

“We don’t talk about these things”: Reproductive health and sexuality of Young People in Egypt

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Summary

Egypt is experiencing a youth bulge, a demographic stage with youth constituting the largest age group in the population. The economic and political implications of this youth bulge have been widely discussed, yet how these factors are influencing the sexual and reproductive lives of young people has yet to be explored in detail. This paper builds on analysis of data from a recent national survey on youth in Egypt, the Survey on Young People in Egypt. This is first national youth survey of its scale in Egypt, covering a sample of 15,000 young people. The Survey gauged the attitudes and behaviors of young people aged 10-29 across a wide range of subjects including marriage, sexuality and media. The paper will address how young people are managing their intimate lives at a time when economic forces are producing a significant delay in the age of marriage, which is the only socially sanctioned context for sexuality and reproduction. Analysis of survey data is supplemented by in-depth interviews with young people.

Abstract:

Like many other countries in the Arab region, Egypt is experiencing a youth bulge, a demographic stage in which the youth represent the largest single population group. According to the 2006 census, approximately 28% of the country’s population is between the ages of 15 and 29. This youth bulge poses a serious challenge to government policies and places enormous pressure on education, employment and the housing market. These pressures are, in turn, resulting in a significant delay in the age of marriage, as young men in particular struggle to afford housing and meet the rising economic expectations of prospective in-laws. According to our analysis of recent survey data on youth in Egypt, less than 35% of men are married by the age of 28¹. Meanwhile, the

¹ Authors’ calculations, based on data from the Survey on Young People in Egypt (SYPE)

phenomenon of single women, unmarried well into their thirties and beyond, is a matter of national consternation. Delayed marriage is now a common phenomenon across the Arab region, a condition termed “waitthood” by American academic Diane Singerman (2007)², to denote a pending transition to adulthood, as traditionally marked by marriage.

“Waitthood” has myriad economic, political and social implications. One of the least explored in the Egyptian context is also one of its most significant: the impact on sexual and reproductive lives of young people. Religion, culture and law in Egypt, as in the wider Arab world, sanction sexual activity and childbearing in the sole context of heterosexual marriage. So if young people are putting off marriage, are they also delaying their sexual and reproductive debut? Anecdotal evidence, and small-scale studies, point to young people desperately trying to balance their sexual needs with religious and social dictates, as evidenced by *‘urfi* (that is “unofficial”) marriages, hymenorrhapy and other cultural phenomena.⁵ However, such is the stigma surrounding sexuality and reproduction outside of marriage that youth-in-waiting are unable to access adequate information on reproduction and sexuality. In a society which prizes chastity, unmarried youth are shy to speak of or seek out reproductive health services; unmarried women, in particular, are subject to even greater physical restrictions, and social stigma, hampering their access.⁶ Unmarried and sexually active youth lack knowledge on safe sex and responsible parenting, and health services in Egypt generally fail to acknowledge or accommodate their needs. As a result, young Egyptians are at risk of many physical and psychological health problems, not least of which is the rising tide of HIV/AIDS in the Arab region.⁷

Beyond the headlines, and small-scale studies, what do we really know about the intimate lives of Egyptian youth and the factors which are shaping their sexual attitudes and behaviors? In 2009, the Population Council fielded the Survey on Young People in Egypt (SYPE), a nationally representative survey of 15,000 young people aged 10-29. This is the first youth survey of such magnitude in Egypt. The survey provides information on youth life transitions in education, work, family formation, health and sexuality, and civic and political participation.⁸

² Singerman, D. (2007). *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities Among Youth in the Middle East*, Wolfensohn Center for Development, Dubai School of Government, Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper, 6.

⁵ Abdel Gawad, L., and M. Kordy (2008). *Secret “Urfi” Marriage Among University Students*. National Center for Sociological and Criminological Research, Cairo. (In Arabic)

⁶ Oraby, D., & Hafez, Z. (2009). *Formative Assessment of Youth Reproductive Health Needs in Menofia and Ismailia Governorates*. Cairo: Family Health International and UNFPA.

⁷ UNAIDS and UNFPA (2008). Middle East and North Africa: AIDS epidemic update summary. Geneva

⁸ The survey is supported by multiple donors including the Ford Foundation; Canadian International Development Agency; UNFPA (channeling funds from UNICEF, UNIFEM, and the Embassy of the Netherlands); and World Bank.

SYPE provides an up-close-and-personal glimpse of some of the intimate issues related to youth in Egypt. The survey collected information on youth pre-marital sexual activity, knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS and sources of information on issues related to sexuality and reproductive health. The survey also gathered data on how young people choose their marriage partners in Egypt, the cost of marriage and the living arrangements they enter into upon marriage. As both old and new media powerfully shape youth attitudes and behaviors, the Survey also provides data on how young people spend their time when not in school or at work, and how they use internet and technology to find partners. While there have been a few large-scale surveys of the intimate life of youth elsewhere in the Arab region¹⁰, such work is challenging in Egypt and this paper will also address some of the practical challenges encountered in addressing such sensitive issues.

This paper will analyze SYPE data with a view to understanding how young people are reconciling delayed marriage, their need for romance and intimacy and the cultural stigma surrounding issues of sexuality. The paper will also supplement qualitative analysis with in-depth interviews with young people to provide contextual data on the different strategies that young people adopt in addressing these challenges. Interviews focus on youth perspectives on societal norms that stigmatize sexual activity, how they negotiate these parameters and make life choices around intimacy and marriage. This qualitative data provides a rich context in which to understand the statistics reflecting the intimate life Egypt's generation-in-waiting.

¹⁰ Tunisia, in particular, has been extremely active in surveying large populations of young people; for example see Direction de la Médecine Scolaire et Universitaire (2005). *Enquête nationale sur la santé des adolescents scolarisés*. Tunis. Ministère de la Santé publique, 2005.