women from Hope Village, said:

> When I saw an announcement by a government agency in Fayoum about issuing ID free of charge to poor women in rural villages, I voluntarily convinced fifteen women from among my friends to come with me to that government agency to apply for ID…I arranged with my husband for transportation and the women collectively contributed to pay the driver to give us a round trip to downtown to apply for IDs. But officials refused to accept any of the applications or even to see them. And when I wanted to understand the reason for their rejection and to investigate what we should do, the guy in the office shouted at me 'We will detain you if you come here anymore!'… so I took the women back home.

When I asked Rasha if she gave up after this encounter, she answered gloomily, 'What should I do?' Although not legally restricted, authorities do not welcome women coming in groups for the free ID. The reason behind such decision may be fuelled by the fear that Islamists may exploit the massive number of illiterate rural women by abusing their IDs to interfere in public elections and other public decisions.[33] This seems to correspond to what Rasha stated earlier—that government officials mistakenly associate women who wear *niqab* with the prohibited Muslim Brotherhood organisation and therefore treat them harshly. Furthermore, the incident shows the need for further discussion on the sufficiency and effectiveness of women's rights organisations in the empowerment of rural women.

Oppressive social norms and gender roles

The preceding discussion highlights various realities that contribute to the exclusion of women from state civic activities, as experienced by women in rural villages in Fayoum. The women also narrated several other issues that obstruct their participation in what they call '*mashakel karietna*' ('problems of our village'). While participation in local civic activities may not require state documents as a prerequisite, young women reported that gender roles limit their involvement in their local communities. Gender roles represent a major obstacle to public participation for young women in rural Fayoum. The data suggested that women experience oppression before and after marriage. While Nada Ramadan argued that marriage, being a primary marker of adulthood, is one of the most important social events in the lives of young people in authoritarian and patriarchal societies like Egypt and is a key for participation in public life with less family supervision,[34] young women reported that they face many gender expectations that limit their role before and after marriage. Gender expectations of women in Egypt, as argued by Nawal El Saadawi, include the expectation that women should remain at home until they marry, adhere to male superiority,

and be responsible for all household activities.[35] These practices contribute to the general perception that a society, especially a rural society, is patriarchal, extensively dominated by males, and oppressive towards women. Throughout the interviews, women recounted several issues which they believe contribute to social oppression, including the subjugation of women, social conservatism, kinship, and hegemonic male culture; they repeatedly referred to these issues as constraints that limit their participation in public life and that men do not face. The data suggested that young women in rural Fayoum are expected to conform to these social norms and accept male superiority regardless of age. Women explained that, in so-called patriarchal societies, the most powerful family member is the father, and his power extends to the male siblings, uncles, and male cousins. Most women whom I interviewed through this study were married at an early age and early marriage as one consequence of these four issues of oppression was a recurrent theme in the interviews with women. Amina, a 25-year-old married women from Dream Village, explained how early marriage could be considered at the root of many of the problems faced by women in rural Fayoum, but distinguished between 'victim women', as she termed them, and 'matriarchs':

> I mistakenly thought I would be free when I marry. Before I got married, I was not allowed to go out alone; I never had a chance to enjoy life or the humble amount of money I earned by working on sewing to save for my marriage. I was engaged at fifteen and then married at age seventeen. Now, I have four daughters. I help my husband in his poultry small business most of the time and do the non-ending household activities. I moved from my parents' control to my mother-in-law's oppression. She is a woman, but she controls everyone at home: my husband and I, my brothers-in-law, and their wives, and all her grandsons and granddaughters. She manages every aspect in the life of everyone that stays at the home. When she is away, in few instances, she delegates my eldest brother-in-law's wife to administer the entire home while she is away. If the wife of my eldest brother-in-law is also away with her, she delegates the second eldest brother-in-law's wife. Living with my husband's family is not easy, too many household responsibilities and a lot of problems.

Amina's story is particularly illuminating as it demonstrates the oppression she experiences living with her husband's extended family and lends support to Saba Mahmood's call for dismantling the institution of the nuclear and extended family as a key source of women's oppression in rural Arab societies.[36] Amina also highlighted the ways that young women suffer when trying to make money for their marriage at a young age. Like Amina, several other women mentioned that the jealousy of other women from within the extended family or neighbourhood over their public activities leads to other problems with their mothers-in-law and husbands, and consequently limits their participation in public life.

