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mahadel@aucegypt.edu

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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

الجامعة الأمريكية بالقاهرة

Graduate Studies

**Women Economic and Social  
Empowerment in Urban Middle Class  
Egyptian Households post 2016  
Austerity Measures**

A Thesis Submitted by

**Maha El-Kady**

to the

**Comparative Middle East Politics and Societies (CMEPS)**

**Graduate Program**

*Spring 2022*

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**Master's of Arts**



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Has been approved by

**Dr. Amr Adly (Supervisor)**  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
The American University in Cairo

**First/Internal Reader**  
**Dr. Nesrine Badawi**  
Associate Professor  
Department of Political Science  
The American University in Cairo

**Second/External Reader**  
**Dr. Mirjam Edel**  
Lecturer  
Political Science  
University of Tübingen

Graduate Program Director

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

School Dean

Date

9/6/22

## **Dedication**

*To my grandmother Rafe'a, who was the first to teach me what empowerment really is. May her soul rest in peace.*

*And to my daughter Hanna, I hope your future is better than our present.*

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Amr Adly, for his support and guidance throughout this research. I would also like to thank my thesis readers, Dr. Nesrine Badawi and Dr. Mirjam Edel, for the valuable discussion and comments.

Special thanks to the participants in this research for their time and insights and for sharing aspects of their lives with me.

I am also grateful for the support of my parents, Dr. Adel El-Kady and Mrs. Hoda Rashed, and to have my uncle, Dr. Maher Abu-Okada, who was the first to nourish my interest in social sciences.

Gratitude is also due to my mother-in-law, Dr. Fakiha Heakal, for her continuous encouragement and support of my professional and academic pursuits and for raising my kind husband, Islam Rashad.

Finally, I would like to thank my dear friend Sara Taraman, whose help was crucial for this research to be concluded. And to my dearests, Hend El Taher and Maya Abu Ajamieh, for their constant love and support.

## **Abstract**

Women empowerment has for long been part of all development agendas as part of the developing economies' social and economic reform plans. However, statistics do not usually reflect much improvement in the status of women's empowerment, especially under austerity. And while most research focuses on the agony and vulnerability of poorer women, a big gap emerges with regard to middle classes women, who try hard to maintain the status of their households and not fall into poverty.

This research attempts to cover part of this gap by investigating the social and economic empowerment of urban middle classes Egyptian women post-2016 IMF loan and related austerity measures. The research follows a qualitative approach of ten in-depth interviews with women from different spectrums within the middle classes. It concludes that while participants practiced and enjoyed much empowerment financially, they were not equally empowered socially. And this empowerment can be compromised in some instances due to the unchanged position of women within the governing social norms.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In 2016, the Egyptian government launched a series of economic measures dubbed economic reform policies. These policies aim at introducing reforms to restore confidence in the economy, encourage investments, and – most importantly – secure International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) approval for a 12-billion-dollar loan, which was successfully concluded in November 2016. This research investigates the effect of these economic policies on the economic and social empowerment of urban middle classes Egyptian women.

The immediate financial measures included introducing a value-added tax at the rate of 13 percent to replace the general sales tax at the rate of 10 percent (Reuters, 2016), the floatation of the Egyptian pound, which resulted in the depreciation of the local currency by almost 50 percent overnight (The Guardian, 2016), lifting fuel subsidies by 30 to 47 percent in 2016 and many phases later until it became in line with its real cost in July 2019 (Reuters, 2019) and increasing customs duties for hundreds of imported goods that were labeled “luxurious” or “non-essential.” Besides, further IMF reviews and measures were imposed throughout a three-year reform plan.

This new scheme resulted in a tremendous increase in prices of almost all services and commodities, which burdens the lower and middle classes. It affected the purchasing power of the people, sales in various industries, and the capacity to consume. Consequently, questions are constantly raised about how Egyptians shall maintain their livelihood amid the changes brought about by austerity.

Inflation rates skyrocketed as a result of the newly introduced measures. Fuel, and consequently transportation, costs kept increasing as the government gradually lifted fuel subsidies till it was lifted entirely in July 2019. According to IMF Data Mapper, inflation rates were in constant decline between 2009 (at 16.2 percent) and 2013 (at 6.9 percent). Inflation started to rise again after imposing the IMF measures, reaching 10.2 in 2016, then hit a hike of 23.5 percent in 2017, the highest recorded inflation rate in Egypt since 1987, when the inflation rate reached 25.2 percent (IMF Data Mapper). Although inflation rates have been declining since 2018 (20.9 percent in 2018 and 13.9 percent in 2019), accompanied by a slight decline in food prices, austerity has taken its toll on the living standards of the majority of the Egyptians (Bloomberg, 2019).

The outcome of these measures on the livelihood of households was not favorable. The drastic situation was clearer almost three years after bringing austerity into effect; in July 2019, CAPMAS stated that the poverty rate increased in Egypt to 32.5 percent in 2017-2018, compared to 27.8 percent in July 2016. It also noted that the poverty line's income increased from 482 LE/month/person in 2015 to 736 LE/month/person in 2017/2018. The Egyptian Minister of Planning attributed such an increase to the social burden brought about by the economic reforms in Egypt.

The economic change brought about family structure and dynamics changes and placed a bigger financial burden on women, who generally have less access to jobs and income-generating activities. According to CAPMAS, divorce rates have been a constant increase since 2016, with 192.1 thousand cases in that year, compared to 211.6 thousand divorce cases in 2018, then reaching the highest number recorded ever of 225.9 thousand cases in 2019

(CAPMAS, 2020). Also, State Information Service stated in 2017 that 12 million Egyptian females are the main providers for their households. However, women's share in the job market remains at the low of a quarter of the workforce, according to the data published in the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030, released by the National Council for Women in 2017. Therefore, among the goals of the Strategy is to reduce the unemployment rate among women from 24 percent to 16 percent, especially since 26.3 percent of Egyptian female breadwinners were below the poverty line when the strategy was published. Moreover, in the event of having fewer job opportunities in the market, 82 percent of Egyptians believe that men should be prioritized, a culture that the Strategy targets in the long run. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) data, Egypt comes among the countries with the least share of women in the workforce, where the current global labor force participation rate for women is close to 49%.<sup>1</sup>

More recent data from the Human Development Report on Egypt state that women's share of the Gross National Income (GNI) remains way below men's. In 2017, female GNI in Egypt was 4836 dollars compared to 16637 for males, 4573 for females versus 17449 for males in 2018, and 4753 for females compared to 18039 for males in 2019. The report also reveals that 27 percent only of Egyptian women have access to the services of the financial institutions or mobile money service providers (Human Development Report on Egypt).

---

<sup>1</sup> Women's share in the labor market is generally small in the Middle East, yet it exceeds 60% in countries like Sweden, Norway, and Canada. In the global south, women's share exceeds 70% in countries like Congo, Angola, Ghana, and Guinea.

Moreover, women do not have sufficient qualifications to compete in the job market. Only 59.2 percent of Egyptian females received secondary education or higher between 2010 and 2018, compared to 71.2 percent of their male counterparts. No wonder then that women's share of the employment market in 2018 remained at 22.8 percent (Gender Social Norms Index GSNI, 27). Consequently, concerns rise about women's capability to secure income and how that affects their household roles.

## **Research Question**

How did austerity measures since 2016 in Egypt empower women financially and socially in urban middle classes households?

## **Hypothesis**

I argue that the economic crisis and austerity have counterintuitively empowered middle classes Egyptian women economically and socially.

Economically, the crisis made women's direct and indirect contributions more valuable, either by generating extra income or using their non-wage work in the household to cater to domestic consumption, substituting for purchased goods. Socially, women's decision-making capacity has grown in the household as they seek to change their domestic roles to accommodate their income-generating (or income-saving) activities. However, coping mechanisms and expressing such empowerment may vary according to the individual household context, which is an area of contribution of this research by merging the private and public domains to analyze the interrelated practices of empowerment inside and outside households.

The independent variable in this research is the austerity measures imposed in 2016 following the IMF loan, and the dependent variables are the Economic and social empowerment of middle classes women. Economic empowerment was assessed through the ability to generate income and agency over resources (assets or skills). Social empowerment was assessed through women's capacity/share in household decision-making and tracing any change in their roles.

## **Research Objectives**

This research investigates the impact of austerity and economic reform policies on women's economic and social empowerment in urban middle classes households. For the economic empowerment aspect, this research looks into women's ability to access revenue-generating activities, join the formal employment market, and acquire the needed skills or capital to improve their capability of generating income.

For the social and familial aspect, this research assesses whether women got more say in family decisions, issues related to children, and household expenses. It also looks into the space women occupy in their larger communities, whether they have more freedom of mobility, the scope of their social circles, and handling more out-of-household responsibilities, including ones related to their extended families.

## **Potential Contribution of Research**

Most research and policy decisions handle women's economic empowerment from a poverty elimination approach, assuming that unempowered females are necessarily poor (Cornwall, 2016). Consequently, literature is focused on assessing the ability of poorer women to generate sufficient income to attain financial empowerment. Yet there is a research gap that does not cover middle classes women, to whom the question of poverty is less relevant, and who use economic empowerment as a tool for familial and social empowerment. This gap is most significant in the Middle East, as there is almost no literature on the implications of austerity on women's economic

empowerment away from poverty. Also, I could not find any pieces of literature that examine family dynamics and social empowerment of women under austerity in the region, let alone the specific case of middle classes women.

In the case of Egypt, the official narrative asserts the state's support for the empowerment of women, especially through its women's rights entity, the National Council of Women (NCW). In 2017, NCW launched the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030, which was attributed to the Egyptian president's vision of the "national duty and responsibility to history to accelerate the pace of women's empowerment". The Strategy targets four main aspects of empowerment; political, economic, social, and protection. Issues like education, access to employment, inequality, family dynamics, violence, and legislation are at the core of the programs promoted by the initiative. Yet the data discussed earlier in this chapter does not reflect much change in women's social and economic empowerment in Egypt, which suggests there is a gap between the state narrative and the outcome. And here lays the potential contribution of my research about the economic and social empowerment of Egyptian middle classes women under austerity.

To answer the research question posed earlier, this thesis next includes a methodology chapter explaining the qualitative methodology used for the research process, the reason for choosing this methodology, and its limitations. The chapter also includes the conceptualization opted for in the research to define what middle classes are and how to assess economic and social empowerment. The chapter that comes after is a literature review on social classes and empowerment. It explores the literature defining social classes and

how the conceptualization is positioned against this literature. It also explores the literature on empowerment, its definitions and applications, and how it was used in the fieldwork to assess the economic and social empowerment of the target group. Then another literature chapter on the Egyptian middle classes, tracing historic changes to its ideological and socio-economic structures and women's position in these structures. This chapter narrows down the conceptualization from the abstract indicators of classes and empowerment in general to Egypt's specific case and dynamics. The last chapter explains the findings of this research and answers the research question on how middle classes women were (dis)empowered economically and socially in Egypt under austerity. And finally, comes the conclusion, to sum up all the findings and significant remarks of this research.



## **Chapter 2: Methodology and Conceptualization**

### **Collecting Data**

For this research, I followed a qualitative approach to collect data that assesses women's economic and social empowerment under the austerity measures by conducting ten in-depth interviews with women in female-headed and co-headed households. While I did not have a specific interest in the employment status of participants, I ended up with a sample of exclusively working women. All participants were employed by the time of the interview, even the ones who were not or were between jobs when I initially approached them. Thus, the focus of this research was unintentionally narrowed down to working women in the urban middle classes.

The interviews were semi-structured, including questions to assess the participant's understanding of the new policies, the level of income, its sources, whether there has been an increase (like salary increase or promotion) after the new economic policies, whether they seek more sources of income and what they are, saving behavior, consumer behavior, the availability of assets, and how they are being run. Other questions were focused on exploring opinions and experiences, like priorities in expenses, whether they feel any improvement as the data indicate less inflation and GDP growth, views about the quality of living after imposing those policies, family time and harmony, roles within the household, and any other questions that might come up during the conversation. I linked this data to available literature that defines women's empowerment and class behavior.

## **Population**

The population of this research is all urban middle classes women in Egypt. I subscribed to Max Weber's theory on social stratification to define this population since this theory encompasses financial and non-financial factors to define a social group.

The reason for choosing this population is that middle classes women are usually understudied when it comes to tracing the social and economic transformation that comes with austerity. The literature indicates that women's financial empowerment is mainly studied from a poverty perspective (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997; Mallick and Rafi, 2010; Cornwall, 2016). It focuses on lower classes and women's ability to provide for the household's basic needs, whether it is a shared or full responsibility of the female. Yet, in the middle classes, the question is not necessarily about providing for basic needs but sustaining the household's lifestyle. This effort to maintain specific consumer behavior and expenditure usually comes with a social toll on middle classes women, whether they are already providing for the family or have to start contributing to the income of the household. And here lays a potential contribution of this research by including the perspective of middle classes women on empowerment in the literature that traditionally focused on poor households.

## **Identifying Middle Classes**

I subscribed to Max Weber's theory on social stratification (Calvert, 1982; Weber, 2010; Weber et al., 2013), which identifies a social class based on three main elements; class, stand, and party. The element of class is the level

of income that a person or a household should have to belong to their given social group. The element of the stand is the way of living or practices that indicate a person's belonging to a given social group (i.e., lifestyle). The party is the connections and acquaintances that help a person remain in or join a given social group and enjoy its privileges and favors. Therefore, Weber's theory encompasses material and non-material aspects of defining a given group and explains social change, which is precisely what this research aims; to explain both the financial and social implications of austerity on women's empowerment. Given that these implications bring change in consumption, lifestyle, and other elements of the stand, I looked into the vulnerability to fall off the participant's social group/stratum and how it affects their practice of empowerment as a result.

This stratification is applied to the middle classes in Egypt by adding elements of the stand, like access to higher education, having assets or savings, affordability of access to essential goods and services in the private sector (like health and education) as well as goods and services that are deemed as unessential (like sports and social clubs and activities, help at home, eat-outs, etc.). The research assesses the change in these elements of stand as the financial elements changed under the new economic policies to identify how women's empowerment was affected.

Data on the average income and expenditure of households in Egypt were used as an indicator of the financial thresholds of the middle classes. According to the Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), the average annual household income in 2015 was LE 44,193.8 (5732.75 dollars), and the average Expenditure was LE 36,709.8 (4761.9

dollars)<sup>2</sup>. More recent data from CAPMAS indicate that in the fiscal year 2017/2018, the average household expenditure was 51.4 thousand EGP (2887.6 dollars), and the average household income for the same year at 58.85 thousand EGP (3306.18 dollars). Yet the government later issued a document to advertise funding houses for middle classes families, in which it was stated that middle classes household annual income should not exceed 600 thousand Egyptian pounds (37974.68 dollars), about LE 50 thousand (3164.6 dollars) per month. Given the huge discrepancy between both figures and their inconsistency with the abstract observations of the financial behavior of the target population, I used the data on income as a threshold for the minimum income of the subjects included in this research.

