



Women's Age at First Marriage and Long-Term Economic Empowerment in Egypt



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SUMMARY

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 calls on nations to promote gender equality and to empower women and girls. SDG5 also recognizes the value of women's economic empowerment, entailing equal rights to economic resources and full participation at all levels in economic decisions. Also according to SDG5, eliminating harmful practices—such as child marriage before age 18—is a prerequisite for women's economic empowerment. Using national data for 4,129 married women 15–43 years who took part in the *Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey* (ELMPS 1998–2012), we performed autoregressive, cross-lagged panel analyses to assess whether women's first marriage in adulthood (at 18 years or older, as reported in 2006), was positively associated with their long-term post-marital economic empowerment, measured as their engagement in market work and latent family economic agency in 2012. Women's first marriage in adulthood had positive unadjusted associations with their market work and family economic agency in 2012. These associations persisted after accounting for market work and family economic agency in 2006, pre-marital resources for empowerment, and cumulative fertility. Policies to discourage child marriage may show promise to enhance women's long-term post-marital economic empowerment.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal Five (SDG5) calls on nations to achieve gender equality and to empower women and girls (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). In the social sciences, *women's empowerment* has been defined as the acquisition of *enabling resources* to exercise *agency*, or the ability to make strategic life choices where these choices historically have been limited (Kabeer, 1999). SDG5 recognizes the value of women's *economic empowerment*, entailing “equal rights to economic resources” (Target 5.A) as well as “full and effective participation... at all levels of decision-making in... economic... life” (Target 5.5). The Middle East, compared to other world regions, is notable for women's poor access to market work and low agency in major economic decisions, which are attributed to restrictive gender roles and social expectations for women to prioritize domestic work after marriage (Assaad, Krafft, & Selwaness, 2017).

Embedded in SDG5 also is the notion that eliminating harmful practices in childhood is a prerequisite for women's economic empowerment. *Child marriage*—a formal or customary union before age 18 (Jain & Kurz, 2007)—is one harmful practice identified in

SDG5 (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Although the prevalence of child marriage had declined globally, the practice still affects more than 700 million women worldwide (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). In the Middle East and North Africa, an average of one in five women 20–24 years was married before the age of 18, and this prevalence varies between 8% and 32% among countries in the region (ICF International, 2015).

Child marriage may curtail a girl's long-term economic empowerment by disrupting her acquisition of pre-marital enabling resources (United Nations Children's Fund, 2014). Foregone resources may include, for example, lost knowledge and skills from leaving school prematurely (Field & Ambrus, 2008), lost earnings from never entering or from leaving the labor market for marriage (Dahl, 2005), or limited role models and social networks outside the family. Child marriage also may operate by curtailing a girl's emotional and cognitive readiness to negotiate on her own behalf (Dixon-Mueller, 2008), including in family economic decisions and in market work after marriage.

Despite the links implicit in SDG5 between child marriage and women's low economic empowerment, researchers have not tested this relationship prospectively. To advance the field, we

leveraged data on women's age at first marriage and economic empowerment from the *Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey* (ELMPS 1998, 2006, 2012), a 14-year panel study of a nationally representative sample of households in Egypt (Assaad & Roushdy, 2013). The sample for this analysis included 4,129 women ages 15–43 years who were married in 2006 and were still married in 2012. Robust, comparable measures for women's economic empowerment were available across the two waves, including repeated measures for their (1) engagement in *market work* and what we define as (2) *family economic agency* (Crandall, Cheong, & Yount, nd). *Market work* captured formal, waged work as well as part-time, intermittent, home-based, seasonal, and temporary work for some return. *Family economic agency* captured women's influence in family economic decisions, especially in domains historically reserved for men. Until the ELMPS, these aspects of women's economic empowerment were poorly measured in Egypt (Anker & Anker, 1989; Fargues, 2005; Langsten & Salem, 2008). This analysis, thus, offers new insights into whether postponing first marriage until adulthood may improve a woman's long-term post-marital economic empowerment in a Middle Eastern setting, where men predominate in most sectors of the labor market and remain the titular heads of household (Yount, 2005a, 2005b; Yount, Dijkerman, Zureick-Brown, & VanderEnde, 2014). Compared to women who first married in childhood, we expect that women who first married in adulthood (at 18 years or older), will have higher post-marital economic empowerment in 2012, accounting for their pre-marital enabling resources for empowerment, short-term post-marital economic empowerment in 2006, and correlated non-empowerment changes in women's cumulative fertility.

