Navigating Waithood: The Lived Experience of Waithood in Middle Class Egypt
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Abstract

This research examines the lived experience of waithood among middle class unmarried Egyptian men. Waithood is a term coined by Diane Singerman to describe the phenomenon of young individuals experiencing a prolonged adolescence. This delay in marriage leads to a state of waithood, where young people are neither carefree children nor responsible adults. In Egypt, waithood is primarily attributed to four key challenges: the youth bulge, the labour market, excessive marriage costs, and the housing problem.

However, this study's literature review critically examines the concept of waithood, highlighting certain limitations. It argues among others that the prevailing focus on socio-economic factors within the waithood discourse undermines the notions of individual agency, humanity, and mental well-being.

Drawing from a total of six comprehensive qualitative analysed interviews, this study uncovers the multifaceted consequences of waithood. The analyses of the interviews demonstrate that middle class Egyptians indeed experience the ramifications of waithood, albeit under a diverse range of personal circumstances. The findings also reflect an intriguing absence of societal pressure to marry, the internalization of neoliberal ideologies, the redefinition of marriage's association with adulthood, and the patience of waiting for true love.

By departing from the generalist and neoliberal perspectives and acknowledging the agency, individuality, and unique experiences of individuals, this research aims to not only contribute valuable insights to academic discourse but also to empower and amplify the voices of those affected by waithood. It seeks to challenge the dehumanization often associated with structural analyses by focussing on the lived realities of young unmarried men. By doing so, this study strives to foster a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of waithood that acknowledges the diverse narratives and aspirations of individuals.

Acknowledgements

The completion of this study could not have been possible without the assistance and expertise of Dr. Cristiana Strava, my thesis supervisor. I would like to express my gratitude to her for devoting her time, knowledge, and guidance throughout the process of writing my master's thesis.

I would also like to extend my gratitude and appreciation to my friends in Cairo, who exhibited tremendous support and cooperation throughout conducting my research. Despite the challenging and sensitive situation prevailing in Egypt, they willingly offered their assistance and engaged in meaningful discussions related to my research topic. Their insights and perspectives have significantly enriched the qualitative aspect of this study. Thanks should also go to Jan Struik, Mattijs Wentinck, and Jelle Smit for joining me during the numerous sessions at the university library.

Lastly, I would be remiss in not mentioning my parents. The unwavering support and dedication of my parents have contributed significantly to my progress.

Notes on translation and transliteration:

A total of six interviews were conducted for this research project. Two of the interviews have been conducted in English and the other four have been conducted in Egyptian colloquial Arabic or 'amiyya.

The method for transliteration used is the Hans Wehr transliteration system. The transliteration system is developed for the Hans Wehr dictionary, which underwent a change between two editions. This system does not use digraphs and is always displayed in the italic style of Latin-alphabet font. It employs diacritics such as a dot underneath or upside and a line underneath for certain letters. Long vowels are marked with a macron, and no capital letters are used. The system transliterates the Arabic alphabet, including the Hamza (ء), the tāʾ marbūṭa (ة), long vowels, short vowels, and non-standard Arabic consonants. The alif maqsūra (ى) is rendered as ā, and the madda (آ) is transliterated as ʾā. Nisba endings are transliterated as īy, and the Arabic definite article ال is always rendered as "al-" except where assimilation occurs. For an overview of the entire alphabet transliterated letter for letter see figure 1.[1]

I have made the deliberate decision to employ this particular method of transliteration due to its initial introduction during my bachelor's degree. Consequently, I have exclusively utilized this method since then, thereby establishing a familiarity with it which surpasses other alternative methods.

As far as the translation is concerned, a translation that is as correct as possible will be given, but there must be awareness that due to nuance differences embedded in a language, it is not always possible to give a one-to-one translation.

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[1] "Hans Wehr Romanization," The Wise Word, accessed June 7, 2023, https://thewiseword.co.uk/hans-wehr-romantization/.