### **Assessing Empowerment**

The literature identifies empowerment as a multi-dimensional concept, influenced by interrelated factors like finances, freedoms, social norms, and legal and policy-making (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997; Duflo, 2012; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Griffin, 2015; Stromquist, 2016; Cornwall, 2016; Perrons, 2017; Sharaunga et al., 2019; Roque, 2020). While some women might have access to income or own assets and capital (both financial and human), social norms and legal obstructions might hinder their ability to use these assets and be empowered. That said, studies (Fuwa, 2000; Henry, 2005; Horrell and Krishnan, 2007; Bispinar, 2010; Stampini et al., 2016) subscribe to multiple interrelated factors to assess empowerment, like the ability to generate income,

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<sup>2</sup> EGP to dollars is calculated according to the average exchange rate in the same year.

the ability to control the income and assets, and the ability to handle and manipulate the social norms and community restrictions. This multidimensional definition of empowerment aligns with Max Weber's theorization of social stratification, which encompasses material and non-material elements of class, status and party.

That said, this research assesses the economic empowerment according to women's ability to generate income by having a job or any source of revenue, stability of the income, control over spending this income, and involvement in the financial decisions of the household, whether simple daily decisions or big ones like moving houses or buying expensive goods. Empowerment indicators also include the ability to maintain independent finances and make savings and the ability to find jobs or other income-generating activities.

This research assesses social empowerment according to women's ability to make personal and familial choices and decisions, ability to pursue ambitions and develop careers and characters, access to social life (friendships, family, and activities), and freedom to move in and between different places to get errands done or for leisure.

I have been watching for other factors that compromise women's perception, sense, and practice of financial and social empowerment, though not necessarily disempowering on their own. Given that the interviews were semi-structured and the questions were open-ended, I could ask participants to elaborate on points that influenced their practice and perception of empowerment. It also allowed them to talk more about their experiences, thoughts, and perspectives, which enriched the narrative analysis later. Such factors include the effect of traditional gender roles (Assaad and Arntz, 2005;

de Koning, 2009; Roque, 2020) within the household and whether women's material and non-material contribution was reflected in the decision-making dynamics. Another factor is time poverty (Fuwa, 2000), where women might be financially and socially empowered yet burnt out and overworked inside and outside the household. Accordingly, women's ability to develop themselves and keep up with the job market is compromised.

### **Sampling**

I followed a mix of selective and snowballing sampling techniques to reach out to potential participants, as half of the sample was selected directly from my extended social network and the other half was through referrals. This technique affected the course of the research as explained earlier, where I ended up with a sample of working women or women who had a change in employment status after years of being housewives. Consequently, the sample was further narrowed down to focus on working women of the urban middle classes.

A pre-chat with each participant was essential to make sure she was fit for the research and could grasp the studied concepts. The pre-chat was a 15 minutes call on average, during which I explained to the participants what the research is about, the concepts it assesses, and the type of questions included. It was also a chance to break the ice, check availability and arrange for suitable timings. Participants were carefully chosen in this phase to ensure they were information-rich and suitable for the research.

During the phase of the interviews, I have been watching for the saturation point (i.e., when the narratives become redundant and similar in a

way that does not add much to the research) to assess when and how to expand and diversify the sample in terms of belonging to a certain stratum, a type of household, and social context.

### **Interview design**

The interviews were semi-structured, starting with screening questions about the amount and sources of income, expenditure, and the main provider for the family both before and after the austerity measures. The second set of questions was about family dynamics, how the family was affected by the measure imposed in 2016, coping mechanisms, how women support their families, and whether they started any income-generating activities. The third set of questions was about how women perceive their family role, how their decision-making capacity within the family was affected, whether they feel more valued and appreciated, how their space in their local communities is affected, and whether they have more social freedoms or burdens.

I added follow-up questions on points where I felt the need to elaborate on women's understanding of empowerment and how they see themselves in this light. Other questions were dedicated for women to describe their feelings about their current roles and statuses in their households and whether they find it fulfilling. A list of questions is available at the end of the thesis as an appendix.

### **Data Analysis**

I followed a narrative analysis to assess how participants comprehended the events they had been through and how their economic and social contexts

were affected. There are two reasons why this analysis method works better for my research; the first is that there is a research gap on the subject, and there is no fixed pattern to the link between empowerment and austerity in Egypt. This research explores how the participants find this link in their own experiences. The second reason is that the narrative analysis focuses more on how people see and voice their own experiences and stories, which better helps draw conclusions that can be generalized among all the participants.

For coding the interviews, I opt to mix deductive and inductive coding techniques. The semi-structured interviews provided data about an initial set of themes to investigate and question, which makes the bases for the deductive technique. At the same time, the interviews were open to discussing other issues and themes that come up in the conversation, and that is when the inductive themes need to be added. Besides, the sense of empowerment is individual and subjective to a great extent, meaning that what makes one person feel empowered does not necessarily make another feel the same. For example, a participant found that taking over more financial responsibilities empowers her, another felt it burdening and repressive, and a third felt a mix of both, all for different reasons. That's where the flexibility of the inductive method is needed. I have made sure that this subjectivity does not alienate the fixed variables of the research by having fixed questions to assess the variables mentioned earlier and adding other self-expressive questions. I used the subjective parts of the interview in the analysis to give more insights into the narratives' social contexts and extract other unintended results.



## **Limitations**

Given the political atmosphere in Egypt, people might find it a risk to participate in studies that question the aftermath of government policies. Guarantees like anonymity and change in personal detail were provided for the participants.

Some of the concepts discussed in the interview and the study were unfamiliar to some participants. The screening pre-chats included providing a list of terms and what they mean in the context of the research and asking if the participant needed any further elaboration on any of the concepts.

The covid-19 situation and social distancing rules was an obstacle to mobility and conducting face-to-face interviews. As a result, all communication was conducted through social media applications and online calls. I used Facebook messenger and Zoom to conduct all interviews and send the Informed Consent Form (ICF). All interviews were audio-recorded, the shortest was 25 minutes, and the longest was 46 minutes, besides an additional unrecorded time before and after the interview to break the ice and explain the process. The discrepancy in the interview timings is mainly due to personal differences among the participants in terms of their understanding of concepts and events related to the research, the magnitude of details they were willing to share, and the need to rephrase questions and revisit points in some instances.

## The Research Process

I conducted ten in-depth interviews with middle classes working women from diversified financial spectrums within this social group, classified according to their consumption behavior, their lifestyle, neighborhoods where they live, schools where their children go, their access to goods and services, and magnitude of adjustments they made to their consumption after austerity. According to this classification, four participants come from the upper-middle class, in the sense that they live in slightly elevated neighborhoods but not in gated communities, have a car or two in the household, send their children to private/international schools but not the highly paid ones, can afford social and sports clubs and the adjustments they made to their lifestyle and consumption were mainly in luxuries. Another four participants come from the middle class, where they live in neighborhoods that are densely populated but not *sha`abi*, send their children to private education but not an international one, cannot afford socializing in social and sports clubs, and the adjustments they made to their consumption after austerity were cutting off luxuries and going for cheaper alternatives to the basic needs. Finally, two from the lower-middle/vulnerable class, in the sense that they made a downgrade after austerity from middle to lower-middle classes but did not fall into poverty, and made tough adjustments to their lifestyle, giving up many essentials like certain types of food, skipping meals, not able to afford transportation at some points and not able to afford socializing. I have also diversified the social context through which each participant lives to understand better the impact of the economic measures in different types of households. I have interviewed five women in co-headed households with children, two women from co-headed households with no

children, two divorced women from female-headed households, one of which is a single mother, and one woman who is not married and still lives with her family. Given the problematic nature of the figures about the income and expenditure of the middle classes' households in Egypt, I have incorporated other elements that define the middle classes' lifestyle (i.e., elements of stand and party in Weber's terms). These elements include being professionals in traditional professions, like education, engineering, media, and administrative jobs. Other elements include having access to private, non-luxurious services of education, healthcare, and food supplies (i.e., not dependent on state subsidies) and access to popular venues of entertainment like eating out, traveling domestically for a holiday, and going to cinemas and theatres.

During the process, I noticed that I reached a saturation point with the category of women in co-headed households with children by the fifth interview. The narratives became similar despite the variation in age groups, financial situation, types of expenses, the proximity of the places where they live, and their distinct career and social choices. I then had to diversify the remainder of the sample by seeking a variety in each participant's social and familial context, hence the inclusion of women from different types of households and social statuses.

### **Challenges through the process**

I have faced some challenges in the data collection process. The first was finding suitable candidates who agreed to be part of the research. I overcame this challenge by using a mix of selective and snowballing selection

techniques. I reached out to my connections who fit the selection criteria and relied on recommendations and word of mouth to refer me to others.

The second challenge was to make sure that the candidates fit the criteria of choice in terms of being in a middle classes household financially and socially. Some of the candidates came from wealthier families (upper/upper middle classes) and had to make a downgrade in their lifestyle to become in the lower spectrums of middle classes. Other candidates came from rural middle classes households and made changes to their lifestyle to become urban. Other candidates changed their circumstances during the process, like getting a job after being a stay-at-home mother, moving from freelancing to a fixed job, or relocating abroad. These changes were challenging because people usually shy away from discussing their backgrounds, financial situation, and class issues, which might compromise the outcome of the data. That's why lengthy pre-chat sessions were required to make sure that the candidate was aware of such changes and open to speaking up about herself.

The third challenge was related to the honesty of the answers. I felt that the candidates were hesitant to answer some questions or give away some details on various occasions in the interviews. I handled this by multiple techniques; the first was to reassure the candidate about the privacy of the agreement and her data. The second technique was to make follow-up questions by rephrasing the question itself or picking on a specific detail and asking for more explanation to ensure that I got the correct answer she meant. The third technique was diverting from the point that initiated the hesitation, discussing another element that the candidate might be more open to speaking about, then asking the question again in a different context when the candidate is more

comfortable. Some candidates gave more detailed and honest answers when I used the third technique.

The fourth challenge was to make sure that the candidates had the minimum required understanding of the economic measures that have been happening in Egypt since 2016. This was resolved during the pre-chat and the interview itself by trying to simplify what I mean by the measures on the micro-level and the kind of impact they had on the livelihood of the people.

The fifth and last challenge was related to reassurance and security, where some candidates I approached were afraid to be identified in the study. Some candidates pulled out after initial approvals. To handle that, I made assurances by explaining that the identity of the participants would remain secret, that the recordings would not be accessed by a third party, and sharing the documents that prove I have necessary approvals from CAPMAS and sharing the Informed Consent Form. Also, the selective sampling technique helped in this situation, as I could refer to previous communications or mutual contacts who can make such guarantees.

Fieldwork was concluded successfully after handling all the previous limitations, and the outcome is presented in later chapters. However, to understand the themes in the narratives of the participants, it had to be positioned in light of the literature available on the definition and practice of empowerment, social stratification theories, and the socio-economic and ideological contexts of Egypt.

### **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

Answering the research question posed in this thesis about how austerity in Egypt empowered middle classes women is multidisciplinary and requires looking into literature on gender, austerity, and class. This literature review starts by exploring the effect of austerity on gender balance and women's economic and social empowerment, followed by exploring what empowerment means in such a context. It will then explore the literature on the class factor and how middle classes households are affected by austerity, then narrow down to look into women of the middle classes under austerity.

#### **Empowerment and Austerity**

It is well established in the literature that women get the short end of the straw when it comes to the consequences of austerity (Ortiz and Cummins, 2013; Griffin, 2015; Périvier, 2016; Perrons, 2017). Research shows that women usually are more prone to vulnerability, more likely to lose their jobs or get lower wages, carry over more duties, and endure other mental health and social consequences. Studies on the 2008 economic crisis in Europe (Griffin, 2015; Périvier, 2016; Perrons, 2017), for instance, state that women became more vulnerable economically and socially under austerity. One of the studies quoted is a joint one with Fawcett Society and Women's Budget Group. It shows that 80 percent of the burden of austerity and budget cuts in the United Kingdom falls onto women, as they mostly work in government and social care sectors that get more affected by cuts. The study also estimated that "the real income of female-headed households, typically lone parents and single female

pensioners, will lose 20% by 2020” (Perrons, 2017, 32) as those measures continue. The term “sh(e)-austerity” was coined as a result, as the female employment rate and the cuts in industries that women tend to occupy did not recover as much as that of men (Perrons, 2017).

More women were hit financially after the 2008 financial crisis as they worked in the public sector under pay cuts in the larger European context. Women became the main breadwinners of many households as men lost their private-sector jobs, yet it was not met with a significant change in household responsibilities and dynamics. Here emerged the “added worker effect,” as women sought to find additional sources of income to make up for the lost jobs of their partners. In countries where women already had less share in the labor market (like Italy, Greece, and Spain), the “added worker effect” was higher in comparison to other countries where women’s participation in the labor market was higher (Périvier, 2016). Similarly, in the case of Egypt, women (who constitute a quarter of the labor market according to the NCW) are placed under the added worker effect as they seek money-generating opportunities to provide for their households, yet it is not clear how this affects their role in the family.

Besides the evident economic and social effect of the 2008 global economic crisis on gender balance and women’s financial and social positions, the crisis also resulted in a setback to the gender-sensitive policymaking. In response to the crisis and its policymaking aftermath, a feminist approach emerged under the name of “crisis governance feminism,” aiming to reinforce gender considerations in policymaking. Penny Griffin (2015) investigated this approach by looking into how “gendered responses to the global financial crisis, including, in particular, the dismissal of ill-fitting feminist critique and the co-

option of feminist knowledge, have contributed both to the promotion of global finance based on neo-liberal, masculine privilege and the longevity of neoliberal, capitalist imperatives in the global political economy.” (Griffin, 2015, 50).

Although the feminist body of literature and scholarship has become outspoken about the imbalanced global economic order and the failure of neo-liberal institutions to accommodate women’s place in the economy and safeguard female financial empowerment, the situation remained idle on the policy-making front. And like what happened in the 1980s debt crisis, the East Asian crisis and the crisis in Argentina, Griffin (2015) concluded that the 2008 crisis was yet another failure for the feminist analysis, which remained a “flawed scholarship and ignorant policy-making that further exacerbate, or even create, hierarchies and inequalities of labor, class, gender and sexual relations.” (Griffin, 2015, 52).

