

"My right? What right?" New Study Sheds Light on Women's Unpaid Work in Egypt



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Women in al-Awna village in the Egyptian province of Assiout. Photo: Aswat Masriya

By Omnia Talal

Illiterate, poor and concentrated in Egypt's south, or Upper Egypt, they mostly work at small projects or on agricultural land owned by their families: These are Egyptian women who carry out unpaid work and who constitute 46 percent of Egyptian women working for family-owned businesses, according to a study released in April.

Written by economic researcher Salwa Antari based on field research conducted by Nafissa Dessouky, the study, "Women's unpaid work in the market: Working for the family," shows that this figure has increased by 17 percentage points in the past 14 years.

Working for the family without pay constitutes the key form of women's work in the informal sector in Egypt, Antari wrote in the study.

"They had no choice but accept this work, as a result of the prevailing culture that rejects the concept of women leaving their homes for paid work," she added.

While women's unpaid work in family-owned land or businesses grew from 29 percent in 1998 to 46.4

percent in 2012, the already small percentage of men's unpaid work for the family decreased further, going down from 13.2 percent in 1998 to 7.4 percent in 2012.

THE EMPLOYER IS THE HUSBAND

The study, conducted by two Egyptian women researchers, shows that the phenomenon is primarily concentrated in Egypt's south: 62 percent of women who carry out unpaid work for family-owned land and businesses are based in Upper Egypt, while 35.4 percent are in the northern provinces of the so-called lower Egypt. Only 1.9 percent of women working without pay for the family are in the capital, Cairo, as well as Alexandria and the Canal region.

Most of the women who work in family-owned businesses without pay are married and in the majority of cases, the employer is their husband.

The majority of them are also illiterate, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural provinces. The higher the degree of education Egyptian women have, the less likely they are to work at family-owned land or businesses without pay, the study found.

The nature of this work is primarily agricultural: 83.7 percent of those unpaid women work in farming, according to the study.

“JUST ANOTHER WORKER”

A woman working on family-owned land without pay is treated as “just another worker,” not a partner in the business. Only 2.2 percent of those women are required to supervise other workers’ work in urban provinces, while 1.1 percent have a supervisory role in rural provinces.

Furthermore, they suffer harsher working conditions compared to paid workers. Most of them work at night, after 7 p.m., and their work does not provide them with medical insurance or any medical services, the study further revealed.

STILL A TABOO: WORKING OUTSIDE HOME

The study noted that women’s paid work outside their homes is still considered unacceptable in rural areas in Egypt, with the exception of prestigious jobs such as civil service jobs and working for big organizations. Otherwise, women either work without pay in family-owned businesses or do not work at all.

Some of the women surveyed for the study found questions about their rights, dreams and future strange. Their answers were along the lines of “My right? What right?” They would shift to addressing their children’s rights. Only a small segment of them mentioned their own right to education, housing or working away from family-owned land or businesses.