Letter	Name	Transliteration	Eng. ed.
ء	*hamza*	ʾ	
ا	*alif*	ā	
ب	*bāʾ*	b	
ت	*tāʾ*	t	
ث	*ṯāʾ*	ṯ	
ج	*ǧīm*	ǧ	j
ح	*ḥāʾ*	ḥ	
خ	*ḫāʾ*	ḫ	ḵ
د	*dāl*	d	
ذ	*ḏāl*	ḏ	
ر	*rāʾ*	r	
ز	*zāy*	z	
س	*sīn*	s	
ش	*šīn*	š	
ص	*ṣād*	ṣ	
ض	*ḍād*	ḍ	
ط	*ṭāʾ*	ṭ	
ظ	*ẓāʾ*	ẓ	
ع	*ʿain*	ʿ	
غ	*ġain*	ġ	ḡ
ف	*fāʾ*	f	
ق	*qāf*	q	
ك	*kāf*	k	
ل	*lām*	l	
م	*mīm*	m	
ن	*nūn*	n	
ه	*hāʾ*	h	
و	*wāw*	w, u, or ū	
ي	*yāʾ*	y, i, or ī	

Figure 1

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Introduction

Majnun, born into a wealthy and esteemed family, possessed a remarkable intellect, sense of humor, and poetic prowess. His verses celebrated the vastness of the desert, the enchantment of the stars, and above all, the beauty of his beloved Layla. Layla, a captivating and intelligent young woman, held a prominent position in her tribe, admired for her grace, elegance, and deep understanding of Arabic poetry.

Upon first setting eyes on Layla, Majnun was instantly captivated, spellbound by her exquisite allure, intellect, and sophistication. Determined to win her over, he expressed his love through heartfelt poetry, secretly sending his verses to her. Initially hesitant, Layla gradually surrendered to Majnun's ardent devotion, touched by his unwavering dedication and the beauty of his words.

Majnun and Layla secretly forged a deep and unbreakable relationship while being alone in the desert. Hours were spent in each other's company, engrossed in lively conversations, shared laughter, and the recitation of their poetry. Their love knew no bounds, defying all obstacles that dared to separate them.

However, their families disapproved of their relationship due to their longstanding feud mood from their opposing tribes. Driven by the belief that their children should marry within their own clans, they were adamant in keeping Majnun and Layla apart. Undeterred by these challenges, Majnun and Layla remained steadfast in their commitment, continuing their secret rendezvous and exchanging heartfelt love letters. Together, they even collaborated on creating a masterpiece of love poetry, each verse building upon the other's, a testament to their shared passion.

Yet, their families' discontent persisted, fearing that Majnun and Layla's love would tarnish their honor. To steer Layla away from Majnun, they orchestrated her marriage to another, hoping she would forget her love and move on with her life. The news of Layla's union shattered Majnun, plunging him into a solitary existence amidst the vast desert, where he sought solace in penning verses and singing songs that celebrated his immutable love for Layla.

Years passed, and Layla's husband eventually passed away. Throughout her married life, she remained true to her feelings for Majnun, holding him dear in her thoughts. It was in their old age, their hair now gray, that Majnun and Layla found their way back to each other's arms. Their reunion was fleeting, as Layla departed from this world, passing away in Majnun's embrace.

Once again devastated by loss, Majnun withdrew from society, seeking refuge in the desert's expanse. His remaining days were spent wandering, immersed in the contemplation of love, reading poetry, and singing songs that immortalized his love for Layla. Though he departed this world alone, Majnun's legacy endures through his profound love poetry, revered and cherished to this day.