Regarding the gap in scholarship, literature is more focused on the economic gender balance in rich economies and lacks gender-based analysis of financial crises in poorer countries. Throughout this research, only one paper could be found to tackle the risk austerity measures pose to vulnerable groups in the developing economies, particularly women and children. A study by Ortiz and Cummins (2013) states that one-quarter of developing countries went through economic shrinkage and had to make considerable cuts in the public expenditure, wages, subsidies, pensions, and safety nets in response to the global financial crisis in 2008. But the situation of those countries was overlooked in the literature due to the gaps in data available. The study, which relied on 2012 data from IMF, mentioned that Egypt was among the most



affected countries in the Middle East and had to make adjustments in policies related to social protection, subsidies, and pensions. It concluded that those “budget cuts pose clear risks to children and women in terms of their impact on the level and quality of essential public assistance” and that “Protecting vulnerable populations is critical to equitably sharing the adjustment costs and avoiding detrimental or even irreversible effects on children and women.” (Ortiz and Cummins, 2013, 73-74). As the IMF-related measures were added to this risky situation in Egypt in 2016, it is plausible to assume that such risks are becoming higher now. Here lays one aspect of the potential contribution of this research, wherein the absence of data and analysis on the effect of austerity on women in developing economies, and Egypt in specific, this paper investigates how Egyptian women were adjusted economically and socially to austerity through first-hand experiences.

### **Why does empowerment matter?**

In 2000, the United Nations listed women’s empowerment among the Millennium Development Goals as a crucial pillar for development. In the following year, 2001, the World Bank released a report titled “Engendering Development,” where it argued that empowering women economically and inside households boosts development at the macro level, as it increases the welfare of the families, leads to better use of resources, and expands and diversifies the workforce. Ten years later, the World Bank released another World Development Report in which it stated that gender equality and women empowerment “should be a goal by itself.” Such statements and recommendations echo the feminist literature that argues that women’s

empowerment is an issue that transcends the private household structure into the bigger socio-economic structures. Economic development and empowerment are interrelated in a causation effect. For the better-off societies, it is argued that development provides more opportunities for women by creating bigger markets and more need for skilled workers. And for poorer classes, development is argued to ease the grip of poverty, hence helping families to allocate more resources to their daughters (i.e., empower them) (Duflo, 2012). Similarly, neoliberal economic measures are claimed to support women's economic empowerment by establishing a gender-blind market that cares only about skillful labor regardless of gender or race. But it was evident that without a fundamental change in social dynamics (i.e., social empowerment of women), such economic opportunities will remain a mere influx of women into the existing socio-economic system in a manner that burdens them even more (Nadasen, 2012/2013).

On the other hand, women's economic and social empowerment boosts development even in poorer economies. An example comes from land ownership in Ghana, where women's insecurity about their ownership and capacity to make decisions regarding farming lands makes them avoid risky measures like fallowing land. On the other hand, when women are empowered with their sense of ownership and decision-making capacity, they tend to invest more in the assets, hence better production (Duflo, 2012). Similar to familial and social empowerment, giving women more weight in decision-making maintains the welfare and health of household members, especially children, as women tend to allocate a greater share of household resources to them than men do. This way, it is guaranteed that proper human capital will keep developing to

keep the system going (Fuwa, 2000; Duflo, 2012; Johansson de Silva et al., 2014).

### **Defining Empowerment**

This research assesses women's economic empowerment based on two factors; having access to generating income and agency by having control over assets. It has been evident in multiple pieces of literature (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997; Horrell and Krishnan, 2008; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Bayissa et al., 2017; Sharaunga et al., 2018) that women may have access to income, but are not necessarily empowered as they cannot control the sources or use of this income. A study on female-headed households in Zimbabwe shows that the factor of agency placed limitations on women's economic empowerment. It also asserts that the level of income is not the only indicator of (dis)empowerment because "being income poor is the most obvious but, being asset poor may be equally detrimental." (Horrell and Krishnan, 2008, 1352). A similar study on female-headed households in Chile, Columbia, Honduras, and India concluded that 38 out of the 61 cases reviewed were overrepresented among the poor and could secure proper income. Yet women in those households were not financially empowered as they did not have control over assets and means of production (i.e., agency) (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997). Such assets extend to "human capital, such as education and the number of people available to work in the household; to social capital which enables people to engage in networks, to develop markets and mitigate risk." (Horrell and Krishnan, 2008, 1352).

The question of the agency was taken into a broader light, and a new body of literature identified empowerment as a multidimensional process with

familial, socio-cultural, legal, psychological, and political aspects. And to assess women's empowerment, studies should look into the relationship between economic empowerment and the aforementioned aspects (Bayissa et al., 2017). The multi-dimensional assessment of empowerment was evident in a study about women in the Msinga Local Municipality in South Africa, where Sharaunga et al. (2018) identify agency (both social and economic) and access to resources as the most significant indicators to assess how empowered women are. They also highlight differences in social and cultural contexts, where women's ideas about the outcome of empowerment vary. Consequently, the study identified empowerment as "The multidimensional process of increasing the capacity/capabilities (i.e., resources and agency) of individuals or groups to make choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes." (Sharaunga et al., 2018, 5).

Another multidimensional study on female Ethiopian entrepreneurs found that economic, familial, and social aspects (i.e., having more power over decision-making in families and local communities) were most interrelated in making women feel empowered. The study confirmed the classic assumption; that as women earn more income, they gain more say in their families. But such sequence is conditioned by the level of income, as women who could not secure enough income to make them totally independent from men could not be as empowered in familial and social aspects (Bayissa et al., 2017).

The same sequence of economic empowerment's effect on familial and social contexts was evident in a ten-year study of Palestinian refugee women in Jordan. The study concluded that home-based embroidery businesses helped women gain more share of power in their households. Women were more

capable of making family decisions, improved the welfare of their households, and expanded their social space and presence in their communities. The study also revealed that women were motivated to overcome constrained opportunities in their communities and formed an organized group that created their embroidery market (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013). This makes the process of empowerment not restricted to the micro family-scale but extends to the communities, a notion described in empowerment literature as making the personal political. This notion comes at the heart of this research, as it builds on it to assess how the macroeconomic measures impact the individual social and economic situations of women within their households and communities.

To sum up, empowerment has multiple interrelated factors to define and assess it. Owning capital (both material and human) or access to any source of income is not a guarantee that a woman is empowered. The factor of agency over resources is as essential as ownership for a woman to exercise and sustain this empowerment (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Sharaunga et al., 2018; Bayisset al., 2017). The social context also affects how a woman is positioned in her community, hence her ability to exercise empowerment. While some women find a space to manipulate and twist norms and social pressure, others remain disempowered because they cannot or do not know how to manipulate. Hereby, this research opts for the multidimensional assessment of empowerment; financial empowerment by having access to income and the ability to control and maintain it through decision-making and self-development, and social empowerment through having enough social space and freedoms to form and maintain relationships and make personal choices.

## **Women's Empowerment and Social Classes**

The literature has proven that the understanding and attainment of empowerment vary along class and cultural lines. Each class or social group perceives and executes empowerment differently. Also, empowerment has long been studied as a form of social change that works in the same dynamics as class struggle/change (Bispinar, 2010; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Stampini et al., 2016). For instance, change in gender relations, being the early theorization of empowerment, was derived from the theories of social change. Similar to Marx's analysis of the oppressed (working classes) as the key player to bring change in class relations, empowerment theories believed that the oppressed (women in this context) should lead a process of change to gain equal rights to men (Stromquist, 2015).

Empowerment was early identified inexplicitly as part of the development and social change work in the 1970s, but the first conceptualization came a decade later in vague terms such as "change in power relations" within the society and giving women access to "equal rights as men" (Cornwall, 2016). And the goal was to make women as capable as men to bring about change to social structures and equal access to power agents (financial resources and decision-making in family and society). It was identified later that in many societies, women might have the will for change, yet they do not necessarily have the financial means, and that's when the question of poverty took over the understanding of empowerment. As a result, another concern grew in feminist scholarship about the possibility of losing the social change gest in favor of finances. A new body of literature came up to identify empowerment as a social movement to resist and challenge the existing power relations within

society, gain equal control over material and social sources of power, and – in a developed format – a grassroots movement that presses for political change to paternal power structures (Cornwall, 2016).

While this understanding of empowerment was taking place in scholarship, a new understanding of class emerged. It was a migration from the predominant view of class as a “communities of individuals bounded by common social status” (Henry, 2005, 766) that was widely employed and supported by marketers in the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars at that time developed the perception of class in light of the huge urban change and growth of bigger, more cosmopolitan cities. Inter-class analysis was developed later to accommodate the elements of distinction among individual households or smaller communities within the same class. One such development of concepts was introducing the term “Habitus” (Bourdieu, 1984) to include the elements that shape an individual’s sense of belonging to a certain class or social group. Encompassing such elements as consumption patterns/lifestyle, age and gender have developed the study of social and economic implications of policies, making women’s perception and practice of empowerment an agent within the study of different social classes.

Class divides and their impact on understanding and performing empowerment are evident in a study about women’s sense of empowerment in Turkey, which found that what constitutes empowerment differed among social classes. While women of lower/poorer classes felt more empowered by having strong family bonds, women of the middle classes felt more empowered by sustaining their social status and passing it to their children, and women of upper

classes felt more empowered by having social connections or investing in their careers.<sup>3</sup> Such perceptions were independent of having a job and contributing to household income, but still, women who wished to work in all classes found their way to manipulate the social structures where they lived, contribute to family decision making and highlight the worthiness of their jobs. The women of each class used unique manipulation and coping mechanisms to gain more influence within the same social structure and more agency over resources (Bespinar, 2010).

This class divide was clear again with the introduction of Neoliberal policies, where “some women, especially economically better-off, educated women have benefitted from the dismantling of the old patriarchal order. However, as many authors have argued, because neoliberalism promotes the idea of a rational individual exercising free will while eroding social democracy, it has made life harder for most women and has widened the race/class divide among women.” (Nadasen, 2012/2013). And along all class lines and different economic contexts, similar social burdens are placed upon women, yet under different labels, like the double day, time poverty, added worker effect or transmission of disadvantage to children (Fuwa, 2000). This makes the dominating literature that looks into empowerment from a poverty elimination perspective (i.e., that of poorer classes), unrepresentative of other social classes, naming the middle classes as the subject of this research.

Taking such variations in understanding empowerment along class and culture lines into consideration and looking at them in their context is what

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<sup>3</sup> This echoes Max Weber’s theory of social stratification (as will come later) where despite the discrepancy in the financial situation of each group (Class), elements of status and party were an integral part of how individuals in all groups perceive and define themselves and their sense of empowerment.



Cornwall referred to as “engagement with culturally embedded normative beliefs, understandings, and ideas about gender, power and change.” (Cornwall, 2016, 345). This cultural accommodation aims to understand women’s unique sense of empowerment in different cultures, communities, and classes in a model where change happens as part of a relational process (specific to each culture/context) to shift the consciousness of men and women to accommodate women’s needs better and right in the same manner as men. Here, again, lays another area of the potential contribution of this research, as it excludes the question of poverty from the assessment of empowerment (a fear among gender theorists, as explained earlier) and exposes the narratives of middle classes women who are equally concerned about the social aspects of empowerment as the economic one.

### **Theories on Middle Classes**

The literature on empowerment was initially a derivative of the Marxist theory of social classes and change. And as the literature on gender developed to study the inter and intra-class understanding of empowerment, it outgrew the Marxist class stratification that divided the society into a minority upper class (Bourgeoisie) and the majority of lower/working class (Proletariat). This Marxist vision did not place much emphasis on the middle classes caught between the two competing Bourgeoisie and Proletariat classes. It did not give much attention to the gender element and its implications either. In fact, Marx thought that the middle classes would vanish into either of the two main classes; the lower middle classes of craftsmen, shopkeepers, and workshop owners sink into the Proletariat, while the upper-middle classes of scientists, philosophers, doctors, and similar profession become attached to the upper class of the

Bourgeoisie which “converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science into its paid wage laborers.” (Marx and Engels, 2010, 4).

As empowerment developed into a multidimensional process with familial, socio-cultural, legal, psychological, and political aspects, it has become more in line with Max Weber’s theorization of social stratification, which encompasses material and non-material elements of class, stand, and party. The financial element of Weber’s theory is through the class; a term he linked exclusively to economic interests where a class, any class, is “a group of people who have a causal component of their life chances in common, and when this causal component is represented exclusively by economic interests in possession of goods and the opportunities of income, and when the causal component is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor market.” (Weber, 2010, 138). And those classes vary according to the kind of asset or capital they possess, the kind of service they offer, and their desirability in the market. That’s why the Weberian concept of class “is always organized around one common principle: it is the kind of chances in the market that determines the common conditions of the individual’s fate. ‘Class Situation’ in this sense ultimately is ‘Market Situation’.” (Weber, 2010, 139). Accordingly, any class action or change is a reaction to the structure of economic order and the distribution of property and assets. This link between market situation and class corresponds to the issue of economic empowerment (which is a kind of social action itself)

The non-materialistic stratification of social groups, according to Weber, is related to the stand or status, which is the kind of honor or prestige a person gets from belonging to a certain group or race or having a certain lifestyle

or mode of consumption. Class and status are not mutually exclusive, but they are not necessarily correlated either. A person might belong to a given status/stand because they possess a specific type or amount of assets that enable them to lead a certain lifestyle. On the other hand, people might need to attain certain status to be eligible for better opportunities in the market, hence better class. That said, “both propertied and propertyless people can belong to the same stand, and often they do with very perceptible consequences, no matter how precarious this ‘social equality’ becomes in the long run.” (Weber, 2010, 143). Still, within the terms of the stand, there are distinctions between the privileged stand groups who grew into a certain lifestyle or title or honor, and the new individuals who joined based on the change that happened in the class part that caused the change in their lifestyle and ability to consume. Weber’s theory about this change in the stand is that its stability is an enemy to the idea of the free market, where a stagnant classification of groups within the stand means that the modes of production and consumption are monopolized by the same groups. Yet “destabilization by technical and economic change, and upheaval, however, can threaten the stand stratification by pushing the ‘class situation’ into the foreground.” (Weber, 2010, 148). Weber’s link between class (finances) and stand and how they affect each other, bring changes within the same social strata or even move people from one stratum to another, resonates with the literature on empowerment (Fuwa, 2000; Bospinar, 2010; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013) that links women’s sense and understanding of empowerment to the culture of the social group they belong to and the kind of burdens (both financial and social) they endure accordingly. This notion of the relation between the economic and social and its effect on social

mobility/stability and empowerment is another part that this research aimed to assess among women of the middle classes in Egypt. Looking into the narratives of Egyptian middle classes women in this research sheds new light on the understanding of empowerment in new terms, not just poverty-related ones, and fills the gap in the literature that did not relate to the variations in perceptions along class lines.