Limited access and mobility

Women highlighted 'inconvenient access' as another aspect that limits women's participation not only in national politics and voting activities but also in volunteer opportunities for local activities organised by the only 'women's club' located in the youth centre in the neighbouring village. Zainab explained, 'I coincidently heard that there is a women's club in the other village, but how can I go there with men?' She highlighted the difficulty, inappropriateness, and societal shame associated with using such women's club because it is 'next to a coffee shop full of men lingering and hanging around all the time…it is just a desolate room with a beautiful shiny and colourful government signboard, but you cannot ever find a single woman there.' While Zainab's claim is in line with what has been coined earlier by Albrecht as 'window dressing,' a form of co-opted civil society, Martha Brady asserted that young women in rural Egypt have even less access to youth centres or are completely excluded in some societies.[37] Due to culture and social norms, many youth centres become men-only spaces. As Brady states, 'Public space de facto becomes men's space.' In addition, young women and their families consider youth centres as institutions of the state, as they recounted by Brady. In addition, participants recounted that migration of husband limits young women's mobility. Migration of husbands because of limited economic opportunities in Fayoum has negatively affected these women's mobility, and accordingly their participation. The women disclosed that they are not allowed by their in-laws to spend time on unnecessary affairs while their husbands are travelling to work outside Fayoum. Furthermore, the women asserted that immigration of husbands to work abroad may bring new behaviours and attitudes, either negative or positive, to their villages. Those who travel to European countries may bring liberal attitudes toward gender roles that challenge socially constructed gender roles in their village, while those who travel to Arab countries may bring conservative values toward gender roles. These opposite attitudes may conform to the theory of Brooks Clem and Catherine Bolzendahl on the link between contextual and ideological learning and changing gender role attitudes.[38] The study examined the effects of context on adult attitude change towards opinion trends and contended that gender role attitudes have significant effects within the context of family institutions.

Economic burdens

As the Fayoumi women recounted earlier, women are not only expected to carry out all household activities and childrearing, but they also are often expected to contribute to breadwinning activities. Additionally, financial burdens on young women, especially the high cost of marriage, turn marriage into a perplexing process. Although marriage may not be their choice, women expressed how this perplexing process puts them between the hammer and the anvil. First, young women must work hard to accumulate the financial costs of marriage (furniture and furnishings, housing, and celebrations). Diane Singerman asserts that the cost of marriage in rural Egypt averaged four and a half times the gross national product (GNP) per capita and fifteen times the annual household expenditure per capita.[39] The situation becomes even tougher for less educated young women who are expected to marry earlier than educated ones who have to go to school for more years before

getting married, in order to have a better chance at finding an appropriate job. Furthermore, young women feel pressure because of the social construction of girl imperative marriage in rural societies where it is considered 'too late' for a girl if she is not married by the age of twenty. Sabah, a19-year-old married woman from Bright Village, said 'I feared that I would become *aness* [spinster] if I didn't marry before the age of twenty years.' During this 'liminal state', as coined by Singerman, young women remain financially dependent on their families who finance a large part of the cost of their marriage. This is consistent with the earlier tale told by Nadia, the mother of Nayera, who stated that the reason that she let her daughter participate in small income generating activity was so that she could contribute to her *gihaz*. The burden of marriage cost and the social pressure of girl imperative marriage in rural societies have tremendous consequences on the quality and quantity of the public participation of young women. In many cases, young women are left with no spare time to participate in unpaid public activities, as they are under pressure to save all their earnings for more than five years to accumulate enough, together with their parents, to pay for their marriage Because adolescents are economically dependent on parents and are not considered to be adults until they marry, they must live by the rules and ethics of their parents and the dominant values of their society. Nayera, a 24-year-old married woman from Bright Village, put it clearly:

> How could I spend any time away while I was immersed in household activities and working for 15 pounds per day [equivalent to about $3 at that time] in different farms in the village to save for my marriage? It is absolutely shamed to go have fun like other girls while my mother cuts part of her humble pension and work hard along with my brothers to accumulate the costs of my marriage. I couldn't do that, and if I could, I would be blamed by my community.