2. Background

(a). Conceptualizing women's economic empowerment

Women's economic empowerment refers to the process by which a woman's life changes from one in which she has few economic resources and limited economic agency to one in which enhanced resources and economic agency enable her to transform her life (Crandall et al., nd; Kabeer, 1999, 2008; Taylor & Perezniето, 2014). One necessary (but insufficient) condition for this process includes a woman's acquisition of *human resources*, such as schooling, knowledge, and personal capabilities, including a sense of entitlement, self-esteem, and confidence in her own capacity to transform her life (Kabeer, 1998; Taylor & Perezniето, 2014). Another condition includes a woman's access to and control over *economic resources*, such as market work and earnings, as well as financial and physical assets (Kabeer, 2008; Taylor & Perezniето, 2014). A third condition includes the enhancement of a woman's extra-familial *social resources*, including her ability to organize with non-family members to enhance her economic activity and rights (Kabeer, 2011; Kabeer & Huq, 2010). From a life-course perspective, a woman's premarital accumulation of these enabling resources may enhance her post-marital potential to engage in the local economy and to influence family economic decisions, especially in domains once reserved for men (Taylor & Perezniето, 2014; Yount, VanderEnde, Dodell, & Cheong, 2016).

(b). Levels of and trends in women's economic empowerment in Egypt

Describing levels of and trends in the economic empowerment of Egyptian—and Arab—women is challenged by inconsistencies in its identified dimensions (Hijab, 1988) and measurement (Anker, 1983; Anker & Anker, 1989; Langsten & Salem, 2008; Papps, 1992). Here, we focus on two dimensions of a woman's economic empowerment, (1) her *participation in market work* and (2)

her *family¹ economic agency*. By *market work*, we mean any participation, during a specific period of time, in paid employment or activities in a family business or enterprise, including work on a farm, that sells some or all of its products (Anker, 1983). By *family economic agency*, we mean the degree to which a woman has a say in family decisions involving a financial transaction, especially decisions normally reserved for men (Crandall et al., nd).

In both respects, women's economic empowerment in Egypt has appeared low (Anker & Anker, 1989; Fargues, 2005; Moghaddam, 1995). Women's low engagement in market work partly has resulted from poor measurement. The Egypt census and national Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), for example, have used single-keyword questions about *work for cash or kind in the prior week* (Anker, 1983; Anker & Anker, 1989). According to the Egypt census, rates of participation for women six years or older were very low in 1976 (5.5%) and only slightly higher in 1986 (8.9%) (Anker & Anker, 1989). Likewise, estimates from the Egypt DHS have suggested low participation in 1988 (12.7%) and only modestly higher participation in 2003 (21.9%) among ever-married women 15–49 years (El-Zanaty & Way, 2009).

Yet, single-keyword questions about market work have not captured the full range of women's engagement, including in home-based, intermittent, part-time, or temporary market work (Anker & Anker, 1989; Donahoe, 1999; Langsten & Salem, 2008). Efforts to capture women's market work more fully have involved the use of probes to ask about specific activities that local women commonly perform to generate income (Anker, 1983; Anker & Anker, 1989; Langsten & Salem, 2008; Yount, Zureick-Brown, & Salem, 2014). Among ever-married women 15–49 years in 2003–4 in Egypt, estimates of market work based on an activities list were more than three times higher than those based on a single-keyword question (64.5% versus 21.0%) (Langsten & Salem, 2008). Thus, changes over time in definitions and measurement have complicated our understanding of levels and trends in women's market work in Egypt.

Estimating levels of and trends in women's family economic agency also has been challenged, because comparable items have not (until recently) been asked in repeated cross-sectional or longitudinal surveys. In parts of Egypt, few ever-married women 15–54 years have reported having the final say alone (8.9%) or with others (11.0%) in decisions about the family budget (Yount, 2005b). The ELMPS included in 2006 and 2012 identical measures for women's influence in a range of family economic decisions (Assaad & Roushdy, 2013), offering greater construct validity over time.

(c). Trends in age at first marriage and marital practices in Egypt

Women's age at first marriage has been on the rise for decades in Egypt; however, child marriage remains a common practice. During 1947–1998, the percentage of women who were never married rose from 59% to 89% among those 15–19 years, and from 20% to 56% among those 20–24 years (Coale, 1988; Rashad & Osman, 2003; U.S. Census Bureau, 2004; United Nations, 1958). Consequently, the median age at first marriage also has risen, from 18.2 years in 1988 to 20.4 in 2008 among women 35–39 years (El-Zanaty & Way, 2009), and was 21.2 years among women 25–29 years in 2008 (El-Zanaty & Way, 2009). Despite these increases, 16.6% of women 20–24 years were first married as children in 2008 (El-Zanaty & Way, 2009).

Continuity in other marital practices in Egypt reflects gender norms that challenge women's economic empowerment. First,

¹ The Arabic word used in the root for the decision-making questions changed during 2006–12. In 2006, *beit* (house) was used and in 2012, *usra* (household) was used.

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