This so-called Arabic 'virgin love' story, which dates back to the 7th century, could be seen as the Arabic equivalent of Romeo and Juliet. We can draw a fitting parallel between this ancient popular poem and the fact that it is also a good representation of what the situation is still like for a large part of the Egyptians today (and for citizens of other Middle Eastern countries); to have a fervent but impossible love, not being able to marry and consummate the marriage, or being weighed down by your family's traditional values or different wishes regarding marriage partner. Perhaps this recognisability is an explanation for the unprecedented popularity of this old impossible love story throughout the Middle East, which was traditionally orally transmitted. Nowadays, young men have more on their minds than the burning desire for their own equivalent of Majnun's Layla. The world has changed completely since the 7th century and young men globally are confronted with a wide range of continually changing social, political and economic problems. This makes the transition from adolescence to adulthood almost never an easy process. While considered adults by society, they struggle with many new obstacles in life: developing their own unique identity, growing adult duties and often being expected by the family to stand on their own feet. This comes with a certain amount of pressure, which is sometimes difficult for the young adults to deal with. According to research by Jane Kroger, Martinussen and Marcia large proportions of late adolescents and young adults do not complete the identity formation process entirely. Ongoing identity development should be anticipated in the years beyond late adolescence and young adulthood.[2] Concerning the MENA, and for this research specifically Egypt, these identity processes are not the only things coming their way. Because as far as the MENA region is concerned, adulthood is linked to marriage, unlike one's age or living independently, apart from the family.[3] The fact that adulthood is linked to marriage comes with a large set of requirements and responsibilities that are often difficult to meet due to social and economic conditions. For example, Diane Singerman calls the extremely high cost of marriage in Egypt unbelievable - especially given the low wages and economic conditions large parts of society have to deal with. According to her, the institutional structure of this marriage culture greatly influences numerous decisions and goals such as intimacy and sexuality, social networks, education, migration and future investments.[4] In addition, the 'youth bulge', or the young demographic of Egypt, also plays a role for the labour market and opportunities for young adults. They risk becoming stuck for a long time or possibly forever in a condition of economic, cultural, and social hardship.[5] Diane Singerman

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[2] Jane Kroger, Monica Martinussen, and James E. Marcia. "Identity status change during adolescence and young adulthood: A meta-analysis," *Journal of Adolescence 33* (2010): 696.
[3] Diane Singerman, "Youth, Economics, and the Politics of Waithood. The Struggle for Dignity in the Middle East and North Africa." in *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage and Childbearing,* ed.Nancy Smith-Hefner and Marcia Inhorn, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 36.

[4] Singerman, "Youth, Economics, and the Politics of Waithood. The Struggle for Dignity in the Middle East and North Africa," 32.
[5] Siobhan McEvoy-Levy. "Stuck in circulation, 'waithood' and the conflict narratives of Israelis and Palestinians," *Children's Geographies 12*, No. 3 (2014): 312.

came up with a term for this condition and coined the term "waithood" or waiting for adulthood.[6] Waithood refers to the common practise of involuntary delayed marriage and, because marriage is viewed as a marker of social adulthood in the MENA region, delaying adulthood.[7] Extensive research has been done on waithood since 2007. Scholars such as Singerman, Dhillon and Jousef, Salehi-Isfahani, Honwana and Sommers have contributed in this field. Much research has been done into the causes of this phenomenon; the youth bulge, labour market, rising costs of housing, and marriage costs. I will elaborate on these causes later in this study. I believe that further research into the consequences of waithood on the youth/young adults can contribute to the discourse. That is also why I formulated the following research question: What is the lived experience of waithood among middle class unmarried men in Egypt? To answer this question, we will proceed with the methodological approach, explaining how my research was conducted, while keeping in mind the limitations, and explaining about ethics and consent. The historical overview follows, describing some general history on the Middle-East and its marriage culture and practices. Thirdly, a literature review will be given on the aforementioned causes of waithood to get a clear picture of the set of problems that the Egyptian young adults are facing; though the emphasis of this research will be on the marriage issue. After the methodological approach, historical overview, and the literature review, the cases of the analysis can be discussed bearing the preceding chapters in mind. A set of six interviews have been conducted with participants from- and around the area of Downtown Cairo (wisṭ al-balad). Through the analysis we can hopefully give a fitting and concluding answer to the research question and contribute to the scientific debate.

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[6] Diane Singerman, "The economic imperatives of marriage: emerging practices and identities among youth in the Middle East," *Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper*, No. 6 (September 2007): 13.

[7] Nancy J Smith-Hefnerand and Marcia C. Inhorn. "Introduction." In *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage and Childbearing,* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020), 3.

Methodological approach

Following the introduction of the subject matter and research question, let us now delve into the methodological approach employed in this study. The research adopts a qualitative research paradigm, with interviews serving as the primary means of data collection. The interviews have been conducted by myself, between the 12th and 27th of January 2023. I have travelled to Cairo and conducted six interviews in total. All participants are Egyptian males between the ages of 18-32 years old, around the age of waithood. The participants are unmarried and come from a family that is considered middle class. By deliberately selecting a homogenous group, characterized by individuals sharing comparable socioeconomic circumstances, this study intends to enable a focused investigation into the research topic, while accommodating the constraints imposed by my limited timeframe. Importantly, I had pre-existing relationships with each of the participants, having met them on previous trips to Egypt. This familiarity proved to be beneficial, as it created an environment in which the participants could express themselves more openly during the interview sessions.