While this deteriorated situation leaves some women with no time to participate in any public activities, it encourages other young women to participate in various paid civic activities. Like Iman, who voted for a particular candidate in one of the public elections in exchange for twenty pounds and groceries. Omaima and Doreya, two young women from Bright Village, participated in election observation in a public election because they were under the impression that they would receive some form of compensation or personal benefit. Omaima is married with one child, and Doreya is a widow with two children. Omaima participated with the hope that she would get a financial per diem allowance and that the candidate would help her find a job if they won the election. Doreya also was hoping to get two things out of her participation in the observation:

> I was so happy when I heard that I was selected to observe the day-long election in the elementary school in my village. My husband died in an accident last year and I am struggling to get his pension because he did not have national ID…One of my neighbours said that my two children and I are eligible to receive an exceptional pension, but I was never able to submit my application because of the complicated

> government bureaucracy. So, I was hoping the candidate would help me apply for the exceptional pension to raise the two children…On the election day, I left my two kids with my neighbour, so she takes care of them while I was away at the school observing the election. But all what we got at the end of the day was a meal and drink. When my colleague—Omaima, asked about financial per diem allowance, the candidate's team told her it is volunteer work. I felt bad spending the whole day away from my children without any benefit; if I knew that, I would not have ever done it.

While these three cases - of Iman voting and Omaima and Doreya's election observation - represent two of the most salient forms of political participation, the personal benefit motives of the three women may have affected the quality of their participation. The three cases also highlight the importance of using disparate research methodology to examine public participation. The desire to benefit others and willingness to volunteer one's time and energy to do so are important components in distinguishing between private or public involvement for personal gain and the civic engagement in which citizens participate in the public life of a community in order to improve conditions for others.[40] While such involvement may be considered as active political participation when applying a quantitative methodology, the result is different when using a methodology that allows women to construct their own experience. In the case of these women, their involvement did not produce any change in attitude that might drive them to maintain future engagement, and would thus be considered ineffective civic engagement according to John Gastil and Peter Levine's criteria.[41] Finally, the examples above may also show the complication of participating in civic life when one's basic needs are also not met. The idea of volunteering is inconceivable to those who need to work to survive. Furthermore, the women's narratives show how the ID issue intertwined with their economic and social problems and demonstrate how women's struggles to participate in public life are interwoven.

Conclusion

Women's narratives in the preceding discussion showed how participants of this study understand the social, culture, economic and political issues that impact their lives and roles within their communities. The narratives highlight the tensions between discourses created and perpetuated by society and other discourses related to women's roles in rural communities. It is suggested that the 'invisible' - or to use a different word, the 'unrecognised' role of rural young women does not indicate weak participation but rather reflects a social construction of women's roles. Disadvantaged rural women experience pervasive social norms which often appear to conflict with and underappreciate a public role for women. These pervasive social norms together with the predominant patriarchal family system limit women's mobility to participate in, and play an equal role in, the public sphere at national and local levels. The citizenship and national ID issue is common to all the women, and it is intertwined with cultural, political, and economic rights to contribute to impeding women's public participation in rural societies. There is clear disparity in

women's empowerment between rural women and their metropolitan counterparts. This disparity discriminates against rural women, depriving them of their basic economic, social, and cultural rights to participate in the public life. At the same time, their struggles are inadequately captured by most research. The discussions showed the dire need for various approaches capable of gaining access to women's realities and everyday lived experiences to better capture their unique unrecognised challenges to participate equally in public life. In addition, the women's narratives showed that the concept of citizenship has been gendered and contributes to women's struggles to play an equal role to men. Finally, the findings of this study provided several implications to theory and practice in the field of international development, specifically as they relate to adjacent research related to women's rights. Policymakers at national and international levels of governance and international civil society should be aware of the unrecognised issues that impede rural women's participation in public life.

About the Author

Hassan Hussein is an assistant professor of Global Business Leadership and Gender Studies at Saint John's University - USA.

