



Women's age at first marriage and postmarital agency in Egypt



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ABSTRACT

Early – or *child* – marriage (before age 18) may diminish women's ability to exercise agency, or their capacity to act upon their goals. Using a propensity score adjustment approach, we analyzed data from 2394 married women ages 35–49 years who participated in the 2006 Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS). We examined whether women's first marriage at age 18 or older was associated with their post-marital agency, measured in terms of their influence in family decisions, freedom of movement in public spaces, and unfavorable views about intimate partner violence against wives. In bivariate analyses, women's age at first marriage was positively associated with their decision-making and more equitable gender attitudes. However, once we controlled for selection into age-at-first-marriage groups, there were no significant differences between the two age-at-first-marriage groups in any dimension of women's agency. We examined the sensitivity of the non-significant age-at-first-marriage effects to possible violations of the strong ignorability assumption and the results did not alter our conclusions. The assumption that women's age at first marriage is a proxy for their post-marital agency, as defined here, warrants further study.

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Over the past few decades, women's empowerment has been an increasing focus of research, policies, and programs, particularly in lower-income countries. A key dimension of women's empowerment is their agency, or capacity to define and act upon personal goals (Kabeer, 1999). Women's agency, itself a worthy goal, also may benefit the whole family and improve economic conditions of whole societies (Gill et al., 2007). For example, women's so-called autonomy¹ (Carlson et al., 2014) and economic agency (Duflo, 2003) have been associated with improved child nutritional status. *Early* or *child* marriage, defined as marriage before age 18 years (Jensen and Thornton, 2003), may deny women the opportunity to exercise agency (Moghadam, 2003) and is recognized broadly as a human rights violation with important implications for women's health

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¹ The term *women's autonomy* sometimes is used interchangeably with *women's agency* and generally incorporates measures of decision-making and freedom to go places without permission from others. We operationalized agency using these measures as well as attitudes towards partner violence.

(Jensen and Thornton, 2003). By contrast, a later age at first marriage is considered an important precondition for women's post-marital agency (Lee-Rife, 2010), though the empirical association has not been widely studied. In Egypt and other Arab countries, a woman's age at first marriage has been associated with her market work (Assaad and El Hamidi, 2001; Spierings et al., 2010) and more equitable attitudes about gender (Al-Nsour et al., 2009).

Measurement and estimation strategies have limited the inferences that can be drawn from prior studies on the association between the age at which a woman first marries and her post-marital agency. First, existing evidence usually focuses on only one or two aspects of women's agency, thereby limiting the construct's content validity (Al-Nsour et al., 2009; Balk, 1997; Heaton et al., 2005; Niraula and Morgan, 1996). Second, isolating the effect of women's later age at first marriage is difficult because women's decisions about schooling, work, and family formation often are undertaken jointly (Johnstone et al., 2011). To our knowledge, research on a woman's age at first marriage and her post-marital agency has not sought to account for the premarital differences between women who first marry at younger ages versus women who marry at age 18 years or older, raising unanswered questions about the influence of women's later age at first marriage on their post-marital agency. These limitations highlight the need for improved measures of women's agency and statistical approaches that attempt to reduce overt bias in this relationship. Here, we address these limitations by drawing on multiple dimensions of women's post-marital agency, and by using a propensity score adjustment approach to reduce overt biases that may arise from observed premarital differences between women who first marry at older ages (≥ 18 years) and younger ages (< 18 years).

We chose Egypt as the setting for this analysis because Egypt is the most populous country in the Middle East, an area of the world known for historically gender inequitable attitudes, limitations on women's participation in the public sphere, and at least historically a young age at first marriage for women (Drolet, 2011; Henry, 2011; Mensch et al., 2003). Also, Egypt has considerable cultural and political influence in North Africa and the Middle East (Cooper et al., 2007). The majority of the population ($> 90\%$) identifies as Muslim, and 9% identifies as Coptic Christians (Pew Forum, 2009). In this analysis, we studied women who were born at a critical time in Egypt's history: shortly after Egypt was freed from foreign military control and became a republic (our sample consisted of women born from 1957 to 1971). Economic, education, and health policies enacted when these women were born, being reared, and first marrying provided greater access to schooling (Osman, 2010), family planning (El-Zanaty et al., 1996), and upward social mobility (Osman, 2010) than had previously existed in Egypt. These trends may have influenced when these women first married and their post-marital agency. Because of Egypt's influence on other countries in the patriarchal belt—a part of the world that encompasses North Africa, the Arab Middle East, and South and East Asia and that is often characterized by restrictions on women's agency and men's social preeminence in the family (Moghadam 2003)—the results of this study can be applied to other emerging economies similarly seeing increases in economic, education, and social policies amidst continued challenges in gender equity.

1. Background

Women's empowerment is the process through which they obtain *enabling resources*, including those that are *human* (e.g., school attainment), *economic* (e.g., income or other assets), and *social* (e.g., membership in extra-familial networks; Kabeer, 1999, 2001, 2011). These resources enhance women's agency, such as their ability to make decisions that will enhance their personal well-being and that of their family. We conceive of women's agency as their *observable actions* and *ideational transformation* (Kabeer, 1999; Salem et al., 2015; Yount et al., 2015). Women's observable actions include their influence in family decisions and freedom of movement in public spaces. Women's ideational transformation refers to their vocalization of views favoring gender equity and women's rights vis-à-vis men (Yount et al., 2015).

In this study, we measure women's post-marital agency in terms of their influence in family decisions, freedom of movement in public spaces, and expression of more equitable attitudes about gender. By influence in family decisions, we mean the extent of women's say (none, joint, or sole) in family decisions that involve some kind of monetary transaction or decisions on children's healthcare and schooling. By women's freedom of movement, we mean their ability to go to places, such as the market or the health center (unable to go alone, able to go with permission, or able to go without permission). By women's more equitable gender attitudes, we mean women's reporting unfavorable views about intimate partner violence (IPV) against wives.

Gender inequity in Egypt. Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge in Egypt. In 2011, the United Nations ranked Egypt 125 out of 134 countries in its gender gap index (UNICEF, 2011). In 1981, Egypt ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but with reservations to the article relating to equality in marriage and family life (United Nations, 2015). In a family court, a woman's testimony is still worth half of a man's testimony (UNICEF, 2011). Honor killings continue to occur, and the penal code allows for lenient sentences (U.S. Department of State, (2013)). Rape is considered a crime, but marital rape is not; there is no law that prohibits domestic violence (U.S. Department of State, (2013)). Child marriage remains prevalent, especially among the poorest 20%, in which over a third of women are married before age 18 (El-Zanaty and Way, 2009).

Given these inequities, Egyptian women themselves place importance on their own agency. For example, in a study of 16–19 year-old unmarried young men and women in Egypt, the overwhelming majority of young women (more so than young men) felt that they should be involved in decisions regarding the household budget, the schooling of sons and daughters, child-bearing, and family healthcare (Mensch et al., 2003). These results reflect the importance that women, especially in younger generations, place on having a say about decisions that affect their family (Mensch et al., 2003). Qualitative research among women who were recent microcredit recipients showed that these women had newfound freedom to leave their homes unaccompanied, affording them greater latitude to pursue their own needs (Drolet, 2011; Salem et al., 2015; Yount et al., 2015).

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