The third pillar in Weber's social stratification is the party, which is the affiliation to a certain political or social group or movement. This party does not necessarily have to be on the greater political spectrum of the state but can be in a minor context like communities or clubs to gain the power to bring about change in either the state or the class. Given that parties are mostly based on ideology and the ability to act upon it, they are generally class and state blind. Weber's idea about the parties is driven by the assumption that "societies have some rational order and an apparatus of persons available who are ready to enforce the rational order. The goal of the party is to influence this apparatus and, if possible, form the apparatus itself out of the party followers." (Weber, 2010, 149).

So, for the purpose of this research, Weber's theory of class stratification seems more plausible as it encompasses the materialistic, social, and ideological aspects of defining a given group and explaining social change. This is precisely what this research aims; to explain the economic and social implications (i.e., social and economic action) of austerity on women's empowerment (i.e., a social group).

## **Defining Middle Classes**

Scholarship on social classes has for long been more focused on questions related to poverty and accumulation of wealth, while the middle classes remain overlooked. The few studies that target middle classes are income-focused, as an economic analysis of middle-income groups, with the assumption that income (class according to Weber) is what secures social privileges (stand according to Weber) for a certain group. One of the approaches used to identify the middle classes in literature (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, 2014; Stampini et al., 2016) is to study levels of consumption based on the income to test the main hypotheses about the middle classes; that it is where entrepreneurship and employment are generated, that the middle classes values of accumulation of human capital and savings are central for capitalist accumulation and that the consumption pattern of middle classes and its demand for quality consumer goods feeds investment in production and marketing, which in turn raises income levels for the whole economy. That is precisely what Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2008) did in their research, as they tried to identify the middle classes in emerging economies in terms of their pattern of consumption. Early on in the research, they stated that no global dataset exists to identify middle classes “however, a growing number of household surveys have been done in low- and middle-income countries around the world.” (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008, 4). Driven by those surveys, the authors rely on income as an indicator of Purchasing Power Parity of the middle classes in 13 countries. They used the data to identify two groups of households at the lower and upper ends of the middle classes;

households whose daily per capita expenditures valued at Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) are between \$2 and \$4 and other households between \$6 and \$10. But the authors find later that households with PPP of between two and four dollars were practically poor lower class, not middle classes, yet they were proven to be better off than the poor who live on two or below-two dollars a day. Here emerges a problem with using finances as the sole indicator to identify a certain social group; it is unrepresentative of realities that incorporate other factors related to behavior and lifestyle (i.e., Weber's element of Stand).

The confusion that Banerjee and Duflo (2008) found concerning the lower end of the middle classes' income can be better understood through the "vulnerability approach". It is an economic approach that defines layers of the middle classes in terms of vulnerability to fall into poverty once their income drops. Such an approach helps to identify both the growth and shrinkage of the middle classes, as it was first used to assess the outcome of development and change in economic policies, making it suitable for this research. Under this approach, once the income increases, a person/household is moved above the poverty line and placed in the safe zone against risks of falling into poverty, to be used as an indicator of the growth of the middle classes. The same concept works in reverse where "it is possible to find the income level associated with a set of assets and socioeconomic characteristics that would allow the households to be less vulnerable to fall into poverty due to idiosyncratic and asymmetric shocks". (Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, 2014, 26). These socioeconomic characteristics correspond to Weber's theory on being born into a certain stand as a guarantee of access to opportunities that secure the same income (i.e., remain in the same class).

This vulnerability approach has been widely used in case studies about the middle classes, especially in poor and developing economies. One study targeted the middle classes of Latin America, in which Stampini et al. looked into the effect of poverty reduction policies on securing the middle classes against falling into poverty again and measured the vulnerability of each class. The study used daily per capita income as an indicator for each class through a synthetic panel methodology, as the study “divides the population into five groups: (i) the extreme poor, with income below \$2.5, (ii) the moderately poor, between \$2.5 and 4, (iii) the vulnerable between \$4 and 10, (iv) the middle classes between \$10 and 50, and (v) the high-income class, above \$50” (Stampini et al., 2016, 4). The study also combined the factor of poverty duration to assess the chances of middle and vulnerable (i.e., lower middle) classes to fall into poverty. Again, the population was divided into another four categories; chronic poor who have been in the lower classes for five years or more, transit poor who have been poor for four years or less, the future poor who are either vulnerable (lower middle) or middle classes or any group that falls into poverty during the term of the study, and finally the never poor who are always above the \$4 poverty line. Combining the two factors of solid income figures and duration of being in a given category of income does not only measure the person’s position on the social ladder but also provides an insight into the ability to remain in the same position or class and maintain the lifestyle related to it. Such insight is significant when studying the middle classes, which are supposed to maintain a certain level of consumption for a wider spectrum of goods over time, maybe even buying assets and investments that need long term financial commitment, in comparison to lower and poorer classes who are

unable to consume such goods or services. As more middle classes households fall into the vulnerability category of the lower-middle class, hence becoming unable to maintain this level of consumption and give up on certain goods, it indicates the effect that the policies in place have on the micro-level. Following this notion, my research looks into this vulnerability element by following the change in consumption patterns, access to services, accumulation/liquidation of assets, and re-arrangement of priorities within the sample households to analyze the change in other non-financial elements, naming women empowerment. This correspondent to Max Weber's theory on categorizing classes, where earning a certain income (class), assets possession, and ability to lead a certain lifestyle (stand) both define a person's placement on the social ladder. And that's how Stampini et al. concluded; that middle classes families in Latin America are still exposed to a substantial risk of falling into poverty, unlike the assumption that middle classes are relatively safer. The study also found that 14 percent of the studied middle classes families went through at least one episode of poverty during the decade-long study, which did not necessarily move them vertically on the social ladder, yet maximized the risk they endured and reflected on the stability of the policies in place.

The vulnerability approach has been used extensively to study female-headed households in developing countries compared to male-headed ones. The reasons for vulnerability are not exclusively related to the economic situation in the country, but sometimes it is about the cultural context. In a study on the food security of Female-headed households in Bangladesh, Mallick and Rafi (2010) found that women's limited access to food production activities did not necessarily make them poor, yet made them more vulnerable in case they were



not provided for. The study targeted an indigenous group in one of the Bengali villages and found that the absence of social restrictions among poorer groups made women more capable of participating in income-generating activities, unlike women of other classes and urban communities who are usually bound to social norms. Also, the absence of formal economic institutions has, in fact, improved the ability of these poor social groups to manage their resources as “the finding is indicative in the sense that noneconomic institutions can significantly impact economic outcomes such as improving the food security of a household, especially the female-headed one. It has important policy implications as well. The design of developmental assistance programs should take into consideration the social and cultural heterogeneity even within a region in a country.” (Mallick and Rafi, 2010, 594). That said, urban middle classes who live under the policies of the economic institutions seem to be more prone to the outcome of these policies and even more burdened by the social context they live in.

Comparing the work of Banerjee and Duflo to that of Stampini et al. proves that there is no fixed global income figure to determine the middle classes in all countries. The 6-10 dollars figure used by Banerjee and Duflo as the upper middle classes in the 13 studied countries was the income of the vulnerable group in Stampini et al.’s model. So, putting data on income into local context is key to better reflect on the reality of the financial situation of households. In the case of Egypt, Central Authority for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) puts the figure of average annual household income at LE 44,193.8, a figure that fits into the vulnerable category in Stampini et al.’s model. This discrepancy reflects the same problem both studies encountered

when trying to apply the international figures in local terms. But a 2019 report by the World Bank on poverty, vulnerability, and middle classes in Egypt set a benchmark for the poverty line in the country at an income of 3.5 dollars a day, above which comes the income of the vulnerable and lower-middle classes. To further determine the finances of the vulnerable and middle classes, the World Bank used consumption figures so that the vulnerable group's consumption was between 5,748 and 7,644 EGP per person per year, and the middle classes' consumption level was between 7,644 EGP and 11,496 EGP per person per year<sup>4</sup>. More recent data from CAPMAS, though, indicate that in the fiscal year 2017/2018, the average household expenditure was 51.4 thousand EGP. The average household income for the same year was 58.85 thousand EGP.

This confusion with data and financial approaches defining social classes gives more merit to Weber's theory, as it has been evident that elements of stand and consumptions behavior or lifestyle play a huge role in defining how income is accessed and used. Even when studies tried to take a strictly financial approach (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008; Mallick and Rafi, 2010; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, 2014; Stampini et al., 2016), non-economic factors imposed themselves on the outcome.

To summarize, gender-related concepts and their practice and implications in the private and public spheres are akin to inter and intra-class analysis. No one general understanding encompasses how women of all classes perceive and practice empowerment. As proven earlier, literature, especially that on the global south, looks into the economic empowerment of women from a poverty elimination perspective, focusing on women of poorer classes and

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<sup>4</sup> World Bank Data is based on 2015 data it obtained from CAPMAS

leaving women of other social groups understudied. Consequently, broader social, non-financial elements are absent from the study of empowerment, elements of stand and party in Weber's terms. Elements like the ability to make personal choices, pursue ambitions, develop careers, maintain a social life, and freedom to move around are as decisive as finances in defining empowerment, especially for social groups that aim beyond securing basic needs.

That said, this research aims to fill the aforementioned gap in the specific case of Egypt, as more households fall into the vulnerability group and adjust their lifestyle to their new financial reality. Women also change their perceptions and practices of empowerment accordingly, both inside households and in the larger social sphere.

The above theorization and research efforts on defining middle classes and assessing empowerment remain abstract, though. Historical discourses of how the Egyptian middle classes were formed and transformed in modern history resulted in tremendous and rapid shifts in Egypt's social stratification. Egyptian women had to adjust according to these changes, some of which resulted from shifts in state policies, and others were related to the global socio-economic and political changes. The next chapter explores the history of Egypt's social stratification, the foundation of the modern middle classes, ideological and socio-economic changes, and women's place within different phases.

## Chapter 4: The Egyptian Middle Classes

The Egyptian middle classes in the current demographic and socio-economic structure, as a class of educated, salaried employees, are relatively modern. History traces the presence of a middle classes of merchants, guild leaders, and state bureaucrats in the eighteenth century, who had access to better education, more connections to the upper/ruling class, and better finances than the majority of the working class (Hanna, 2003). However, the nuclei for the modern Egyptian middle classes date back to the nineteenth century, when the state sent students to Europe. Some of those students returned to form the modern bureaucracy and educators, developing a new culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lucie Ryzova (2014) dubbed this era “The Age of Efendiyya”, who formed a new state-affiliated class formed in a manner similar to the Mamluks in the thirteenth century, except that they were not soldiers. This era established access to higher education as one of the pillars defining middle classes in Egypt as an element of stand in Weber’s theory<sup>5</sup>. This era in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also established the affiliation to the state and being part of its bureaucracy as another defining feature for the middle classes of Egypt, a feature that was fully developed and invested during the time of Nasser.

Historically, changes to Egypt’s economic and, consequently, social and hierarchical structures have always been state-led and dominated. From

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<sup>5</sup> Education is still one of significant importance for the average Egyptian household. According to CAPMAS report on the income and expenditure for the year 2019/2020, average urban households spend 6.7% of their income on education. And total the number of university graduates is steadily increasing, from about 340 thousand in 2016 to more than 480 thousand in 2020.

Mohamed Ali's modernization to the westernization by his grandson Ismail, then the drastic shift to Socialism during the time of Nasser, then the other extreme of Sadat's open-door policy, the middle classes have always been the subject of state economic actions. But for a brief time in the early twentieth century, the educated class of leaders that became sophisticated at the time took upon themselves the mission of creating an independent economy. According to Tignor (1984), this class sought to use its wealth of land and other forms of capital to diversify the economy and create a new layer of middle classes that was independent of the state between 1918 and until Nasser's time in 1952. This newly established economy, and consequently the rise of the middle classes it supported, was part of the decolonization and nationalist sentiment that was sweeping the country at the time, adding an element of the party (as a pillar of social stratification in Weber's theory) to defining this new stratum of the middle classes. While Egypt was under British mandate, the Egyptian business elite tried to resist the favoritism of European counterparts by creating a national economy that depended on resources that the latter did not have strong ties to; mainly land and access to human capital, hence supporting the rise of the independent middle classes (Tignor, 1984).

### **Nasser's Middle Class**

The element of the party in social stratification was massively significant in the two decades following the 1952 coup in Egypt, as the new regime adopted policies and narratives that were focused on decolonization and cracking down on the corrupt elite of the monarchy alike. The economic conditions during the 1930s and 1940s came in handy to support such a

nationalist narrative, as the Egyptian economy was massively hit by the inter-war and World War II eras. Being tied to the international economy, Egypt relied much on the exports of cotton, which “commanded high prices on the world market” (Tignor, 1984, 79) and, in turn, supported the introduction of supporting industries and improvements to transportation, most significantly establishing the railway. This growing Egyptian economy that once relied on crop exports, textile industry, and active trade and services during the war became stagnant. Population increase, paired with increasing rates of underemployment and unemployment, made Egyptians poorer. And the elite that once was investing in the national economy that supported the rise of a new layer of middle classes became troubled itself, trying to save its businesses. Expectedly, fewer people had access to any form of education, let alone higher education, which eroded much of the stand element that signified the then-newly emerging middle classes. The 1952 regime was aware of the significance of the element of education and used it efficiently to expand the middle classes and strengthen its loyalty to the state. Huge investments were poured into all stages of education, making the “educational effort of the interwar years dwarfed by the Nasser Push of the 1950s and 1960s” (Tignor, 1984, 250). Enrolment in primary education made a huge leap, from an enrolment rate of 45 percent among children of eligible age in 1952 to 65 percent in 1960, then 80 percent in 1967, counting for 3.4 million pupils. Investment in higher education significantly increased as well, as “between 1953-1954 and 1961-1962, the budget of the universities has almost quadrupled, whereas the budget of the Ministry of Education little more than doubled” (Faksh, 1980, 48). And the number of enrolled university students “rose from 35,016 undergraduates

(excluding al-Azhar and the American University) in 1951-1952 to 86,539 in 1960-1961. It rose to 152,382 in 1970-1971” (Faksh, 1980, 46).

