



The Arab Families Working Group

“The Financial Burdens of Marriage: Familial and Youth Strategies, Social Anxieties and Marriage Substitutes”

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Abstract

Combining ethnographic, political, and economic research, this paper focuses on how young people in the region negotiate the predicament of delayed marriage, unemployment, and marginalization. It also explores how they forge new rules, institutions, identities, and social imaginations as they confront “wait adulthood,” or the continued dependency of post-adolescent unmarried youth on their families and their deferred social participation due to late marriage.

While the paper discusses various issues raised by “wait adulthood” and delayed marriage throughout the Middle East, Egypt represents the main focus. A statistical analysis of the costs of marriage in Egypt using the 2006 Egyptian Labor Market Panel Survey attempts to bring back the economic to demography by considering some of the economic ramifications of delayed marriage. A detailed analysis of the contributions towards marriage among the bride, groom, and their families is presented as well as the relationship between education, region, employment and the costs of marriage. Finally, the paper argues that Egyptians invest substantially in marriage and these contributions typically absorb the earnings of grooms and their families over several years. Hopefully, this nationally aggregated data will convince policy makers to recognize the way in which marriage impacts a wide variety of financial strategies. The “marriage” imperative should be routinely integrated into the logic of social and economic policy-making in Egypt and throughout the region.

As with any commodity whose demand is inelastic, the high costs of marriage have also led to the rise of controversial marriage substitutes in the region, including *`urfi* marriage, *misyar*

marriage, *misyaf* marriage, and *mut`a* marriage. While young people and their families are negotiating complex and changing terrains of sexuality, authority and normative behavior, the realities of their lives are often superficially or paternalistically addressed by public, scholarly, and religious authorities. Opposition Islamic movements may have gained supporters by focusing on issues of morality and modesty but they often have failed to address seriously the economic problems of youth. In addition to raising questions about political legitimacy and national unity, the failure of the state to facilitate the transition from education to work to marriage increases the private economic burdens on families while at the same time doing little to ease the ambivalent feelings of post-adolescent unmarried youth.