I followed the guidelines for developing interview questions and prepared clear questions. The template with the interview questions can be found in the appendix. The idea was that the questions would act as the basis for the interview, but the intention was to have a smooth open conversation in the end. A day before the interview started, I gave the participant a sheet with a short explanation about my research and an explanation of the concept of waithood, and the questions I was going to ask. In this way, the participant had the space and time to adjust and possibly prepare for the questions that were to come. The questions contained, among other things, the topics of the previously discussed literature, but also how the participants felt about it and, for example, how they saw their future. Each interview was recorded for later transcription and translation, ensuring a correct translation can be provided.

After conducting and completing all the interviews, including transcription and translation processes, the collected data was ready for examination. Each participant will be presented with a personal sketch detailing how I first met them and providing background information. This approach seeks to provide readers with an accurate understanding of the participants, which is especially important in qualitative research. Upon completion of the analysis, it is expected that a conclusion can be formed that contributes to the existing understanding of waithood and its effects. Do the participants actually suffer from all causes of waithood, or are there other causes that lead to later entry into the domain of adulthood? Are people bothered by it at all?

Limitations:

Initially, the interviews were conducted in English, which proved successful as the first participant had a proficient level of the language. However, the second interview did not go as smoothly since the participant's English proficiency fell short of my expectations. Considering that my Arabic skills, particularly in the Egyptian Colloquial Dialect, were likely better than the English skills of my subsequent participants, and that I had resided in Egypt for approximately six months while they had no experience abroad, I anticipated using Arabic for the interviews. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that my Arabic language proficiency is not flawless, and I must bear in mind that I may encounter difficulties comprehending certain nuances and aspects of the language. To address this challenge, I opted to create a more formal setting by recording the conversations. This approach would grant me the opportunity to carefully listen to the interviews at a later moment and provide more accurate translations.

Secondly, the timeframe for conducting the research was constrained due to other obligations related to my master's program at Leiden University. Consequently, a limited number of interviews, six in total, were conducted. As a result, the strength and robustness of the results achieved, may have been better with a longer duration and a larger sample size.

Thirdly, it is important to acknowledge the challenging environment in which these interviews took place, considering the risks associated with discussing certain topics in a country under military dictatorship. The participants expressed genuine fear of government surveillance and repercussions for openly discussing the government or any of Egypt's socio-political issues. This apprehension is not unfounded, given that Egypt ranks 166th out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, indicating limited freedom of the press and expression.[8] Given this restrictive climate, I was initially appreciative that my participants were willing to participate in the interviews at all.

Fourthly, my role as conductor of the interviews and author of the research introduces another layer of positionality. My interpretation and representation of the data obtained are influenced by my personal background, education, and biases. To try and mitigate these biases, it is important to maintain critical awareness, and engage in self-reflection.

Finally, finding suitable locations to conduct interviews in Cairo also proved to be a challenge due to various factors. As I did not have a permanent address in the city, it was difficult to find a quiet and private location to conduct interviews. The city's constant noise and chaos added to the challenge, as finding a quiet spot was pretty challenging. As a result, I had to meet participants in various locations, with some being more suitable than others. This added another layer of complexity to the research

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[8] "World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, accessed May 8, 2023, https://rsf.org/en/index.

process, as the varying locations could have potentially influenced the quality and validity of the data collected. Despite the difficulties faced, I was hopefully able to navigate these challenges and conduct interviews with my participants.

Ethics and consent

Maintaining ethical standards and obtaining informed permission are critical in research, especially in nations where press freedom is restricted. Because Egypt restricts freedom of expression, preserving the privacy and security of participants is even more important. As a result, before conducting the interviews, I told my participants about the goal and scope of my research and obtained their informed consent to record and publish their responses.

To further safeguard my participants' privacy and security, I have taken steps to conceal their real identities. In my study analyses and transcripts, for example, I have substituted their true identities with pseudonyms. Furthermore, I have taken precautions to safeguard any data, both physically and digitally.