[1] Population Council (2015) *Survey of young people in Egypt final report:* (Cairo: Population Council).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Brady, Martha (2005) 'Creating Safe Spaces and Building Social Assets for Young Women in the Developing World', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 33 (2), pp. 35-49.
[4] Obermeyer, Carla (1992) 'Islam, Women, and Politics: The Demography of Arab countries', *Population and Development Review*, 1 (18), pp. 33-60.
[5] Ramadan, Nada (2012) *Envisioning and Defining New Egypt: Women and Gender in the January 25th Uprising and the Transitional Period.*
[6] Ibid.
[7] OECD, MENA (2019) 'Women's Political Participation in Egypt: Barriers, opportunities and gender sensitivity of select political institutions', (OECD) pp.1-73.
[8] Joseph, Saud (1996) 'Gender and citizenship in Middle Eastern States', *Middle East Report*, pp. 4-10.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Bargain, Olivier, Delphine Boutin, and Hugues, Champeaux (2019) 'Women's Political Participation and Intrahousehold Empowerment', *Journal of Development Economics* 12 (1), pp. 109-141.
[11] Elbehary, Samah (2020) 'Providing Insights into the Intended Curriculum of Probability for Basic Education Sector in Egypt', *International Journal of Mathematics Education* 15 (2), pp. 67-89.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ginsburg, Mark B., and Nagwa M. Megahed (2021) 'Global Discourses and Educational Reform in Egypt', *Educational Scholarship across the Mediterranean*, pp.171-195.
[15] Mirshak, Nadim (2020) 'Authoritarianism, education and the limits of political socialisation in Egypt', *Power and Education* 12 (1) pp. 39-54.
[16] Adely, Fida (2019) 'Decolonizing Our Questions/Decolonizing Our Answers,' *Gender and Education* 31 (4) pp. 452-457.

[17] Abu-Lughod, Lila (2010) 'The Active Social Life of "Muslim Women's Rights": A Plea for Ethnography, Not Polemic, with Cases from Egypt and Palestine', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 6 (1), pp.1-45.
[18] Lake, Ronald and Robert Huckfeldt (1998) 'Social Capital, Social Networks, and Political Participation', *Political Psychology* 19 (3), pp. 567-584.
[19] Grace, Margaret, and Lennie June (1998) 'Constructing and Reconstructing Rural Women in Australia: The Politics of Change, Diversity and Identity', *Sociologia Ruralis* 38 (3), pp. 351-370.
[20] Hussein, Hassan (2022) 'Unconventional Avenues for Public Participation: A Case Study from Rural Egypt', *The Journal of Social Encounters* 6 (1), pp. 49-61.
[21] For more information on the rural context in Egypt, see Mohamed, Hassan (2017) 'Informal social networks, civic learning, and women's political participation', (Doctoral Dissertation), Retrieved from Proquest Dissertations.
[22] Cohen, Louis, Lawrence Manion, and Keith Morrison (2000) *Research Methods in Education* (NY: Routledge Falmer).
[23] Lincoln, Yvonna and Egon Guba (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Sage).
[24] Given, Lisa (2008) *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage Publications).
[25] Abu-Lughod, Lila (1991) 'Writing Against Culture', in Richard G. Fox (ed.) *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press).
[26] Hafner-Burton, Emilie, Susan Hyde, and Jablonski Ryan (2018) 'Surviving Elections: Election Violence, Incumbent Victory and Post-Election Repercussions', *British Journal of Political Science* 48 (2), pp. 459-488.
[27] Sanyal, Paulami (2016) 'Parliamentary Elections in Egypt, 2015', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 3 (4), pp. 445-454.
[28] Blaydes, Lisa, and El Tarouty Safinaz (2009) 'Women's electoral participation in Egypt: the implications of gender for voter recruitment and mobilization', *The Middle East Journal* 63 (3), pp. 364-380.
[29] Prenston, Julia (2017) 'Omar Abdel Rahman, Blind Cleric Found Guilty of Plot to Wage "War of Urban Terrorism" dies at 78', *The New York Times*, accessed 18 February, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/18/world/middleeast/omar-abdel-rahman-dead.html.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Albrecht, Holger (2013) *Raging Against the Machine: Political Opposition Under Authoritarianism in Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Interview, August 2017.
[34] Ibid.
[35] El Saadawi, Nawal (2007) *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (London: Zed Books).
[36] Mahmood, Saba (2011) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
[37] Ibid.
[38] Clem, Brooks and Catherine Bolzendahl (2004) 'The transformation of US gender role attitudes: Cohort replacement, social-structural change, and ideological learning', *Social Science Research* 33 (1), pp.106-133.
[39] Singerman, Diane (2007) 'The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities Among Youth in the Middle East', (Wolfensohn Center for Development).
[40] Adler, Richard and Goggin Judy (2005) 'What Do We Mean By "Civic Engagement"'? *Journal of Transformative Education* 3 (3), pp. 236-253.
[41] Gastil, John and Peter Levine (2005) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass).