

Gendered Work Norms in Egypt

Evidence on Preferences and Social Perceptions

James Allen IV, Daniel O. Gilligan, Sikandra Kurdi, Nada Shokry and Basma Yassa

Overview

We examine the nature and scope of gendered work norms in Egypt using new experimental evidence from a household survey. Societal norms around work, care responsibilities and the types of jobs women and men can hold can have a profound effect on gender differences in employment, earnings and life satisfaction. Indeed, while lack of childcare and secure transportation remain widely cited constraints to women's employment in low-income settings, descriptive and experimental evidence also suggest that deeply rooted social norms about gender roles play a prominent role in driving the persistence of such barriers and in how households evaluate women's work. Norms emphasizing men as primary breadwinners and women as primary caregivers shape both economic decisions and perceptions of behavior in ways that may limit women's labor force participation even when opportunities exist.

We implement three survey-based experiments among economically disadvantaged households to elucidate these norms and measure their salience. A wage-comparison choice experiment shows that households strongly prefer that men—not women—take on additional paid work, even when this preference entails substantial forgone income for the household. When offered identical wages for equal hours of work, only 12.4 percent of respondents select the wife to take it as a first part-time job versus the husband taking it as a second part-time job. Even when her wage is double that of her husband, a clear majority still prefer that the husband works instead. These results indicate a large implicit cost that households place on women working outside the household.

Two randomized vignette experiments further demonstrate that identical actions are interpreted differently depending on whether they are performed by men or women. Men who take on a second job to support their financially struggling household are widely viewed as more competent and more moral, whereas perceptions of women making the same choice are far more divided. Perceptions of workplace effort are broadly similar across genders, with small differences appearing only in perceptions of morality. Together, these findings emphasize the strength of gendered work norms in Egypt and reveal nuance in how they shape behavior. The findings also underscore the relevance of gender norms for designing programs affecting household work decisions and testing new approaches to promote women's economic inclusion.

1. Introduction

Understanding the social norms shaping women’s labor force participation is central to designing effective programs aimed at improving household welfare and economic development. In many settings, norms influence can not only whether women work outside the home, but also how households evaluate the trade-offs between employment of different household members. Indeed, the feminist economist Naila Kabeer observed that the gendered rules, norms, and customs within which everyday life is conducted influence “the choices that are conceived to be within the realms of possibility” (Kabeer 1999). These norms—often deeply embedded in social expectations around gender, household responsibilities, and moral behavior—can create barriers to women’s economic engagement that persist even when other barriers are reduced.

This project note examines how such gendered work norms operate within poor Egyptian households, using new experimental evidence to elucidate preferences and social perceptions related to work decisions and measure their salience. The data come from household surveys implemented during an impact evaluation of Egypt’s Forsa economic inclusion program, which aimed to engage beneficiaries in wage employment or small-scale productive enterprises. In prior work, we found that women were more likely to show interest in the economic inclusion program, despite 86% identifying “being a housewife” as the main barrier to taking work (Gilligan et al. 2022). We also found that the vast majority of households preferred the program modality offering a large one-time asset transfer to enable self-employment over a modality offering job matching and training for private sector employment (Allen IV, et al. 2023). That women were more likely to show interest in the economic inclusion program is consistent with other evidence from Egypt (Assad et al. 2024), and we hypothesize this is because households seek ways for women to earn income while remaining inside the household. Thus, social norms around women’s work are an important consideration when designing an effective economic inclusion program.

A growing body of economics research highlights how social norms can constrain women’s employment. A prominent example is Bursztyn et al. (2020), who show that men in Saudi Arabia substantially underestimate other men’s support for women working outside the home; correcting these misperceptions leads to meaningful increases in job search assistance and women’s actual labor market activity. Complementing this, Jayachandran (2021) reviews evidence showing that differences in gender norms explain wide cross-country variation in female labor supply at similar income levels and demonstrates that both “workaround” interventions (e.g., transport services that circumvent safety concerns) and norm-changing interventions can increase women’s employment. Studies in South Asia further document how improving women’s control over earnings (Field et al. 2021), easing mobility constraints (Field & Vyborny 2022), or providing information on community support for working women (Cameron et al. 2024; Bellani et al. 2023) can shift both behavior and perceptions of gender roles. Collectively, this literature illustrates that gender norms are both pervasive and adaptable, and that interventions can influence expectations about appropriate gender roles in ways that translate into economic action.