Lastly, as a researcher, it is important to recognize the significant responsibility associated with transforming the personal narratives and experiences of participants into scholarly writing. These individuals have entrusted us with their stories, and it is our duty to handle their experiences with utmost care, respect, and ethical consideration.

Historical overview

Marriage has long been an important institution in the Middle Eastern region and societies, and its practices have been shaped by a range of cultural, religious, and legal factors. Marriage contracts in the Middle East can be traced back to pre-Islamic periods, according to Amira El-Azhary Sonbol's "History of Marriage Contracts in Egypt," and many of the elements included in contemporary contracts were also present in these earlier agreements.[9] During the 7th to 10th centuries A.D., an unprecedented change occurred in the Arab world that would greatly shape its history and culture. Islam, a religion that emerged from the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, spread rapidly throughout the region, compelling many tribes and nations to submit to its teachings. Marriage was regarded as a sacred institution that was essential for the growth and stability of Muslim communities. The Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of marriage and encouraged the creation of strong and loving relationships between spouses.[10] This early Islamic view of marriage laid the foundation for the legal and social norms that would guide marriages in subsequent centuries. United by Mohammed, and under the banner of Islam, Arab tribes began to conquer neighbouring territories, which eventually led to the establishment of the Rashidun Caliphate, followed by the Umayyad Caliphate catered in Damascus, and later the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad.[11] This empire stretched across central Asia and into Spain, establishing an era of urban civilization and progress, in which the Arabic language and Islamic faith flourished.[12] Throughout the latter medieval era, the Arab world faced collapse and fragmentation, with many dynasties and empires governing different areas of the region, including the Fatimids, Seljuks, Ayyubids, and Mamluks. While facing this collapse, the legal framework surrounding marriage became more formalized. Islamic law, or Sharia, provided a strict set of rules governing marriage, including provisions for divorce, dowry, and inheritance.[13] Sharia, also meaning "path" in Arabic, is a system of rules that guides every aspect of Muslim life, amongst which daily routines, responsibilities to family and religion, and financial matters. Muslim scholars started to draw heavily from the Quran and the Sunna to apply precedents and analogies to adapt to everchanging times. In this period, hadith literature expanded and various schools of Islamic philosophy were created, each with a different emphasis on sharia's sources: Hanbali, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanafi; and the Shiite school, Ja'fari.[14]

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[9] Amira El-Azhary Sonbol, "History of Marriage Contracts in Egypt," *Hawwa* 3, no.2 (2005): 167.

[10] Not literally but metaphorically; surah 2, verse 187 F.E. "They (Your wives) are clothing for you and you are clothing for them" or Surah 30, verse 21.

[11] Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 25-37.

[12] Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano, and Nydia Garcia-Preto, *Ethnicity and Family Therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 423-424.

[13] Lena Salaymeh, The Beginnings of Islamic Law: Late Antique Islamicate Legal Traditions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, December 2016), 136-137.

[14] Toni Johnson and Mohammed Aly Sergie, "Islam: Governing under Sharia," *Council on Foreign Relations*, (July 25, 2014): 1-2.

In the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire captured most of the Arab world.[15] In this period, the Hanafi school of Islamic thought was adopted by the Ottomans.[16] The Hanafi school was influential in shaping the legal norms surrounding marriage in Arab societies.[17]

After a few centuries of rule, the power of the Ottoman Empire was slowly waning. The rise of Arab Nationalist movements, and the wars that marked the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, including the Ottoman involvement in World War I, worsened, among other things, the economic conditions.[18] The changes in social and cultural life (particularly among the Ottoman elite) that brought about these circumstances led to a need for family law reform. The wellbeing of Muslim women played a major role in this. In the war about 3 million Ottoman Muslim men were killed, wounded or disappeared from the face of the earth. The wives of the men in question, who were almost completely economically dependent on their husbands, were left without any form of livelihood.[19] The Ottoman state took measures to provide job opportunities specifically for females and established a commission to prevent them from resorting to prostitution. The Hanafi School of Islamic law also made it difficult for women to divorce from their husbands who disappeared during the war, due to specific articles and jurisprudence regarding divorce in the Madhhab.[20] As a result, women's right to seek judicial dissolution of marriage and being able to remarry was granted by the Ottomans by amalgamating the views of different juristic schools of Islamic law; Hanbali and Maliki.[21]