Investment in education was paired with another investment in the labor market by promising job opportunities to the majority of the population, especially university graduates. Given Egypt’s aforementioned ties to the global economy, inter and post-world wars recession hit many industries in Egypt, and the once-wealthy vibrant market became stagnant, leaving many workers and employees under the threat of unemployment (Beinin, 1989). Nasser’s regime used this momentum to declare a national goal of securing employment for all kinds of labor. Given that most businesses were nationalized and private businesses were discouraged, the state became the main employer either in public sector enterprises or state bureaucracy. One of the changes to the employment market was to give priority to skilled workers while side-lining non-skilled labor. In that sense, people of the lower-middle and poorer classes got more interested in vocational education and training to become government employees (Abdalla, 1984). As a result, “the number of government sector workers was increased from 350,000 in 1951-1952 to 1.2 million in 1969-1970. The annual growth rate of government sector workers was 7.5% between 1962 and 1972 and exceeded the annual growth rate (2.2%) of the national workforce” (Kawamura, 2021, 36; Waterbury, 1983).

And with the rapidly increasing number of university graduates, the state made a commitment to providing jobs to all university graduates in one of the state enterprises or bureaucracies. In 1961, the government declared a five-year plan to reform the public sector, with a bundle of decisions with regard to the workforce, including one that mandates a guaranteed job to all university

graduates (Waterbury, 1983). This guarantee was formalized into law 14 in 1964 and was expanded through law 85 in 1973 to include graduates of vocational education (Assaad, 1997). As a result, the state bureaucracy kept growing annually, sometimes unnecessarily, in a manner that surpassed its capacity (Abdalla, 1984). “Over the Plan period, the workforce grew by nearly 22 percent, or from about 6 [in 1959] to 7.3 million [in 1965]” (Waterbury, 1983, 90). As a result, the public sector became overstaffed, and productivity soon declined before the end of the Plan. The investment in education and employment still served a great purpose by creating a huge stratum of middle, lower-middle, and working classes that were state-affiliated, a strategy of creating loyalty and exercising control and dominance at the same time (Abdalla, 1984; Benin, 1989).

Changes to the Egyptian middle classes during the time of Nasser surpassed the mere influx of funds to education and employment to other demographic and occupational structures. Before 1952, the Egyptian social stratification had an upper class of land owners, while the middle classes, arguably, had two strata; one of rural intellectuals and merchants and another of industrialists. After 1952, the regime sought to replace the industrialist strata that was much associated with the upper class with that of the state-affiliated bureaucratic and managerial elite (Abdalla 1984; Mellor, 2016). The military was considered another tool of social mobility at the time since young men of the upper and middle classes were not keen to join the army at the time, giving more space to those of the rural and lower classes. And given the benefits, finances, and connections (i.e., class, stand, and party) that were dedicated to this group, it made its way up on the social stratification. This Nasserite



investment in the middle classes paid off decades later; as Galal Amin (1991) states that the Egyptian population in 1955 constituted 19 percent of the middle classes, 80 percent of the lower classes, and one percent of the upper class. In 1986, the numbers grew to around 45 percent of the middle classes, 50 percent of the lower classes, and five percent of the upper class (Amin, 1991, 70, 72). This increase in the numbers of the middle classes during the 1950s and 1960s was accompanied by demographic changes as well, as social mobility elevated many people from the poorer/lower to middle classes thanks to education and affiliation to state bureaucracy, paired with the fall of some of the members of the upper class to the middle classes and being replaced by new state elite and bourgeoisie (Mellor, 2015).

### **Sadat's Open-door Policy**

The expansion of the middle classes made it more heterogenous, given the diverse backgrounds of each stratum. This diversity grew rather deeper after Sadat's open-door policy in the 1970s. While the middle classes were previously defined by their state affiliation, non-ownership of production capital, yet possession of huge social capital in terms of access to education and networks (i.e., elements of stand and party) (Mellor, 2015), the open-door policy disrupted this order by introducing liberal policies that resulted in a new wave of social mobility. The working/lower class that was once poorer and less educated could make more income and enjoyed higher living standards in comparison to the state-employed middle classes, but it was still lacking the social capital of education and networks.

Sadat's open-door policy was determined to support the flow of money and private investment into the country, sometimes at the expense of Nasser's huge public sector and bureaucracy apparatus. "However, this economic growth did not bestow upon Egypt the development of 'real' economy; instead, it accelerated the decline of it" (DAI, 2012, 67). But this toll on the public sector was not intended. According to Kawamura (2022), Sadat sought to preserve Nasser's public sector structure to gather and maintain the political support of the middle classes. The guaranteed job scheme was expanded, and 60 percent of the university graduates sought employment in the public sector by the late 1970s. Enrolment in universities kept expanding as well, making an increase by 3.5 times between 1971 and 1984, besides launching seven new provincial universities between 1972 and 1976 (Kawamura, 2022). This investment in education was not only driven by Sadat's approach to maintaining the public sector but also by the new international and domestic political and economic orders. After the 1973 war, Sadat shifted from Nasser's socialist policies to more liberal ones to elevate the Egyptian economy. Foreign investments and the private sector were encouraged, creating more jobs and more demand for higher education and the kind of training and skills that university graduates have (Waterbury, 1983). Consequently, a new stratum within the middle classes was created from the private sector employees and small businesses owners, who enjoyed better income and more privileges in comparison to their public sector counterparts.

The oil boom in the Gulf was yet another big change in the international economy that coincided with Sadat's Open Door. It sparked the need for all kinds of labor in the Gulf countries, whether nonskilled or skilled workers,

professionals, university graduates, and postgraduates. Sadat's liberal policies allowed, and even encouraged, big waves of labor migration from all classes. In the Egyptian villages, it became a phenomenon for laborers to travel and leave the village behind and send money back to their families. This flow of remittance resulted in a new wave of social mobility by being used to improve "living standards and housing, security of retirement or for building up a certain prestige in their home areas. Economic investment is not a predominant feature. In many cases, migrant workers are able to save substantial amounts of money" (Reichert, 1993, 43). Migration also disrupted the long-established relationship between land ownership and social classes in rural Egypt, as a new layer in the rural middle classes came into existence through migration monetary flows.

Meanwhile, the state was burdened by maintaining the huge public sector, and "as early as 1973, various Egyptians began to call for the liquidation of failing public sector enterprises" (Waterbury, 1983, 138). Multiple plans were proposed to handle the losses of the public sector, including sacking the unwanted labor and employees and selling shares from the state capital to the private sector, especially as the economic situation got really sore during the war years. And in 1976, a five-year plan (1976-1980) was announced, and it included listing 16 industrial companies to sell their shares to the private sector for 50 million Egyptian Pounds (Waterbury, 1983). As a result, the middle classes that were once affiliated with state employment became increasingly short of financial capabilities and were pushed towards lower-middle and lower/poorer strata, in a classic case of social vulnerability as discussed earlier in the literature (Mallick and Rafi, 2010; Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez, 2014; Stampini et al., 2016). It was plausible for this vulnerability to continue during

the time of Mubarak, where the shrinkage of the state apparatus became rather fiercer during the consecutive waves of privatization of the public sector.

### **Mubarak Era**

Mubarak's privatization was paired with two major changes in the international political and economic structures, which are the rise of the oil-rich economies in neighboring Gulf countries and the transition to a uni-polar world system controlled by the United States after the fall of the Soviet Union (DAI, 2012). Labor migration to the oil-rich countries played a role as well in diversifying the backgrounds within each class, as it resulted in a huge wave of social mobility from middle to upper and from poorer to middle classes in terms of income. This labor migration "absorbed the growing Egyptian labor force (skilled and semi-skilled) while increasing remittances at a remarkable rate: from USD 2 billion in 1980 to approximately USD 9 billion in 2011." (Mellor, 2016, 64).

On the other hand, the consecutive liberal economic policies imposed by the new international order made it harder for the public sector to survive, and the private sector took over, changing both the economic and social ecosystems. According to DAI (2012), the older form of the upper and middle classes was restructured into the structure that still exists. A new upper class emerged, consisting of foreign and new national capitalists and business elite besides the old elite. The new lower class consisted mostly of labor and workers in both the public and private sectors or other sorts of informal employment. Public sector and bureaucracy employees made their way down the social stratification, arguably creating what we know now as the vulnerable/lower

middle classes (Roque, 2020). Consequently, the social gap significantly expanded, creating a bigger upper class, a much bigger lower class, and shrinking, struggling middle classes. By 2006 “the upper class accounted for 18.4%, the middle classes 12.4%, and the lower class 69.1%” (DAI, 2012, 70). In Comparison to figures quoted earlier in this chapter by Gala Amin (1991), the middle classes shrank from 45 percent in 1991 to 12.4 percent within 15 years, which resonates with the vulnerability approach referred to earlier in the literature review. Hasan (2016), however, challenges the notion of shrinkage of the Egyptian middle classes and argues that it has rather been restructured into new layers. While the liberal economic policies have indeed resulted in shrinkage of the state-affiliated middle classes and pushed parts of it into the poorer thresholds of the social stratification, it created in return new layers and professions that did not exist before. These new modes of employment, like small businesses, the working class that receives a middle classes income, self-employment, and wage recipient labor, were excluded from middle classes count and research (Hasan, 2016). Accordingly, Hasan points out that the positions of the middle classes increased in size from 36.63 percent in 1976 to 55.1 percent in 1996 (Hasan, 2016, 94). A setback happened, however, between 1996 and 2006, as the percentage of the middle classes declined to 41 percent, “which is expected and plausible in light of state policies and programs that dismantled some of the middle classes’ positions and redistributed them into other placements in the class stratification, most significantly the working class. Policies towards labor laws, waves of privatization, selling the public sector and encouraging the private one, all contributed to cutting off some main streams that helped the middle classes to grow socially and demographically” (Hasan,

2016, 95). As these policies kept expanding, the layer of the middle classes associated with the public sector kept shrinking, and by 2018 the public sector counted for only 18 percent of the employment in Egypt (Tansel et al., 2020).

Subscribing Weber's theory on class stratification is significant here, given that the economic changes over the previous eras created multiple layers within the same social group. It is irrational to exclude layers based on the level of income that might have increased or lost value while they still belong in terms of ideology and social capital. Therefore, elements of stand and party remain substantial to identify the Egyptian middle classes.

The new liberal economic order totally reconstructed the middle classes to include professionals, administration employees, owners of medium private businesses, and most of the shopkeepers. It also created layers within the middle classes, splitting it into the upper-middle class of households who work as professionals, earn a relatively higher income, own a car or two, live in relatively improved residential areas but cannot afford luxurious gated communities, can afford to pay for domestic help and have access to private and international education. As the economic situation gets tighter, this group cuts mainly the luxurious, leisure, and non-essential goods and services. The second layer is that of middle-class households who are also professionals but earn less income, live in more congested neighborhoods, can afford private education but not an international one, and is less capable of consuming goods and services in comparison to their upper-middle counterparts, hence their need to make more cuts to the non-essential goods and adjust their consumption of the essentials (Roque, 2020). The third layer is the lower-middle class, consisting of households that are barely capable of sustaining themselves above the poverty

line, live in modest neighborhoods, homes have basic appliances, have no budget for luxuries and leisure, struggle to keep up with the cost of the essentials, have less budget for private education and resort to national schools with relatively higher fees or nunnery ones (Roque, 2020).

In Weber's terms, this era resulted in the emergence of a new layer within each social group in the stratification of the Egyptian society, and this new layer was not necessarily identical in the financial aspect (i.e., class) and arguably lacked the previously assigned elements of stand and party. As a result, heterogeneity got even deeper within each social group, especially as the political backgrounds became more diversified, being Marxist/Nasserite, Liberal under Sadat while allowing more presence to the Islamists starting in the 1970s.

### **Lifestyle and Moral Traits**

The changes to the economic structures and rapid social mobility changed the lifestyle and consumption habits of the growing middle classes in Egypt, where the open-door and liberal economic policies and the increasing influx of finances from foreign investments and labor migration made more imported goods available and more taste and ability to consume them. The change in consumption habits is also argued to be one of the consequences of social mobility, as an attempt by the people of the new stratum to cover up their real class origin (Amin, 2000). By the late 1990s, the new layers of the middle classes lost most of their dependency and affiliation to the state in both income (employment by the public sector) and consumption. Upper layers of the middle classes consumed less subsidized or locally produced goods, were introduced to

a westernized lifestyle of dining (which was exclusively a trait of upper classes in previous eras), subscribed to private education and healthcare services, had increasing access to sports and social clubs and enjoyed a new culture of leisure that used to be exclusive to upper classes like dining out and traveling for holidays (Abaza, 2006). However, the new lifestyle (an element of *stand in Weber's terms*) was rather demanding and meant that as the economic conditions got tighter, people of this class had more to keep up with than they were used to before.

The shifts in economic structures have historically had the biggest toll on the middle classes, financially and morally. According to Galal Amin (2012), the middle classes enjoyed traits of stability, education, morals, and respect for the law, in addition to a rational view of religious and patriotic sentiment, making this class a safeguard against corruption at various times in modern Egyptian history. Yet, the tightening economic situation paired with the rapid social mobility in the late Sadat and during the Mubarak era changed most of those moral traits. The height of this change was during the Mubarak era, though, where “the rapid rate of population growth, combined with insufficient economic growth and the slackening of labor migration, plus the resulting rise in unemployment and the growth of slums were all powerful enough motivators for people to circumvent the law.” (Amin, 2012, 42). And towards the end of the Mubarak era, social mobility got even slower, and the middle classes got more vulnerable to falling into the poorer ones, which compromised its historically celebrated patriotic sentiment.

Given the aforementioned circumstances, it was a matter of time before the middle classes took to the streets of Egypt in 2011, not only making



economic demands like in 1974, for instance, but also demanding social, political, and economic reform. Hazem Kandil (2012) argues that the middle classes were severely suffering financially in the presence of an expanding consumer culture that they, as well as the government, were not able to keep up with. And thanks to the awareness this class enjoyed due to education; they believed that in the presence of the business elite in power, “the worst was yet to come” (Kandil, 2012). The moral traits that Galal Amin described were significant, even in the act of revolt in 2011, dubbed by Jessica Winegar (2016) as a “civilized revolution”. She argues in her article that the education and moral values that the middle Classes are associated with made the 18 days of Tahrir Square “aesthetic” in terms of slogans, chants, organization, banners, unifying outfits, and colors of clothing in some protests, as well as the rise of the art of graffiti. All this, according to Winegar (2016), created a state of Utopia that the young people of the middle classes were aspiring to, and the patriotic sentiment (which was once compromised, according to Amin) was reinstated. However, this revolutionary romance was perhaps the reason why the revolting young people were distracted from the political reality, hence had their revolution compromised. And with the constant political and economic disappointments, a paradox was created where the morals of the middle classes lost precedence, and people resorted to “verbal vulgarity previously more common among the lower classes to express views about the political situation” (Winegar, 2016, 620).

## **Women of the Middle Classes**

The traits that define the middle classes' morals and lifestyle extend to the situation of women, most notably gender roles and the public and social space available for them to navigate. While women of the middle classes enjoy an improved legal, educational, and employment status, this improvement remains compromised by the gender roles that did not similarly change. Multiple factors can be attributed to this situation, "including women's occupational segregation, the intensification of their domestic burdens, the contraction of opportunities in the public sector leading to overcrowding in the limited segments of the private sector that are accessible to women" (Assaad and Arntz, 2005, 432) Most women of the Egyptian middle classes fail to make proper use of their higher education and acquired degrees for the purpose of employment, where women's share of the labor market remained well below 30 percent (Binzel and Assaad, 2011). In many cases, the degree only serves as a tool to elevate marriage prospects, as the role of a housewife and mother takes precedence over a career. Even in households where women are required to work in order to support financially, conventional gender roles remain enforced, which compromises women's professional prospects and wellbeing (Roque, 2020). Mervat Hatem (1988) blames the rise of Islamist groups and the patriarchal nationalist sentiment for the imbalanced gender roles and traces it back to intellectuals of the first quarter of the twentieth century, who, instead of promoting a westernized/modernized culture of equality, advocated that "more accurate interpretations of Islam supported the extension of equal rights to women." (Hatem, 1988, 412). Consequently, the patriarchal/conservative system remained in control, and women had to accept it in exchange for

improving their chances of education and public space. And while the socialist trend in the 1960s tried to promote more integration of women in the public space and employment, the rise of Islamist groups in the 1970s acted as a sit back. They heavily promoted the domestic role as the sole purpose of women's life, education being a tool to make them better housewives and mothers, and advocated against their employment (Hatem, 1988). Sadat's regime seemed to be in line with this narrative, but the difficult economic situation served in favor of middle classes women in this instance despite its toll on the middle classes in general. "Most analysts agree that spiraling inflation made two-income families an economic necessity, therefore making it difficult for the state to withdraw its commitment to the employment of women" (Hatem, 1988, 415).

Labor migration in the 1970s was yet another factor that influenced women's employment, both in rural and urban communities. Being male-dominated labor migration, women were left behind, fully responsible for the households, and financially dependent on remittance. Thus, the migration phase was closely tied to the phase of marriage, where young men traveled mainly to earn the needed marriage expenses and support their new families (Binzel and Assaad, 2011). As a result, women's share in the household responsibilities got even bigger, having to compensate for the absence of the partner by taking over more domestic duties and non-paid work and compensating for men's absence in the labor market. But the effect was rather stronger in the urban contexts where "unlike the case of family farms, where many tasks can be carried out by men or women, family enterprises in urban areas tend to operate according to a much stricter gender division of labor and men are much more likely to be engaged in wage work anyway. It is therefore more difficult for women to

substitute for the labor of the absent migrant in urban areas” (Binzel and Assaad, 2011, 105). Moreover, the emerging private sector in the 1970s was not as welcoming or convenient for women as the public sector, given the familial commitments (Assaad and Arntz, 2005; Tansel et al., 2020). As a result, women’s chances in the private sector were fewer in comparison to men and a salary gap came to exist given that “unlike in the government, where married women are more able to reconcile their marital responsibilities with their work duties, marriage and the added responsibilities it entails appears to be incompatible with nongovernmental wage and salary employment in Egypt” (Assaad and Arntz, 2005, 439).

Roque’s research (2020) found that cultural, religious, and economic influences hinder highly educated middle Classes women’s participation in formal employment, mainly due to their belief in “the greater strength and significance of the marriage market compared to that of the labor market” (Roque, 2020, 13). Accordingly, higher education of at least a university degree is merely a symbol of social status among middle classes women and is linked to improving their marital prospects. The need for financial security is ranked second, depending on the financial situation of the households that women are married into. And given that the surrounding social pressure gives primacy to women’s role as housewives and mothers, without any change to domestic gender roles, plus the demanding private sector having the bigger share of employment, women’s chance of finding appropriate and decent jobs was greatly affected (Roque, 2020). In such context, education and the need for work serve as elements of stand in Weber’s terms, rather than their initial purpose as elements of class/income.

Cultural and social restrictions have also affected the public space available for middle classes women, who chose to resort to controlled spaces as a haven from the increasingly dangerous public spaces in the streets and transportation (de Konning, 2009; Roque, 2020). Such controlled places include modern coffee shops, restaurants, social and sports clubs, and areas that best cater to their roles as mothers and housewives. De Konning (2009) finds these havens to be part of the gendered class divide in Cairo and similar Egyptian urban communities, as the social and economic restructuring of the class system created a new middle/upper-middle classes that adopt a different/more westernized set of morals. The public and social space available to women come at the heart of this new moral system, which might not necessarily be to the liking of the greater masses from other classes, hence the need for controlled spaces for these women to socialize. This situation, however, created a new set of inequalities; firstly, it makes it harder for women to socialize, sometimes having to commute for long distances to places that can be presumed safe or decent. Secondly, it is a more costly lifestyle than men from the same social group/class, who could easily access cheaper and more public places without restrictions or concerns. And finally, it compromises women's space and rightful presence in the streets, transportation, and public spaces, leaving issues like sexual harassment and violence against women unresolved (de Konning, 2009). This, in turn, affects other women from poorer or lower-middle classes, who do not necessarily have the means to afford those confined spaces and have to endure the dangers or handle them in other ways. The gendered class segregation and dynamics of handling social spaces resonate with Bispinar's

research (2010) on women in urban Turkey, proving the existence of a class divide in agency, practices, and perceptions of empowerment.

To sum up, the current Egyptian middle classes are a product of rapid and significant changes over a relatively short span of history. Changes from being an elite investment to state-affiliated, then state-independent brought about changes to the social, moral, and consumer cultures and structures of this social group. However, elements of stand remain more or less the same; access to higher education, ability to consume, having some budget for luxuries, and affordability of private services. While women of this group became increasingly required to contribute to the household's welfare, the traditional gender roles that place domestic burdens on women remained in place. Similarly, restrictions on women's access to public spaces and freedom of movement did not equally change, which compromises many aspects of the empowerment of this group of women.

## **Chapter 5: Economic Empowerment and Social Disempowerment**

The outcome of this research proved part of the hypothesis and disproved another. In line with the hypothesis, participants were found to be financially empowered under the new economic measures in terms of access to jobs, sources of income, and having control over their own finances. Yet, against the hypothesis, women were not found to be equally empowered socially, where the social norms and household dynamics did not change much under the new circumstances. In addition, women suffered from the double burden and time poverty in a way that further hindered their practice of social empowerment.

### **Economic Empowerment**

The majority of the participants were found to be financially empowered in the sense that they have stable jobs, earn fixed salaries, exercise much control over their income, are much involved in the financial decisions of the family, and have the required skills to place them in the job market. Even those who practiced this kind of empowerment before could still find it after the economic measures were implemented. For example, Sarah, an upper-middle class who used to be a housewife and stay-at-home mother for ten years, could find a job as a school teacher in 2018 as the need arose for an additional source of income for the family. Same for Gameela, the upper-middle class construction engineer who stayed at home for five years, could land a job in late 2021 to secure the school fees of her younger daughter. Also, Mayar, an upper-middle class mother who worked for about four years as a freelance media producer, could finally

land a fixed job as a media officer in 2019, around the time when she needed a fixed income to contribute to her son's school fees.

### **Vulnerable empowerment**

This empowerment, however, is vulnerable and could be compromised due to multiple factors; the inability to get their financial role fully acknowledged and identified in the household, the sore economic situation in the country that makes it harder to self-develop hence acquire more skills or better jobs, and belonging to their respective social groups which act as a support system in some instances and a burden in others.

The acknowledgment of the economic role of women in the household, either through direct financial contribution or non-paid housework, has always been an issue of concern in the literature (Bispinar, 2010; Périvier, 2016; Bayissa et al., 2018). And the risk of unacknowledging women's contribution was evident through my research since, among the seven women in co-headed households I interviewed, five stated that their husbands are the main breadwinners in the family. Salma, for instance, a middle-class teacher who contributes her full salary towards the household supplies (counts for a quarter of the household income as she estimates), believes that her husband is the breadwinner and that her contribution is just an extra. Same for Sarah, who admitted that her low salary does not make her a breadwinner, despite her being in full control over the finances of the household and doing extra housework and chores to substitute for the goods and services they no longer afford to consume. Mariana, an upper-middle class journalist, earns a more stable and consistent income in comparison to her husband, who runs a business of media



services, yet believes that her husband is the main breadwinner because he earns more money in the greater scheme.

However, the cases of Gameela and Heba are the most evident in this regard because, despite the great contribution they provide, they do not acknowledge themselves as co-breadwinners. Gameela has a commitment to paying the school expenses of her second daughter plus providing for her personal expenses, which is a great contribution that constitutes almost half of the annual household expenses. Heba, a middle-class banker, also made a great contribution by providing the sole source of income for the household when her husband lost his job in 2020, and later by providing the bigger share of income when the only jobs he found provided monthly salaries of 1000-2000 Egyptian Pounds. That said, none of the interviewed women in co-headed households acknowledged or was even aware that her non-paid housework is actually a worthy contribution to the finances of the households. For instance, Salma and Sarah said that they do more housework, cooking, and chores and use the help of female domestic workers much less vis a vis before the measures were placed in order to save money, but this was not considered a financial contribution. As presented earlier in the literature (Bispinar, 2010; Périvier, 2016; Bayissa et al., 2018; Roque, 2020), these are classical cases of double-burden that women bear during times of austerity, which passes without proper acknowledgment, sometimes by the women themselves.

### **Decision-making Dynamics**

This denial of the magnitude of the economic role of the participants was reflected in the decision-making dynamics within the households. In the

case of Salma, she admitted that her husband had the bigger and final say with regard to the financial decision of the family and that she could not contest these dynamics even if she wanted. Gameela, however, did not feel it was reflected in the decision-making dynamics in the family as much as giving the husband more financial liberties. A hypothetical example she gave was her husband making the abrupt decision to purchase a gaming console for 20 thousand Egyptian pounds, which she found would be much more socially acceptable by the extended family because it is considered his money at the end of the day. This same example is not equally perceived when it comes to her own finances, as Gameela acknowledged that she could not make such big decisions of purchase on her own, even if it were her money, “without prior consultation at least”. On the other hand, in the cases of Sarah and Mayar, men have willingly given up much of their say over the finances of the family due to issues of proximity or in exchange for greater liberties. Sarah had the full and utmost control over the finances of her family due to the absence of her husband, the army officer. She makes decisions regarding her son’s education, activities, household expenses, and even the bigger ones of moving houses and buying a car. Same for Mayar, who makes the daily decisions of the household totally independent from her husband as he works for late hours. She also has a great share when it comes to bigger financial decisions, like buying a car or taking a loan, or deciding on the finances of her son’s education and activities.

These findings prove part of the hypothesis and disprove another, in the sense that while women are financially empowered in terms of having access to income, the patriarchal pattern that controls their household dynamics gives the upper hand to men, places limitations on their freedom to make decisions and

makes them disempowered socially. Consequently, this pattern places risks on the sustainability of the financial empowerment of women. That said, it echoes the concerns presented earlier in the literature review about the element of agency over financial resources being as significant in assessing empowerment as the access to the resources. Women might own the assets or income but are still bound by a culture that necessitates using them for certain expenses or under male consultation, if not permission (Buvinić and Gupta, 1997; Horrell and Krishnan, 2008; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Bayissa et al., 2017; Sharaunga et al., 2018; Roque, 2020). Although the majority of the participants said that they have an equal say in the financial decision-making of the household, the cases of Gameela and Salma are still proof of the vulnerability of the financial empowerment of women under the traditional household dynamics. As presented earlier in the literature, Roque (2020) finds that this pattern results from the endurance of a culture that places a bigger emphasis on women's roles as wives and mothers and makes their role in the household more worthy socially than in the job market. It is true that all the seven women in the co-headed households made the conscious and independent choice of contributing their financial resources to the household income out of the sense of duty or motherly instinct to support their children, but this contribution in both its forms (financial and housework) has to be acknowledged to safeguard this empowerment.

### **Economic Insecurity**

The sore economic situation is yet another element that compromises the empowerment of most of the participants. While the austerity and need for

extra income had a positive consequence by pushing Gameela, Mayar and Sarah to get stable employment, hence an independent source of income, economic hardships and instability still deeply hinder participants' ability to control their finances and consequently feel financially safe and empowered. This has been brutally proven in the case of Laila, the single mother of two who was pushed down to the lower-middle class, as she and her daughters suffered a huge toll after the floatation of the Egyptian currency in 2016, especially since she was already in debt to meet her responsibilities. For about two months after the floatation in 2016, Laila could not afford to buy proper food, just beans, cheese, and bread. She described the situation as very stressful, as she sometimes felt thankful her kids got tired and slept early, which meant skipping a meal. She stated that she "did not feel empowered at all" and eventually had to find a job in a gulf country and be separated from her children for more than a year to pay off her debts.

Radwa, is yet another brutal example, coming from an already financially troubled lower-middle class family due to her father's disability, and being a fresh graduate who has limited opportunities and is hired for small salaries that are not enough to support her household. She had to change jobs multiple times, as the only jobs offered were fixed-term contracts and for salaries as low as 800 Egyptian Pounds. Consequently, she had to sell any valuables that might bring a considerable amount of money, like gold jewelry and her personal laptop. She also had to make severe changes to household consumption, like cutting off meat and poultry and reducing the variety and amount of groceries they consume. Similarly, for Hend, who made her way down from an upper-middle class family to middle-class, empowerment is

compromised by economic hardships that make her sometimes unable to afford basic needs such as seeing doctors for her chronic illness. She stated that she started a meal schedule after the economic measures were enforced in order to handle the messed-up budget of her household. These experiences can be summed up in Sarah's words, stating that she does not feel in control of her finances; rather, finances control her and the way she lives. After enforcing the austerity measures, this sore economic situation pushed Gameela, Heba, Salma, Hend, and Laila to use their savings or liquidate assets to afford their basic needs and maintain their lifestyle. And in the pursuit of maintaining a livelihood, none of the participants could make any savings to secure their financial future. And the two who did, naming Hend and Heba, used these savings later to pay for bigger financial commitments. Some commitments are personal, like Hend having to pay for her medical needs or the household, like Heba having to support her family and pay for her son's education.