While the economics literature emphasizes the importance of restrictive norms around women working outside the household, descriptive evidence for Egypt from several sources paints a more complex picture. Arab Barometer data (2022) show that only a small share of respondents—about 3 percent—identify lack of social acceptability as the most challenging barrier to women’s employment, while far more cite structural constraints such as lack of childcare. At the same time, 18 percent note that “men are given priority,” though the majority of both men and women agree that men should have final say in household decisions. In Zeitoun et al. (2023), 13 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that “household income is the responsibility of the man only” while around 75 percent of respondents

reported that they believe women primarily work out of financial necessity, suggesting limited perceived value of women’s employment beyond contributing to household welfare. Additionally, a recent analysis of 24-hour time use data from Egyptian households found that more egalitarian gender norms did not necessarily translate into a lower gender gap in the actual time spent on unpaid care work (Atallah and Hesham 2024). Further, increasing childcare access alone has been shown to be insufficient to increase women’s labor force participation in Egypt (Caria et. al. 2025).

Rather than pointing to a single social norm, these patterns suggest the coexistence of multiple, overlapping expectations: norms about men’s responsibility for earning income, norms governing intra-household authority, and norms that shape how household labor and caregiving are valued. This interpretation resonates with cultural accounts (Zayan, 2013) emphasizing the substantial and socially valued role women play in managing household production and childcare—activities that are time-intensive and compete directly with paid work. Together, these sources highlight that the constraints shaping women’s economic choices in Egypt may not stem solely from a norm against women working outside the home, but from a broader set of expectations about gendered responsibilities within the household and society. These complexities motivate the need for empirical approaches that more precisely disentangle how different norms interact to influence household decisions about work.

This project note contributes to this literature by using experimental survey questions fielded as part of the Forsa study household survey to quantify the economic value households implicitly place on upholding gendered work norms. Through a series of hypothetical but incentive-relevant scenarios, respondents evaluated trade-offs between men and women taking additional work, revealing how strongly households prefer that men assume the breadwinning role even when this entails a substantial economic loss. We also experimentally varied the gender of hypothetical workers to examine how identical behaviors are socially perceived depending on whether they are performed by men or women. The findings show that respondents are willing to forgo large amounts of income to maintain the norm that men, rather than women, should take on outside work, and that identical work decisions are evaluated very differently depending on gender. These insights help illuminate some reasons why women’s labor force participation in Egypt remains low even among households expressing interest in economic programs. By identifying the implicit costs households assign to norm violations, the results shed light on how programs may work differently for men and women—and why economic inclusion initiatives that allow women to earn income from *within* the household, such as through small livestock assets, may be more norm-congruent and thus more readily adopted.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data Collection

The data for this study come from household surveys conducted as part of an impact evaluation of a pilot of Egypt’s Forsa economic inclusion program. The goal of the program was to “graduate” beneficiaries of the existing government-run cash transfer program to economic self-reliance by enabling them to engage in wage employment or small-scale productive enterprises through Forsa. The Forsa program began in 2023. This survey, implemented from October 22 to November 14, 2023, included modules updating household characteristics, assessing awareness of and participation in the economic inclusion program, and modules on gendered work norms, which are the focus on this study.

The survey covers 323 sub-villages across eight governorates. The study population included households eligible to participate for the Forsa, who were more economically disadvantaged than the average

Egyptian household. In each sub-village, 24 households were randomly sampled, yielding a total baseline sample of 7,754 households. Of baseline households, 97.3 percent were successfully reinterviewed, minimizing concerns about attrition bias, and replacement households were found for those that were missing. The present analysis has a sample of 7,755 households. Sample households have an average size of 5.5 members, 68 percent report employment for the household head, and 56 percent were recipients of the existing cash transfer program.