Some people believe that Egypt was starting to face a marriage crisis during the Ottoman reforms and the subsequent period. This crisis was distinct in terms of the social, political, legal, and economic conditions that existed during Egypt's semi-colonial status in the early twentieth century.[22] In 1517, Egypt became a province of the Ottoman Empire and remained so for several centuries until the French invasion in 1798. After the French defeat, a power struggle ensued between the Ottoman Turks, Egyptian Mamluks, and Albanian mercenaries. In 1805, an Albanian military commander of the Ottoman army in Egypt named Muhammad Ali Pasha seized power and established a dynasty that lasted until the revolution of 1952. During his reign, Muhammad Ali modernized the country, built industries and canals, and established a powerful military state. Egypt became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire until it gained nominal autonomy in 1867. The construction of the Suez Canal in

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[15] Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, 209-213.
[16] Samy A. Ayoub, *Law, Empire, and the Sultan: Ottoman Imperial Authority and Late Hanafi Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19 December 2019), 20.
[17] Ayoub, *Law, Empire, and the Sultan*, 116.
[18] Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples, 315.
[19] Yavuz Selim Karakısla, *Women, War and Work in the Ottoman Empire: Society for the Employment of Ottoman Muslim Women (1916–1923)* (Istanbul: Libra, 2005), 167.

[20] Nihan Altinbas. "Marriage and Divorce in the Late Ottoman Empire: Social Upheaval, Women's Rights, and the Need for New Family Law," *Journal of Family History* 12, No.1 (2014): 2-3.
[21] Altinbas, "Marriage and Diviorce in the Late Ottoman Empire, 3.
[22] Hanan Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis That Made Modern Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 124.

1869 and the subsequent financial crisis led to the British and French controllers assuming real power in the Egyptian government.

This complex interplay between the Ottomans, French and British created much ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the future and national identity formation of Egyptians, and in the early 20th century, marriage, but also love and sexuality, started to be closely linked to the nation-state. This was due to the legal idea that the family is the foundation of the state. As a result, the love lives, sexual experiences, and sexuality of citizens were intertwined with the state.[23] The subject started gaining attention from the middle class press and the Egyptian government under British rule. Egyptian individuals, both men and women, used marriage to define their perception of the nation and their rights and responsibilities. This period saw significant changes and new ideas related to marriage, law, nationalism, and gender (partly thanks to the influence of the foreign powers).[24]

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, there was much criticism of the increasing degree of bachelorhood in Egyptian society. Qasim Amin, considered one of the first feminists of the Arab world and also the author of "The Liberation of Women", was one of the first to write about the subject of bachelorhood in 1898. Subsequently, many middle class publishers and newspapers picked up on this and continued it.[25]

In 1920, Abdu al-Barquqi wrote an article for al-mar'a al-misriyya, calling the rise in middle class bachelorhood a "marriage crisis" for the first time. He argued that this crisis posed a threat to Egypt's struggle for independence from the British, as the failure to secure political and economic independence led many to view marriage as being in turmoil. To them, marriage represented the ways and means of producing and reproducing, making it a microcosm of the nation.[26]

The marriage crisis became a popular topic to write about in the media, although after years of moral panic, no consensus could be reached as to the exact cause of the crisis and why an increasing amount of men resisted marriage. Numerous causes have been identified over the years. The most frequently cited justification was the nation's economic crises. These justifications entailed the foreign economic dominance, but also the Great Depression for example. The economic difficulties led to an impossibility to get married for middle class men, as they could not afford the wedding expenses anymore.[27] In the book Marriage crisis in Egypt from 1933, Muhammad Farid Genedy names the exaggeration in dowries and marriage expenses as an example for why Egypt is in a crisis. He also

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[23] Mari Norbakk, "Love, Sex, and Sexuality: Touching Hands: Love Scapes and Marriage in The Middle East," *In A Cultural History of Marriage in The Modern Age*, ed. Christina Simmons (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 103
[24] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 3.
[25] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse*, 4.
[26] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse*, 4.
[27] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 23-24.