### **Self-development**

In addition to the compromised finances, most of the participants did not see any prospect of gaining training or education that might secure better jobs or additional sources of income. Esraa, Mariana, Heba, Sarah, Radwa, and Gameela stated that it is very costly for them to pay for a course in languages or any certification in their respective fields. Esraa, for example, said she had to stop taking classes in Arabic writing because it was burdening her budget, and she could not afford to take other courses that help her with other skills. Same for Heba, who thought of learning Russian to give her an edge in serving the bank customers but had to put off the idea due to the cost. Sarah and Mariana

could not enroll in a master's degree and diplomas due to the financial commitment, which Mariana called "an unaffordable investment". In the case of Gameela, engineering certification is not just a one-off payment but rather a running cost of renewals, all of which are in foreign currency. And as the Egyptian Pound keeps losing value to other currencies, she puts off taking a couple of certificates and prefers to keep the money for her daughters' education. Others, like Mayar, work in places willing to allocate budget or directly provide necessary training and courses for the staff, which creates an attachment to the place. And in this regard, Mayar believes that the sore economic situation made her develop a bigger attachment to her workplace, being more concerned about the stability and security in her job instead of pursuing other less stable jobs, even if they are better paid. Yet, in a case like Esraa, she stated that the economic situation affected the budget allocated for training in her work; an example was training she kept requesting for three years until she left in December 2020 and never got to take it. The outcome of such a lack of training opportunities can be seen in the older participants, Salma and Laila, who have no prospects to move to better places and are barely trying to find a good place to retire. Salma is content with her government job in education management and does not really care to explore elsewhere. And Laila has seen younger talents take over her place at work, with no consideration for the element of experience, and "the idea of the end/retirement" took over her.

### **Social Privileges and Burdens**

The stand element was proven to be both of assistance and burden in different instances. For all the participants, belonging to their classes was the

main factor that helped them position themselves in their respective careers and lifestyles. Some of them still keep aspects of their privileges through the support of ‘the stand’, like Gameela, who lives in a building owned by her in-laws, so she does not pay rent, housing installments, or utility bills. Similarly, Hend lives in an apartment in Heliopolis owned by her mother, so she lives in a middle/upper-middle classes neighborhood without having to afford it. And Sarah’s husband’s belonging to his profession (i.e., element of party) enabled her to move houses when her old place got ruined and less serviced, even when it was financially challenging, just because he had access to neighborhoods dedicated to army officers.

On the other hand, the element of stand poses other challenges to preserving the lifestyle that makes participants belong to their classes. Among those challenges is sending children to schools similar to that of their peers, where Gameela, Mayar, and Sarah (all upper-middle class), said it is important for them to send their children to schools that provide good/international education despite all the financial toll. Also, paying for activities and sports training for children “has become an [social] obligation and not a choice, unlike in our generation” as Mayar puts it, she also states that not taking a kid to any sports training is considered odd among her peers. Same for Laila, who kept the share of income dedicated to school instalments untouched, despite the brutal changes made to needs as basic as food. In fact, all participants agreed that public education was not an option for their children, despite the fact that the majority of them had public education. They all agreed that the community they want for their children cannot be found in public schools, and that the significance of schools is not only in the kind of education, but includes

activities and social position. Roque (2020) made the same notion in her research, stating that each stratum within the middle classes sent its children to private education, which resulted in having different types of private schools and universities according to the affordability of each group. That said, all participants made changes to their consumption behavior in terms of food supplies and clothing but were very keen to keep elements of socializing like certain schools or social and sports clubs. Similarly, for Mariana, belonging to and growing up in her social classes places a burden on her affordability to the lifestyle, like going out in certain places or consuming certain brands, and seeing all that slipping away as the financial situation gets tighter creates fear and panic in her social group.

To sum up, as hypothesized, participants in this research were found to be economically empowered in terms of the ability to find jobs, generate income, and exercise significant control over their income and household finances. Yet this empowerment is compromised and not sustainable as their financial contribution is not significantly recognized, sometimes even by themselves, due to the culture and social norms that give men the upper hand over the finances of the household. As will be explained later, these norms are a factor that disempowers women socially and poses a risk to their financial empowerment. It resonates with the multidisciplinary assessment of empowerment explained earlier in this research, given that economic empowerment cannot be excluded from the social and community contexts. While women have the opportunity to work and generate income, the norms that govern their social context are still patriarchal, give more significance to women's roles as housewives and mothers, and even affect their job



opportunities and decisions to use income (Assaad and Arntz, 2013; Roque, 2020). There is also uncertainty about the participants' prospects in the job market, in light of the sustainability of the businesses they work for and their inability to better develop their skills to maintain an edge in the job market. Lastly, the element of stand poses itself in determining the financial decisions of the participants and their households in a way that compromises their finances and burdens them sometimes.

### **Social Empowerment**

While the majority of the participants were found to be economically empowered, they were not found to be as socially empowered in terms of their ability to make personal and family choices and decisions, ability to pursue ambitions and develop careers and characters, access to social life (friendships, family and activities) and freedom to move in and between different places to get errands done or for leisure. Many limitations are imposed on participants' ability to form and maintain relationships, move around freely and have free time for their wellbeing. Some of these limitations are related to the familial circumstances of each participant. Others are related to social norms or as a direct result of financial hardships.

Intuitively, women who did not have children or had older children enjoyed relatively more social freedoms. Esraa, for instance, stated that she had much time to read, enjoy her activities or meet up with friends in her free time. Similarly, despite working for two places, Hend is still capable of seeing her friends and maintaining constant contact almost daily. And Salma, whose three children are off to universities, can find some time in the middle or at the end

of the day for herself. On the other hand, participants with younger children (Gameela, Mayar, Heba, and Sarah) suffer from absolute time poverty, having their time divided among work, house chores, and kids' training and activities. Gameela, for instance, did not have time to spare at home to do the interview for this research, and the only slot available was during her commute from work. Similarly, Mayar and Heba stated that their only "me time" was the break they had at work, as they did not get to have any time for themselves at home. All of the four women stated that they did not have time to do any activities for their own leisure, like seeing friends or visiting a beauty salon, and the only socializing they did was with mothers of other children during training or in school. Another cause of time poverty, like in the case of Laila, was being overworked, where she had to finish a shift of nine hours and work as a freelancer for extra five hours to afford to live.

### **Social Norms and Judgments**

Social norms place many limitations on women's freedom to move, visit certain places or socialize, or make personal choices, especially in comparison to men (Hatem, 1988; de Konning, 2009; Roque, 2020). All participants stated that they felt it is socially acceptable, and sometimes mandated, that men have more opportunities to make decisions on their own and break away from responsibilities and that "the society gives validation to men who want to be irresponsible," as Sarah puts it. And that was evident in the case of Mayar as well, who said that it had become the status quo that she takes over most of the household and the kid's responsibilities, even if her husband has the time. Participants also quoted being judged by their community over their compliance

to social norms and dynamics as a threat to their social empowerment both inside and outside of the households. Things like the number of hours they spend outside, their working hours, places they go to, how they are dressed, and choices of friends were subject to social judgment and pressure among all participants. Gameela even mentioned that she was judged by her extended family and some friends over the division of labor in her household as she asked her husband to help with the kids when she started to work. In Hend's case, the judgment had a bigger toll as she fell out with her brother for making the choice of taking off her hijab. He, in return, cut her off and refused to attend her wedding. She also stated that with every family gathering, she's burdened by comments about her choices for life, her divorce, and her looks. Similarly, Mariana finds that her community has become more concerned and judging about her lifestyle, as everybody keeps an eye on the kind of life others lead, their clothing, whether they buy branded products, the types of cars they drive, and other aspects of lifestyle.

These social judgments often extend to how women are perceived in their workplace, where Gameela has to fight being undermined at work every day, especially since she works in a career that's perceived to be male-dominated. She finds it to be exhausting to have to be assertive all the time with her colleagues and yell at the construction workers she manages in order to be listened to. In other words, the social norm that makes her profession a male-dominated one makes it harder for her to maintain her rightful place in her career. These workplace perceptions took another turn for Radwa, being harassed by a manager who wanted to take advantage of her young age and need for work and eventually sacked her. These situations were reversed in careers

that are perceived to be female-dominated, like administrative and communications in the case of Mayar or teaching in the cases of Sarah and Salma.

### **Mobility and Public Space**

Given the aforementioned limitations to women's public and professional spaces, the toll of sexual harassment was found to be socially disempowering to all of the participants. All ten women pay the extra cost and extra time to ensure their safety while in the streets or workplaces. Radwa stated that she was harassed in public transportation and decided, despite all the financial hardships, to buy a car on an installment plan to avoid harassment and guarantee her safety. Similarly, Hend could not give up on her car and endured its cost of fuel and repairs to avoid repeating the experiences where she was harassed on public transportation. In fact, all participants except for Salma and Esraa stated that they feel safer driving and avoid public transportation. While Salma and Esraa did not drive, they still paid much money for cabs and private transportation. Such pricy options extend to the places available to socialize, as all ten women stated that they had to go to relatively expensive places to avoid harassment, unlike their male counterparts who had the option of going to cheaper public cafés and street venues. This notion comes in line with the literature on the public space available for middle classes women in Egypt, where many limitations and added costs are placed upon women (de Konning, 2009; Roque, 2020).

Financial hardships have also played a role in limiting women's ability to socialize. In Esraa's case, who was relatively capable of maintaining much

of her lifestyle after the economic measures were put in place, she found it hard to socialize with her friends who had more responsibilities to attend to. And she found it very depressing and mentally draining to endure the state of panic that was happening then. Laila was one of those burdened and incapable of meeting up with friends, as she could not afford to socialize because her financial situation got dire. She avoided going out with friends because she could not afford to eat out. She also avoided other social occasions like marriages and birthdays as she did not have the budget for a gift or proper outfit. Mariana also finds it intimidating to go out to certain places because she does not want to be judged for considering those places pricy. Generally, all participants stated that they stopped going out, visiting places, and eating out as part of cutting costs to afford the rising cost of living. Given the limitations on women's access to cheaper venues, like public cafes and street stalls, their ability to maintain social relations and space minimizes.

### **Added Worker Effect**

The double burden or added worker effect has been significant for all the participants, as all of them kept taking over the bigger share of household chores and responsibilities, and sometimes with no help at all. Even when a division of labor was agreed upon, women still had to pick up what men gave up on. An example is Gameela's agreement with her husband to help their daughter with part of her homework that was breached, and she had to take over. Mayar as well stated that her husband is not aware of any of the household work because he simply comes home to sit and relax. Same for Salma's husband, who comes home just to be served food and relax. While Gameela, Mayar, and Sarah

found it an unequal division of labor and exhausting to endure, Esraa and Mariana did not seem to be much bothered by taking the bigger share of house chores simply because they did not see it much work given the size of their families. This notion of double burden has been evident in all the literature on women under austerity, especially that of the 2008 financial crisis, as explained earlier in the literature review (Griffin, 2015; Périvier, 2016; Perrons, 2017).

To sum up, while the financial need necessitates women's financial contribution to their households, it does not much reflect on their ability to exercise social freedoms. The worse the economic situation gets, the more women are required to contribute by finances or by cutting off expenses and doing more chores, creating a double burden that all participants suffer from. This eats up women's time to contemplate or do activities they enjoy or even learn something new. And as the places where it is socially acceptable for women to socialize get more expensive, there is less opportunity for them to maintain relationships, unlike men who have more space in the social realm.

### **Female-headed VS Co-headed households**

Comparing female-headed to co-headed households, it is evident through this research that women in the female-headed households exercised more financial empowerment and were less vulnerable to elements of disempowerment. Still, they suffered more of the added worker effect, social limitations, and time poverty.

The absence of a partner or a male supporter made women more appreciative of their financial capabilities and contributions. Laila was the most significant case, being a single mother who takes full responsibility for her

daughters with no contribution from the father. She stated that her financial role is most significant in the household and that she is in full charge of the decision-making dynamics simply because no one else will do it. Radwa is yet another case; given her father's disability, he cannot contribute to the household income anymore, which leaves her and her sister as the breadwinners. She sounded more confident and affirmative about the value of her direct financial contribution as well as the housekeeping she does to save more money. She bluntly stated that she is less inclined toward the commitment of marriage, knowing that she will not find enough appreciation and understanding of her efforts. In a similar context, Hend was keen on maintaining control over her finances and not asking for family help or support unless absolutely necessary. She stated that she would rather give up on necessities like postponing a medical appointment than ask her mother for money, all to self-acknowledge her control over finances. Similar attitudes could be traced in co-headed households where the partner was unavailable. Sarah and Mayar had a bigger share of making decisions simply because their husbands had to dedicate more time to their jobs and chose to give up part of their say to their wives.

While women in the female-headed household were not socially disempowered due to the patriarchal pattern of decision-making and the domestic division of labor, they were equally suffering from the added worker effect and limitations in the public spaces. In fact, the element that affected social empowerment the most was that of having children. Laila's capacity to exercise social empowerment was much less in comparison to Hend and Radwa. While the latter two could maintain friendships, socialize and gather even in relatively cheaper places or in friends' houses, Laila did not have much time to

socialize after taking over extra freelance work and not affording social obligations of gift exchange or paying a bill at a café.

### **Perception of Empowerment**

It has been evident through this research that women's situation, whether empowered or not, is not necessarily directly related to how they actually feel it. In some instances, women did not feel empowered at all despite exercising much independence and control over their finances and choices. Each had reasons for lacking the feeling, some due to the pressure of social norms and traditional family dynamics, and some due to the uncertainty brought by the economic hardships. Gameela enjoys several empowering traits; she has a stable job, has full control over her salary, chooses to finance the school fees of her second daughter, and exercises an equal share of control over her household decisions and finances. Still, she feels disempowered because she has to fight and overachieve at work to prove herself an equal to her male counterparts, that she does the bigger share of chores and household responsibilities at home, and the fact that the husband has "veto power over all decisions" does not feel empowering even if he doesn't use it. Mariana does not share any of Gameela's concerns and enjoys all of the empowering traits; she feels this empowerment is totally compromised by the economic uncertainty that makes her "extremely scared of what the future might bring", and considers the middle classes to which she belongs a victim to the economic policies. While Sarah has the upper hand in her household decisions and could secure a source of income, she still feels disempowered due to the increasing financial burdens



and the effort it takes to keep her household going, as well as her aspirations that she feels unfulfilled due to her social and familial duties and circumstances.