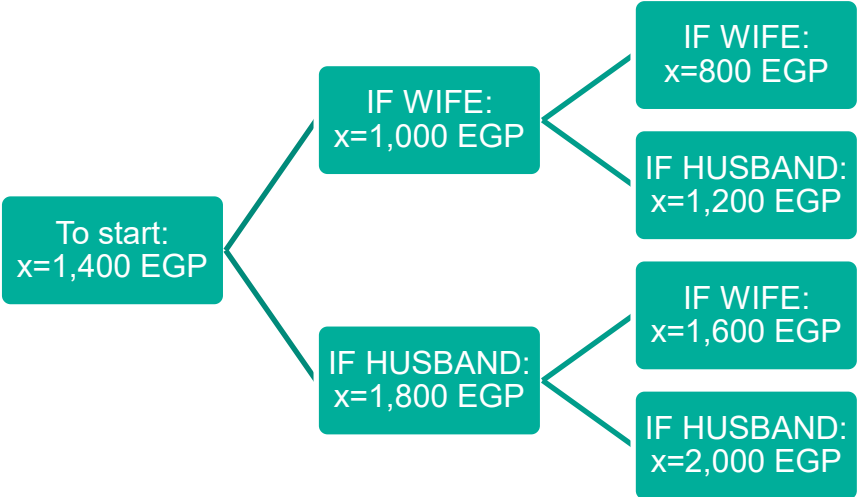
2.2 Survey Questions

We designed three experiments to elicit preferences and social perceptions on gendered work norms.

Experiment 1: Valuing the Social Norm Through a Choice Experiment

Respondents were presented with a stylized household scenario in which either the husband or the wife could take a 4-hour/day job. The husband’s wage offer was fixed at 1,000 EGP per month, while the wife’s wage varied from 800 to 2,000 EGP. Using a branching decision tree—shown in Figure 1—respondents answered up to three questions to identify the wage at which they would switch from preferring the husband to take a second job to preferring the wife to take a first job. If the respondent reported that the wife should take the job for a given wife’s wage, then we would ask who should take the job at a *lower* wife’s wage. Conversely, if the respondent reported that the husband should take the job for a given wife’s wage, then we would ask who should take the job at a *higher* wife’s wage. This structure enabled efficient elicitation of willingness to accept away from the prevailing norm.

Figure 1: Experiment 1 decision tree to cover range from 800 to 2,000 EGP in three questions



The exact wording of the questions was as follows:

- Setup: “Imagine a household with a husband, a wife and two young children. The husband works full-time job while the wife stays at home, but he is not earning enough money to support his family. So, in addition to his full-time job, the husband looks for a second job for 4 hours/day and finds one that offers to pay 1,000 EGP monthly.”
- First question: “Now suppose his wife looks too and finds a 4 hour/day job that offers to pay 1,400 EGP monthly. Only one person can take the job because the other person has to stay home. If this was your household, who would take the job? (1=husband takes the second job for 1,000 EGP monthly, 2=wife takes the job for 1,400 EGP months)”

- Subsequent questions: “Now suppose the wife was offered [insert “x”] EGP monthly for the 4 hour/day job. If this was your household, who would take the job? (1=husband takes the second job for 1,000 EGP monthly, 2=wife takes the job for [insert “x”] EGP months)”

In cleaning the data, we assume that if a respondent states that the wife should take the job for a given wife’s wage, then the respondent would also select that the wife should take the job for a higher wife’s wage, and vice versa. For example, if a respondent says that the wife should *not* take the job for 1,000 EGP but should take the job for 1,200 EGP, then we assume that the respondent would select that the wife should also *not* take the job for 800 EGP but should take the job for all higher wage amounts.

Experiments 2 & 3: Randomization of Gender in Question Subjects

For Experiments 2 and 3, the gender of hypothetical subjects was randomized at the respondent level. Names used in the scenarios were common Egyptian male (Omar/Karim; Atef/Youssef) or female (Mariam/Doha; Heba/Farah) names. Randomization was stratified at the village level to ensure balance across geographic areas. This between-subjects design enables causal inference on how identical behaviors are socially evaluated when attributed to men versus women. We compare responses to these questions by the subjects’ gender using a two-sample two-sided t-test.

Experiment 2: Social Perceptions of Taking a Second Job

Respondents evaluated two hypothetical individuals who differ only in whether they take a second part-time job or stay home. Respondents indicated who they perceived as more competent, more moral, and whose spouse they perceived as more moral. Gender of subjects was randomized. The exact wording of the hypothetical vignette and questions are as follows:

“Suppose that [Subject 1] and [Subject 2] work the same full-time job and earn the same amount of income. They also both have a spouse and three young children and feel that they do not earn enough income to support their households.

Now suppose both are offered the same second part-time job at a lower wage that they can work in addition to their full-time job. [Subject 1] decides to take the second job to earn more income for the household, while [Subject 2] decides to NOT to take the second job to spend more time with the household.