mentions the propaganda of married couples against marriage.[28] Another theory was that middle class bachelors would waste their money and time on alcohol, prostitution, or hanging around at their local coffee shop.[29] Society slowly saw an increasing debate between conservatists and progressivists. Whereas progressivists like Qasim Amin would blame arranged marriage, female seclusion, and uneducated women, conservatists would say the opposite and blame the modernist, European influenced generation for replacing the arranged marriages with gender integration and equal education for females.[30] Surprisingly, another reason why urban middle class men restrained from getting married was due to the high divorce rate in the country. Why would men enter into a marriage, which they thought would eventually break down again. Egyptians would use the state of marriage, as it was linked to the state of the country, as a means to express their worries about the social condition of their struggling nation.[31]

Egypt gained greater political and economic freedom from the British in 1936, and as a result, Egyptians' worries about a supposed marriage crisis started to subside in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Many Egyptians became optimistic about the future of their independent country by the late 1950s, after President Gamal Abdel Nasser took power and nationalized the Suez Canal. This led to many Egyptians being confident about the future of their independent nation and the intellectual minority's interest in the marriage crisis slowly faded.[32]

On the basis of the long history of marriage, we can see that in the Middle East, and specifically in Egypt, there has never been unambiguity about marriage and that it is therefore a changing entity, subject to the influences of time, culture and politics. In the next chapter the literature review is presented including the literature written on the next supposed marriage crisis; in contemporary times. According to multiple scholars this is a widespread phenomenon, thus some general literature will be discussed, but the main focus will be on Egypt specifically.

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[28] Muhammad farīd al-ǧenedī, *Azmat al-zawāǧ fī maṣr* (Cairo: maṭbaʿat ḥiǧāzī, 1933), 23.

[29] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 23-24.
[30] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 40.
[31] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 77-78.
[32] Kholoussy, *For Better, For Worse,* 124.

Literature review

As previously indicated in the preceding historical overview, the discussions and controversies surrounding marriage are not novel occurrences in Egypt. Following the challenges faced during the Ottoman era and the marriage crisis of 1923, scholars argue that new complexities surrounding marriage in the Middle East have emerged. In this chapter we will have a look at what these scholars have written on the subject and whether there should be adjustments or additions made to the already existing literature. The chapter is divided into several sub-topics of importance. At first the literature on the relatively new concept 'waithood' will be discussed. Waithood shall be an important concept for the conceptualization of the contemporary marriage difficulties, but anno 2023 it will have to be checked whether this theory still fits the current zeitgeist and whether there have been critics who have made improvements since then.

Waithood

Although the term waithood was already briefly mentioned and explained in the introduction, the explanation bears additional attention, to refresh the short-term memory somewhat. Next, waithood and its causes will be discussed in further detail. Waithood was coined first by Diane Singerman, an American scholar, in the Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper "The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities among Youth in the Middle East".[33]According to Singerman in this paper, young people in Egypt and other countries in the area are going through a prolonged adolescence and being single for longer periods of time. They are left in a "waithood" or "wait adulthood", which is used to describe this common trend of postponed marriage which consequently delays adulthood, since marriage is culturally associated with adulthood.[34] Marriage could even be seen as a rite des passages to adulthood, independence, and having a sexual relationship with someone. Not much data is available on the age of marriage, but according to data from approximately 2009 from Ragui Assaad and Ghada Barsoum more than nine percent of women remain unmarried by the time they reach 34 years old. Men also experience a delay in marriage, but it is more significant. In urban areas, almost 57 percent of men are not married by the age of 29, and around 22 percent of them remain unmarried by the age of 34.[35]

Youth ends up in a liminal position where they are neither carefree children nor responsible adults and are dependent on their relatives for financial support. As a result, new sexual norms and alternatives

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[33] Singerman, "The economic imperatives of marriage," 6.

[34] Smith-Hefner and Inhorn, *Waithood: Gender, Education, and Global Delays in Marriage and Childbearing,* 3.

