

Masculinity, Femininity, and Domestic Violence in Assiut, Egypt

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Short Abstract

Intimate partner violence against women is widespread globally. In Egypt, the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey included a Domestic Violence Module that queried ever-married females about their experiences of domestic violence. Prior research has uncovered a strong association between a woman's educational status relative to her husband and her odds of experiencing domestic violence. This paper summarizes the findings of a qualitative study in Assiut, Egypt to explore ideal gender roles in marriage and to understand local ideas about domestic violence. In in-depth interviews, ever-married men (n=24) and women (n=19) often mentioned a range of ideal characteristics of husbands and wives, such as a husband's responsibility for the family's affairs and a wife's endurance of difficult situations. Many respondents spontaneously explained that the first years of marriage are the most difficult of the relationship, as each partner "learns" his or her role and the spouses "come to understand each other."

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Extended abstract

Background

Global research on domestic violence – including in the Arab world – is heavily guided by Western definitions of such violence. Often, local understandings of masculinity, femininity, and the treatment of married women are understudied. In Egypt, as in many countries, women differentially access valued resources in the form of healthcare, education, and formal work. Egyptian women often access other resources – such as a reliable income – through marital ties

and the forming of new kinship networks. In the absence of economic and social alternatives to marriage, a woman's reliance on these ties to provide for herself or her children may increase her tolerance of domestic violence.^{i,ii} Some scholars have argued that this reliance creates tensions in the marital relationship, and violence may be induced when a husband feels unable to provide adequately for his family financially.^{iiiiv} Cultural expectations that a husband dominate in the marriage may also contribute to violence. Specifically, prior research using the 2005 Egyptian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) shows that women who have much less and much more schooling than their husbands are more likely than equally educated wives to experience domestic violence.^{v,vi}

In this paper, we explore these relationships further. We use rich qualitative data from in-depth interviews with wives (n = 19) and husbands (n = 24), selected for participation based on their schooling vis-à-vis their spouse, to understand how ideals about gender in marriage differ across these groups and shape men's treatment of their wives, especially in the early years of marriage. Assiut governorate, about six hours south of Cairo in *Upper* or Southern Egypt, was the field site for this study, and the fieldwork was conducted in collaboration with faculty at Assiut University. Upper Egypt receives fewer resources from the Egyptian government than do other areas of the country; education and income of Upper Egyptians are generally lower than in the urban governorates. In addition, gender disparities in education and income are more pronounced in Upper Egypt than in urban governorates. Approximately 34% of Upper Egyptian women report ever having experienced emotional, physical, or sexual violence by their husbands.^{vii}

Data and Methods

Currently-married men and women of reproductive age from Assiut city (n = 18) and surrounding villages (n = 25) were purposively selected for this study. Participants were selected primarily on the basis of spousal educational characteristics. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 24 male and 19 female respondents according to these characteristics.

	<i>Spousal educational characteristics</i>		
	Wife < schooling than husband	Wife = schooling as husband	Wife > schooling than husband
Male	6	14	4
Female	4	12	3

Trained field staff interviewed each informant for approximately one hour using a semi-structured interview guide to elicit information and attitudes regarding gender and marriage. Topics included: (1) ideas and ideals about spousal status differences, masculinity, and femininity (2) common behaviors of men and women that reflect local ideals of masculinity and femininity, respectively (3) acceptable and unacceptable ways for husbands to treat their wives (4) situations in which various treatments by husbands are warranted and (5) interpersonal, institutional, and/or legal resources that women access to cope with an experience of domestic violence, and perceptions about such resources. In addition, 13 women participated in a cognitive interview of the 2005 EDHS Domestic Violence module, and these data will be presented elsewhere. The team of three interviewers consisted of one Egyptian male, one Egyptian female, and co-author Rosalie Haughton.

Preliminary findings and planned analyses

Common ideal characteristics of a spouse quickly emerged, regardless of gender. A husband or wife should be religious (Arabic: *mutadayyan*) and kind (*tayeb*), and should not make problems in the household. Both the husband and wife should be obedient (*yisma' el kalam*) and patient

(*‘andu sabr*), though these characteristics should be expressed differentially by gender. An obedient husband should provide his wife with her material needs, such as bringing vegetables, buying her and the children decent clothes, and providing a “secure home” (*beit ameen*). An obedient wife should accommodate her husband within the home by being available to console him, cook the foods he likes, and support his decisions. A patient husband would briefly leave the house to relax and forget his worries if he has a disagreement with his wife, and should return in a calm state. A patient wife should work to find an amicable solution to a problem, and should endure (*tistahmal*) his mood changes and ensure there is no disruption to their daily lives. In ongoing work, we are exploring the extent to which these expressed ideals vary by schooling characteristics of the couple.

Many male and female respondents spontaneously mentioned the first years of marriage as the most problematic ones in terms of achieving these ideals. When probed in the semi-structured interviews, some respondents explained that, in the beginning of the marriage, the partners do not “understand each other” – their moods, temperaments, “natures,” and for males, their wives’ sexual boundaries. Other respondents mentioned that it is in the first years of marriage that the wife may “teach” her husband how to be patient, by embodying the characteristic herself and by “enduring” in the idealized ways, as described above. Many women admitted that his process may take time. In fact, the overwhelming majority of male and female informants mentioned that it is normal for a woman, especially one married to a blood relative, to seek her family’s advice or assistance when (not if) there is a problem between her and her husband. Seeking assistance through more “formal” avenues, such as going to the police or the court system, was reserved for very severe situations, the perception being that one would go to the police or court only if one wanted a divorce. Many female respondents in particular noted

that a failed marriage is a poor reflection on the wife because she has not been sufficiently patient or strong enough to “endure.”

Further analyses in this paper will employ stratification by (1) marriage type of the female (47% of female respondents are married to a relative), (2) work status and earning of the female, and (3) spousal educational characteristic to test hypotheses derived from previous quantitative research in Egypt.

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^{vii} El-Zanaty, F. and Way, A. (2006) Egypt Demographic Health and Health Survey 2005.