- Between [Subject 1] or [Subject 2], who would you say is more competent?
- Between [Subject 1] or [Subject 2], who would you say is more moral?
- Between [Subject 1]’s spouse or [Subject 2]’s spouse, who would you say is more moral?”

If randomly selected to be men, subjects were named Omar and Karim, respectively. If randomly selected to be women, subjects were named Mariam and Doha, respectively.

Experiment 3: Social Perceptions of Workplace Effort

Respondents compared two workers who complete the same task at the same speed but differ in the effort required: one finds the task easy, the other finds it difficult. Respondents evaluated competence, morality, and preferred cooperation partner. Gender of subjects was again randomized. The exact wording of the hypothetical vignette and questions are as follows:

“[Subject 1] works stocking shelves at a store. [Subject 1] is able to stock one shelf every 5 minutes. For [Subject 1], the job requires minimal effort - while he works as quickly as possible, it is easy work.

[Subject 2] stocks shelves at the same store. [Subject 2] is also able to stock one shelf every 5 minutes. For [Subject 2], the job requires a lot of effort - while he works as quickly as possible, it is hard work.

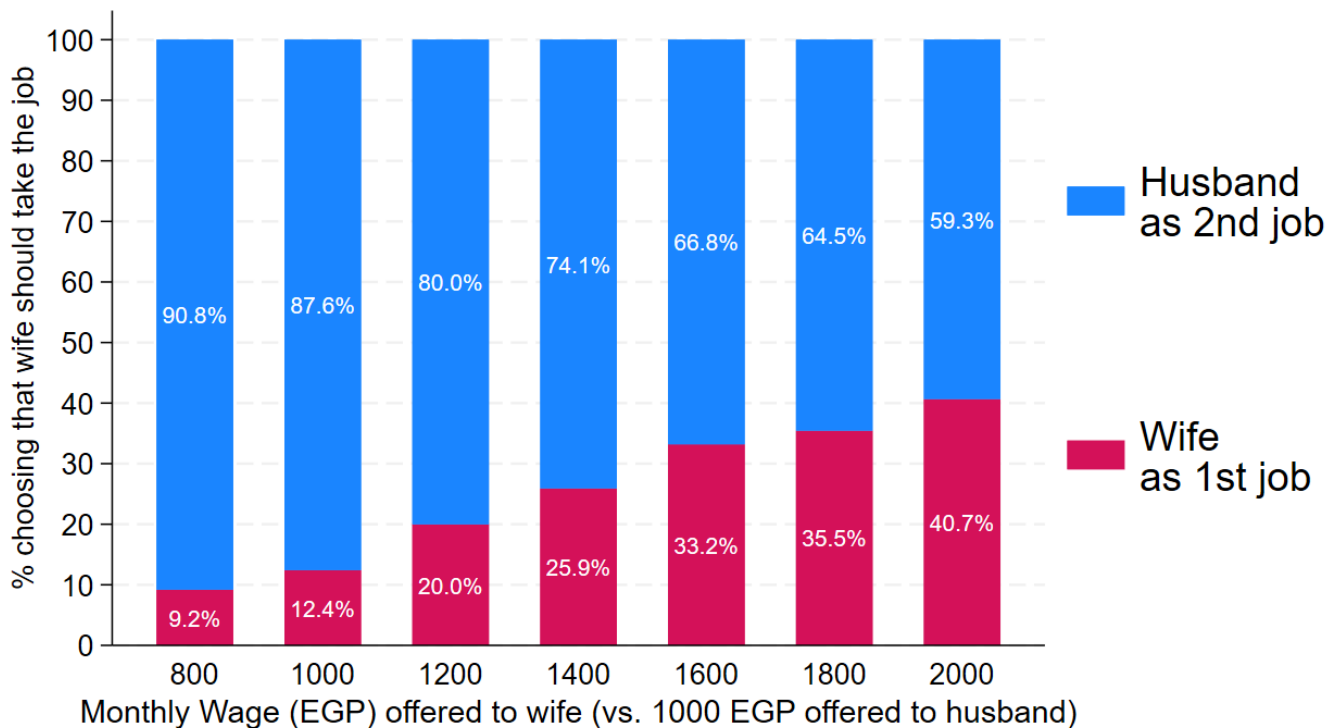
- Between [Subject 1] or [Subject 2], who would you say is more competent?
- Between [Subject 1] or [Subject 2], who would you say is more moral?
- Between [Subject 1] or [Subject 2], who would you rather choose to work with you as a cooperation partner on some work that you had to do?”