On the other hand, Salma did not have many of the empowering traits, yet she seemed very content and confident that she was fully empowered because she earned an income - even if little - and chose to spend it on her household, capable of maintaining relationships and has equal space to men at work. She did not seem much concerned about the patriarchal family dynamics and found that the double burden is simply part of her duty as a wife and a mother. Similarly, for Heba, she finds that the mere ability to maintain a job and have an income is empowering, even if this income is barely sufficient to cover her household expenses paycheck to paycheck. Other trivial traits were associated with Esraa's sense of empowerment, like the ability to afford taking a taxi with her own money or buying herself coffee and a nice meal.

While all participants were aware of the role social stand plays in their sense of empowerment and providing privilege, some felt it is equally burdening. Heba felt it is empowering and protective of belonging to her stand and considers association with her workplace a pillar of prestige, hence social empowerment. Mariana as well finds it empowering to be acquainted with people who would help her against deceit and being taken advantage of. Yet, for Hend, having to answer to stand and Party is exhausting and compromises her sense of empowerment, and she feels empowered when capable of performing some act of rebellion, like traveling against her brother's will. But still, she could not give up on the privileges that her stand brings, like moving to a cheaper neighborhood or changing her consumption habits. Likewise, Mayar did not feel socially empowered until she could break away from the

elements of stand and party, and she gives an example of how empowering it felt that she renewed her driving license without the need for a favor. Still, she felt it is important to maintain a lifestyle that makes her equal to her peers, like sending her son to a private school or taking him to a sports club. And while Laila and Sarah did not give much significance to the effect of stand and party over their sense of empowerment, they still were aware of the role that stand played as a support system and source of favors and privilege.

Building on that point of Stand, participants felt they are required to extend empowerment to other women in other social groups. For instance, Hend, Laila, and Salma believed that their inability to use more of the help of cleaning ladies who come from poorer classes compromises the financial empowerment of those women and passes on the economic toll to them. This notion made Hend insist on keeping the same level of help at the expense of other personal priorities. Mayar, however, feels that women of poorer classes have become much more aware of their rights and feels it is a duty to help them to know more about their prospects and opportunities. Even within the middle classes, Heba feels it is her duty to make women in her community aware of the need to keep an income or some savings for themselves and to seek any kind of job. In short, women consider it is empowering to act in solidarity and help empower other women.

To sum up, while women enjoyed economic empowerment in terms of having an independent source of income, they were not equally empowered socially. Patriarchal dynamics in the households affect their share of decision-making. The social pressure that places emphasis and judgment on their roles as housewives and mothers keep them in an inferior placement. While women

are required to run errands in multiple social spaces (work, school, clubs, etc.), they do not have equal space to socialize and leisure. Still, a sense of empowerment is deeply personal and varies according to every woman's ambition versus her capacities. Relationship with elements of stand and party is complicated, as some women are aware of the privilege brought by their stand and party, while others found it more empowering to break away from this stand yet incapable of doing so.

### **Unintended Results**

Several findings surfaced during this research, which directly and indirectly affected perceptions of empowerment. These findings are about the effect of social mobility, the effect of belonging to different age groups, the toll brought upon households and women due to covid, uncertainty about the economic situation, ability to maintain lifestyle (i.e., Stand), and housing ownership among younger age groups.

Firstly, social mobility directly affected women's perception of empowerment. For instance, in the case of Esraa, her sense of empowerment was maximized by moving from a rural environment to an urban one, breaking away from the strict traditions, having an income she fully controls and being equal in her marriage in terms of decision making and financial contribution. On the other hand, Hend moved from an upper-middle classes to a lower layer of the middle classes, making her feel vulnerable and less empowered because she could not maintain the lifestyle/Stand she was used to. And fearful of this vulnerability, Mariana's sense of empowerment is compromised as she finds

herself required to make compromises and adjustments to her lifestyle, unlike what she was used to.

Secondly, the element of age plays a role in the perception of empowerment. Older age groups seemed more at peace with making concessions. Salma asserted that she felt totally empowered, and Laila repeatedly said that she was privileged compared to women of poorer classes. Women of younger age groups, on the other hand, were yearning for more and not giving in to the social norms that were widely accepted by the generation of their mothers. Gameela, for instance, was proud that she was standing for herself against sexism in the workplace and that women speak up about issues of harassment and inequality. Mayar as well found that one of the empowering perks of her workplace was being managed by women almost exclusively and that the barrier of culture against women empowerment is being broken.

Thirdly, Covid greatly affected how women perceived and exercised empowerment, especially those who had children. Aside from the accelerating economic toll, mothers were required to stay at home and almost sacrifice their jobs when schools were closed as part of the measures to control the pandemic, while fathers were not asked to. Gameela had her salary negotiated because, as a mother, she is expected to stay at home more with the kids. Heba had to take unpaid leave to stay with her son at home, which almost cost her the job she had, let alone a delayed promotion due to her maternity leave. Sarah was lucky enough to work as a teacher, so she stayed home with her son. And Mayar was lucky to have a children's room available at work to place her son in it.

Fourthly, uncertainty about the economic situation and vulnerability to slide down in the social stratification affected the participants' behavior in many aspects. All participants made adjustments to their lifestyle, sacrificing activities labeled as luxury or entertainment. They also changed their consumer behavior by substituting products and brands. Heba and Hend recently forced themselves to make any kind of savings at the expense of basic needs sometimes, fearing what the future might bring. Mariana and Esraa are hesitant to have children because they are not sure they will afford to provide for them. Radwa refuses the prospects of marriage altogether, is fearful of losing her control over her finances and time, and refuses the idea of having children in such economic circumstances. Similarly, Sarah, Mayar, and Heba avoid having a second child as they can barely provide for the ones they have.

Fifthly Maintaining the lifestyle (i.e., stand) was proven to be of utmost importance, especially for those who have children, whereas the literature stated earlier, women are keen on passing privilege to their children. Mayar, for instance, finds it important to send her child to a relatively expensive school and takes a loan to buy a car, while the family does not own a place to live and keeps paying rent. Hend as well made compromises with her medicine or medical appointment but could not shift to buying cheaper clothing or using public transportation. And Sarah, despite the debts and loss of assets, is still keen on sending her son to a relatively expensive private school and reputable social and sports club.

Lastly, there is an obvious problem with home ownership for the age group of the mid to late thirties. Mayar, Heba, and Radwa live in rented properties, incapable of moving due to high rent prices despite their wish to do

so. Gameela, Mariana, and Hend live in apartments owned by their parents or in-laws. Esraa and Laila could only buy small places in overpopulated areas. Sarah lives in a place bought through installments from her husband's work. Only Salma lives in an owned suitable housing.

## Conclusion

To conclude, as hypothesized, participants were proven to be financially empowered under the economic measures imposed by austerity in terms of access to jobs, sources of income, and having control over their own finances. Yet, unlike the hypothesis, women were not found to be equally empowered socially since the social norms, and household dynamics did not change much under the new circumstances. The need for women's financial contribution has become greater than before the measures to maintain the household expenses and the family's lifestyle, sometimes even without men noticing or knowing about it. However, this financial role played by women extended beyond direct funds into the management of household finances. Women have to do more economical shopping, substitute products, and make sacrifices in household expenses. All participants took over more house chores and duties to save money instead of using domestic help.

These efforts were not proven to be proportional to women's share in household decision-making. Roles remained unchanged in this regard in a classic case of double burden. Households where women had an equal or bigger share of decision-making remained unchanged, even when men paid for the bigger share of the household expenses. In households where women had to start working or made a bigger financial contribution, their share of say in decision-making did not equally increase. Additionally, the increasing financial role of women was not acknowledged within the household and did not trigger any change in the division of labor when it came to chores and responsibilities. The disproportionate magnitude of social and economic empowerment is

mainly due to the social norms and culture that emphasize women's obligation to their households and supports men's upper hand in the family. This situation resulted in an added worker effect, extreme time poverty, and mental burnout among women, especially in households with kids. Consequently, women have less time and capacity to relax and maintain social relationships.

Women are still faced with challenges in their workplace, especially in professions conventionally dominated by men, like engineering. The situation is better with professions that are traditionally occupied by women, like teaching and administrative work. Other challenges are related to the limited public space available to women compared to men, which compromises women's chances for cheaper entertainment alternatives. Participants agreed that there is no absolute freedom of mobility and that they are bound to certain places labeled as safe or mainly occupied by women.

Elements of stand and party play a complicated role when it comes to empowerment. As much as they provide a haven and support to some women, others find it intimidating to have to conform to a certain lifestyle to remain included in their social group. Although some find it liberating to break away from this element of Stand, they are not capable of fully doing so.

Lastly, a woman's sense of empowerment does not necessarily correlate to measures or indicators. Rather, it is completely personal and depends on their aspirations and capabilities. A woman may exercise a great deal of economic empowerment yet still feels disempowered. Another might be less empowered but, in fact, feels much more empowered.



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## Appendix

### Appendix I: About the Participants

**Esraa:** A middle-class journalist in her late thirties, married with no children. She comes from a family who lived in a village in Sharkeya, and her mother was a housewife who did not have a university degree. She had a degree in English literature, moved to Cairo, and worked in customer service before finding her way to journalism in 2011. She got married in 2017 to a journalist who shifted his career to be a fitness coach. They split all marriage expenses and even bought their apartment together. They moved to the UK in January 2021, and they are expecting their first child.

**Gameela:** An upper-middle class construction engineer in her mid-30s. She comes from a family of professionals in Mansoura in the north of Egypt, got her university education in Cairo, married, and settled there. She has two girls; one is nine years, and the other is four years old. She had a career break for five years, through which she had her second child and finished her Ph.D. She had to go back to work in November 2021 due to the need for her income.

**Heba:** A middle-class banker in *Banque Misr* who lives in Sharm El-Sheikh, is married, and has a son. Her husband worked in electronics sales as an office manager for B-tech in Sharm El-Sheikh. Her household has been through a difficult time after enforcing the austerity then Corona, as her husband's salary shrunk due to the lack of sales until he lost his job in 2020. He stayed at home

for 4-6 months, and the positions he found later did not generate the same income level.

**Hend:** A middle-class lawyer in her mid-thirties who lives in Cairo but comes originally from upper Egypt. She graduated with a degree in physics, then worked for a women's advocacy organization and studied for a law degree. She's divorced, with no children, and lives in her mother's apartment in Heliopolis. Her current lifestyle is a downgrade from an upper-middle-class to a relatively lower/typical middle class.

**Laila:** A lower-middle class single mother in her late 40s, divorced with two daughters, ages 16 and 14. She has been supporting her daughters for more than ten years now. The toll of economic measures was so hard on her that she had to find a job in the gulf in 2020 to continue supporting her daughters. She moved to the US one year later and managed to have the girls with her, hoping she could grant them a future in this new land.

**Mariana:** An upper-middle class journalist in her early thirties. She got married two years ago and lives in Heliopolis, where her parents and in-laws also live. Her husband works in photography and media production, and they have no children.



**Mayar:** An upper-middle class communications professional. Is in her early thirties, married, and has a kid. She used to do freelance work for a long time before settling for a permanent job at Save the Children in September 2019. She had to find a better-paid and more stable position as her son got older and needed more financial support. She comes from a middle-class family, where the mother is a housewife, and the family is protective of the girls.

**Radwa:** A lower-middle class fresh graduate. She is single and in her mid-twenties. She lives with her father and sister, and her mother died ten years ago. She has a law degree and currently studying for a postgraduate diploma. She worked at an early age while studying for her undergraduate degree as an assistant teacher. She teaches private lessons to get some extra income. She worked for multiple places on a temporary and fixed-term basis. Her father had an accident that left him disabled, making her and her sister the main providers for the household.

**Salma:** A middle-class former high-school teacher who shifted to education management. She's in her early fifties, a mother of three university students. Her family is split between Cairo and Kafr Elsheikh. Her husband works in agricultural research.

**Sarah:** An upper-middle class teacher. She is in her late thirties, from a middle-class family in upper Egypt, married with one child, and lives in Alexandria since 2008. She has a degree in business and worked for a while in her early career as a market analyst but stayed home after getting married. In 2018, she had to take a job as a school teacher to support herself and contribute to her family's finances.

## **Appendix II: Interview Questions**

### **Group 1: Demographic and General Questions**

Where do you live?

How big is your family?

Who is the main provider?

What do you think happened to the Egyptian economy after 2016?

What was the initial effect of the new measures on your household?

Did you move houses during this time?

What qualifications do you have?

Do you find it easy to acquire skills/credentials that you need to better position yourself in the job market?

How empowered do you think you are (financially and socially)?

### **Group 2: Questions Related to Economic Empowerment**

How was your family income affected after 2016?

What are the main expenses of your household?

Do you try to generate income for the household?

Did you sell any assets after 2016?

How easy was it to try and find a job or any income-generating activity?

What is the scope and capacity of your involvement in your family's financial decisions?

Are you able to make any savings or buy any assets for yourself?

How much control do you think you have over financial resources?

### **Group 3: Questions related to Social Empowerment**

Did you have to make any changes to your lifestyle after 2016?

Describe your daily routine.

How involved is your husband in the household work/chores? (did it change over the past four years)?

How much say do you have in family decisions?

How fair is the division of responsibilities with your partner?

How much time do you have for yourself/your pursuits?

How free to move around do you think you are? (Ability to go to places for professional/family/personal errands)

How judgmental do you find people in your community?

How understanding do you find your community to the responsibilities you have?

How often do you feel overwhelmed/tired/burdened?

Do you think you have the same social space as men in your community?

Do you think you have the social position you need or find sufficient for your pursuits?

**Appendix III: Coding Sheet 1**

	Economic Empowerment			Social Empowerment			Freedom of Mobility		
	Employment/ Source of income	Control over income	Independent Personal Financial Decisions	Equal Say in Family Decisions	Self- development	Social Life	Family Limits	Safety Concerns	Financial limits
<b>Esraa</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Gameela</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Heba</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Hend</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Laila</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Mariana</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Mayar</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<b>Radwa</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Salma</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	Yes
<b>Sarah</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes

**Appendix III: Coding Sheet 2**

	Acknowledging Financial Role		Time Poverty	Social Norms/ Pressure/ Judgment	Feels Empowered	Able to Maintain Lifestyle	Financial Security
	By Self	By Family					
<b>Esraa</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
<b>Gameela</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Heba</b>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Hend</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Laila</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Mariana</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Mayar</b>	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
<b>Radwa</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
<b>Salma</b>	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Sarah</b>	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No