If randomly selected to be men, subjects were named Atef and Youssef, respectively. If randomly selected to be women, subjects were named Heba and Farah, respectively.

3. Findings

The study’s results reveal that Egyptian households place significant value on upholding a gendered work norm in which men are expected to be primary earners, even when doing so imposes clear economic costs. Figure 2 summarizes responses to the wage-comparison choice experiment, which elicits how much more a woman would need to earn than a man for respondents to prefer that she take a first part-time job rather than her husband take a part-time second job for 1,000 EGP per month.

Figure 2: Who should take the part-time job in a struggling household?



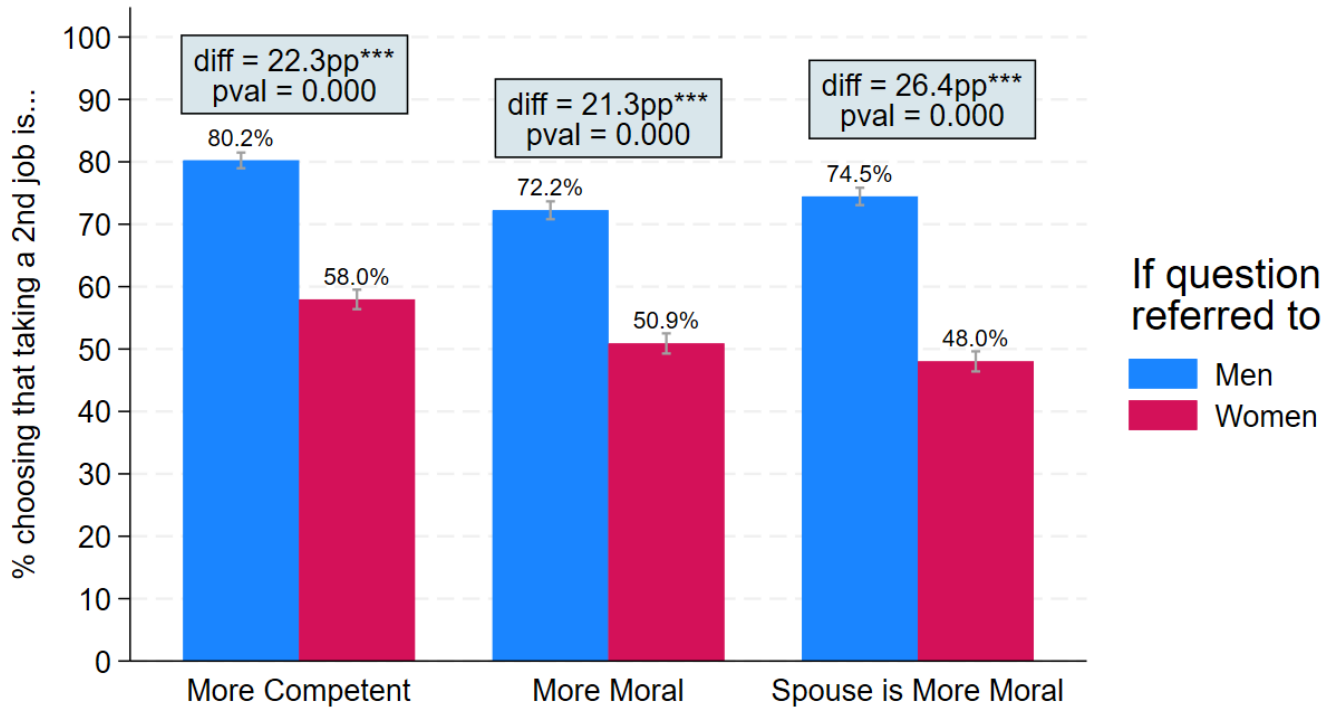
Source: Data come from a choice experiment described in Experiment 1.

Two results stand out. First, if the wife and husband are both offered 1,000 EGP, only 12.4 percent of households believe the wife should take the job. In other words, the default preference overwhelmingly favors men taking on additional paid work, consistent with a strong norm that prefers men supporting the household financially and against women working outside the household. Second, even when the

wife’s wage increases to 2,000 EGP—double the husband’s wage—nearly 60 percent of households still choose the husband to take the job. This willingness to forgo substantial income indicates that preserving the male breadwinner role may carry a high implicit value.

However, the share of respondents preferring that the wife takes the job increases as the offered wage rises, suggesting that sufficiently high wages can partially shift the underlying social norm. The increasing willingness of households to accept the wife taking a second job as the pay increases may reflect that sufficiently high wages overcome the social norm. Alternatively, the higher female wages may serve as a signal about the working conditions being more acceptable for women.

Figure 3: Views on taking a second part-time job vs. staying home by workers’ gender



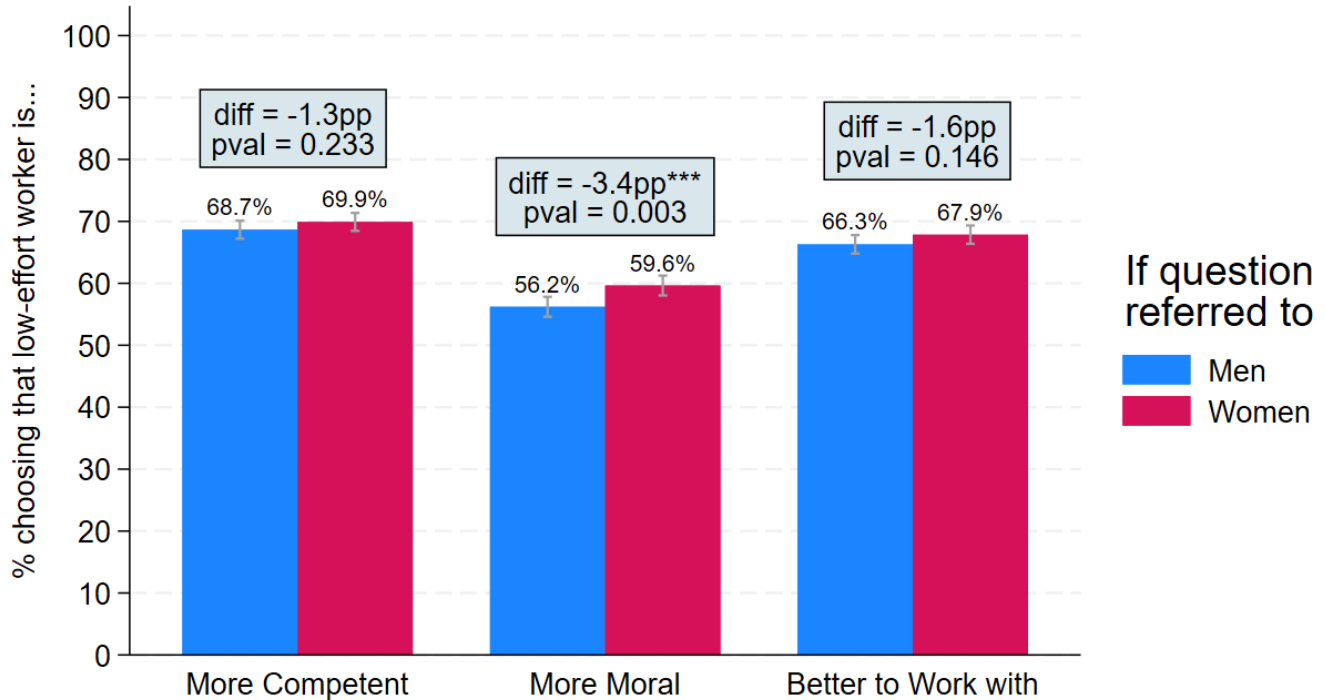
Source: Data come from a hypothetical vignette described in Question 2 in which subjects’ names were randomly male or female. Reported differences and two-sided p-values come from a two-sample t-test comparing responses by subjects’ gender. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05. * p<0.1.

Figure 3 shows results from the vignette experiment comparing social perceptions of individuals who choose to take a second job versus stay home. Because the gender of hypothetical subjects was randomly assigned, differences in responses can be interpreted causally. Men who take the second job are consistently viewed as more competent, more moral, and as having a more moral spouse—over 70 percent in each case. When the same scenario is framed with women’s names, perceptions are roughly evenly divided. Thus, men taking a second job is viewed as a positive signal for the men and for their wives but a much more ambiguous one for women. The figure also shows that the differences in these perceptions between genders are both large in magnitude and statistically significant according to an unpaired two-sample t-test.

Figure 4 uses another vignette experiment to examine social perceptions of workplace effort. Respondents compare a low-effort worker and a high-effort worker who perform identically. Perceived competence and partner preference generally favor the low-effort worker for both genders. Moral judgments are more evenly divided, with only one statistically significant gender difference: low-effort women are

viewed as slightly more moral relative to high-effort women than low-effort men are relative to high-effort men (by roughly 3.5 percentage points). While modest, this pattern suggests that to a greater degree than male work, women’s work is seen as more morally acceptable if it does not cause her hardship, though this finding may be open to other interpretations.

Figure 4: Views on equally productive low-effort vs. high-effort work by workers’ gender



Source: Data come from a hypothetical vignette described in Question 2 in which subjects’ names were randomly male or female. Reported differences and two-sided p-values come from a two-sample t-test comparing responses by subjects’ gender. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05. * p<0.1.

Taken together, the results quantify key dimensions of gendered work norms in Egypt: a strong preference for men as earners, gender-differentiated moral and competence assessments of identical work decisions, and hints that women’s work-related effort may be subject to more reputational scrutiny relative men’s work-related effort.

4. Discussion and Policy Implications

The findings from this exploratory study provide new insight into how gendered work norms shape economic decision-making among economically disadvantaged Egyptian households and highlight the salience of social preferences underlying these choices. Rather than revealing a norm that simply discourages women from working outside the household, the results suggest that two related norms operate jointly: a norm against women working outside the home and a norm favoring men as the household’s primary income earner. These norms appear tightly coupled—two sides of the same coin—and jointly influence how households evaluate work decisions, even when significant income gains are at stake. The willingness of respondents to forgo large sums of income in order to preserve the male breadwinner role underscores the strength of these norms and helps explain why structural programs alone may have limited reach without accounting for these underlying social expectations.

The experimental results further indicate that behaviors around seeking employment are interpreted differently depending on the gender of the actor. When men take on additional employment, they are

widely viewed as more competent, more moral, and as reflecting positively on their spouses. Yet when women undertake the same actions, perceptions are far more ambivalent. These asymmetries suggest that women face not only opportunity costs related to household responsibilities but also reputational risks associated with norm deviations. Moreover, the finding that women exhibiting low effort are perceived as more moral than low-effort men—even by a small margin—hints that women’s workload may be viewed through a moral lens more often than men’s, an insight with implications for understanding workplace dynamics and employer expectations.

These findings have several implications for livelihoods interventions and economic inclusion programs aiming to spur economic development through targeting women with income-generating opportunities. First, they suggest that interventions encouraging women to enter wage employment may face substantial normative barriers, regardless of household economic needs. Second, they highlight why the vast majority of Forsa-eligible households selected women, rather than men, as the intended program beneficiary: the program provides small livestock assets that enable income generation from within the household. In doing so, Forsa offers a norm-congruent pathway for women to contribute economically without violating expectations around women’s mobility or men’s breadwinner roles. These insights are important to keep in mind as the Egyptian government contemplates new messaging and designs for Forsa and its other social protection programs (Allen IV, et al. 2024).

More broadly, the results motivate future research on whether such programs can either adapt to or gradually reshape gendered work norms—either by changing expectations about women’s economic contributions or by altering how households perceive the trade-offs between wage work and home-based livelihoods. Understanding these pathways is essential for designing programs that both respect existing social constraints and, where appropriate, help relax them.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

James Allen IV is an Associate Research Fellow in the Poverty, Gender and Inclusion Division at IFPRI, based in Washinton, DC. **Daniel Gilligan** is a Senior Research Fellow and unit director of the Poverty, Gender and Inclusion Division, based in Washington, DC. **Sikandra Kurdi** is a Research Fellow in the Development Strategy and Governance Division at IFPRI and Country Program Leader in Cairo, Egypt. **Nada Shokry** is a Research Associate in the Development Strategy and Governance Division at IFPRI, based in Alexandria. **Basma Yassa** is a Senior Research Associate in the Development Strategy and Governance Division at IFPRI, based in Cairo.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Funding for this work was provided by the CGIAR Gender Equality and Inclusion Accelerator. Data collection was supported by the World Bank via the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). We gratefully acknowledge very helpful consultations with the Ministry of Social Solidarity of the Government of Egypt. We are grateful to Mr. Mohamad Azab and the research firm Gawab for their role in collecting the household survey data, and to households for their time. This work has not been independently peer reviewed. Any opinions expressed here belong to the authors and are not necessarily representative of or endorsed by IFPRI or CGIAR.

Address for correspondence: James Allen IV, j.allen@cgiar.org

REFERENCES

- Allen IV, James; Gilligan, Daniel O.; Kurdi, Sikandra; Shokry, Nada; and Yassa, Basma. 2023. Key findings from midline evaluation of Egypt's Forsa graduation program. MENA Policy Note 24. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/137221>
- Allen IV, James; Gilligan, Daniel O.; Kurdi, Sikandra; and Yassa, Basma. 2024. Would you rather: Voluntary take-up of a poverty graduation program among cash transfer recipients. MENA Working Paper 44. Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute. <https://hdl.handle.net/10568/158340>
- Assad, Ragui, Adam Osman, William Pariente Pariente, and Christine Valente. 2024. "How Big Does a Big Push Need to Be?" Presented at the Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the Global Poverty Research Lab (GPRL) Researcher Gathering at Northwestern University.
- Atallah, Marian, and Marina Hesham. "Unpaid care work in Egypt: Gender gaps in time use." Economic Research Forum (ERF), 2024.
- Bellani, Luna, Kumar Biswas, Sebastian Fehrer, Paul Marx, Shwetlena Sabarwal, and Syed Rashed Al-Zayed Josh. 2023. "Social Norms and Female Labor Force Participation in Bangladesh: The Role of Social Expectations and Reference Networks." SSRN Working Paper.
- Bursztyn, Leonardo, Alessandra L. González, and David Yanagizawa-Drott. 2020. "Misperceived Social Norms: Women Working Outside the Home in Saudi Arabia." American Economic Review 110(10): 2997–3029.
- Cameron, Lisa, David C. Suarez, and Dita Setyonaluri. 2024. "Leveraging Women's Views to Influence Gender Norms Around Women Working: Evidence from an Online Intervention in Indonesia." World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 10681.
- Caria, Stefano, Bruno Crepon, Caroline Krafft, and Abdelrahman Nagy. 2025 "The barriers to female employment: Experimental evidence from Egypt." G²LM|LIC Working Paper, No. 92.
- Jayachandran, Seema. 2021. "Social Norms as a Barrier to Women's Employment in Developing Countries." IMF Economic Review 69: 576–595.
- Kabeer, N., 1999. Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), pp.435-464.
- Field, Erica, Rohini Pande, Natalia Rigol, Simone Schaner, and Charity Troyer Moore. 2021. "On Her Own Account: How Strengthening Women's Financial Control Impacts Labor Supply and Gender Norms." American Economic Review 111(7): 2342–2375.
- Field, Erica, and Kate Vyborny. 2022. "Women's Mobility and Labor Supply: Experimental Evidence from Pakistan." Asian Development Bank Economics Working Paper Series, No. 655.
- Gilligan, Daniel O.; Kurdi, Sikandra; Tabe-Ojong, Martin Paul Jr.; and Yassa, Basma. 2022. Impact evaluation report: Egypt's Forsa graduation program. MENA RP Working Paper 41. Washington, DC: IFPRI. <https://doi.org/10.2499/p15738coll2.136469>.
- Roche, MaryClare, 2022. "Gender Attitudes and Trends in MENA." Arab Barometer, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Gender_Report-ENG.pdf
- Zayan, Jailan. 2013. *Egypt – Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture*. London: Kuperard. ISBN: 9781857336726.
- Zeitoun, Nahla Ahmed Mohamed Salaheldin, Souraya Mahmoud Moustafa Elassiouty, Tasmia Rahman, Magued Ibrahim Osman, and Hanan Girgis. "Social Norms and Female Labor Force Participation in Egypt." (2023).

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

A world free of hunger and malnutrition

IFPRI is a CGIAR Research Center

1201 Eye Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005 USA | T. +1-202-862-5600 | F. +1-202-862-5606 | Email: ifpri@cgiar.org | www.ifpri.org | www.ifpri.info

© 2025 International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). This publication is licensed for use under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.