[35] Ragui Assaad and Ghada Barsoum, "Rising Expectations and Diminishing Opportunities for Egypt's Young," in *Generation in Waiting: the Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East,* ed. Navtej Dhillon and Tarik Yousef (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 12.

are forming, and the institution of marriage is evolving. One of these alternatives is zawāǧ al-ʿurfi. The word "ʿurfi" in Arabic means a person's conventional or customary practices. It refers to an informal or customary marriage that does not adhere to the formal marriage's legal standards. The media has been reporting on the rise of ʿurfi marriages in Egypt, but the accuracy of these reports is uncertain due to the lack of official statistics and the secretive nature of some cases (since it is an informal marriage).[36] One time when some numbers were given, is when Amina al-Guindi, Egypt's Minister of Social Affairs, claimed in a speech at the start of the new millennium that 17.2% of Egyptian university students were involved in ʿurfi marriages. It is crucial to remember that no significant survey was carried out to collect this data, and no justification was given for how this result was arrived at. On the other hand, the newspaper "al-wafd" claimed that 67–70% of all university students were involved in ʿurfi marriages, so apparently no one actually knows.[37]

ʿurfi marriages are frequently linked to prostitution and short-term marriages like misyār and mutʿa, which originated in Iran and Saudi Arabia respectively. But more information is required regarding the alleged connection between ʿurfi marriage and prostitution or sex tourism. The ʿurfi Marriage Contract can give couples in boyfriend-girlfriend relationships a more secure and recognized choice, making their union feel less immoral. It is comparable to a common law marriage. ʿurfi marriage is a way for some people to get back to ancient practices that prevailed before official registration requirements were put in place. Additionally, for those unable to consummate a legal marriage, ʿurfi marriage can be a practical alternative.[38]

Nonetheless, as youth navigates the dating scene, explore their sexuality and battle to establish their identities within multiple societal frameworks, young people encounter a number of difficulties. They rarely participate in political discussion and feel left out of potential answers to their issues. Youth in the Middle East are already marginalized, and this disempowerment gives them even less possibilities to participate in shaping their future.[39]

It is common knowledge that the transition from youth to adulthood is never an easy step, but it seems as if youth in the Middle East are held back by more things than youth in Europe, for example. Singerman and other scholars try to elucidate the causes of waithood. This would mainly be due to four reasons that hold youth back from making the transition to adulthood; the youth bulge, labour market, marriage costs and housing problem. I will elaborate on these four reasons one by one and discuss them in the following subtopics.

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[36] Silje Saliha Telum, "Why Urfi? An Examening Study of Urfi Marriage in Egypt and its Causalities" (Diss., University of Oslo, 2016), 4-5.

[37] Mona Abaza, "Perceptions of 'Urfi Marriage in the Egyptian Press," Regional Issues, *ISIS Newsletter* 7, no.1 (2001):

[38] Abaza, "Perceptions of 'Urfi Marriage in the Egyptian Press," 65-66.

[39] Singerman, "The Economic Imperatives of Marriage," 5-6.

Youth bulge

MENA youth are widely mentioned as a demographic constraint. A "youth bulge" has been formed by the rapidly expanding youthful population, a baby boom brought on by a time of falling infant mortality and high fertility rates. The youth bulge is used to describe a growing youth demography that includes everyone around 30 and under.[40] The Egyptian youth bulge subsequently refers to the large number of young people in Egypt's population. According to the statistics of the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in Egypt (CAPMAS), published in their "Statistical Yearbook" (2021), Egypt had a total population of 94,798,827 in 2017. Of those almost 95,000,000 people, 68,7% would be younger than 30 years old.[41] For comparison; in 2022, 47 percent of the population in the Netherlands was under the age of 40. This percentage is therefore considerably lower, while the age group is larger.[42] According to Statista.com, The total number of people living in Egypt as of January 1, 2022, was 102.88 million. Egypt's population is still increasing quite considerably; the country's population growth is constantly increasing, reaching its peak in 2013, when it reached 2.27 percent. Since 2013, the population growth is steadily decreasing, but still at 1.86 percent.[43] According to Tarek Tawfik,

Figure 2: https://www.statista.com/statistics/377291/population-growth-in-egypt/

who is the leader of the National Population Council (NPC) in Egypt, the population of the country is anticipated to grow substantially and be somewhere between 142 to 157 million people by 2050. Tawfik mentioned to the al-ahrām newspaper that Upper Egypt and border governorates had the highest birth rates, and most of the birth control campaigns focused on Cairo and Delta governorates, resulting in higher birth rates in those areas.[44] We can wonder whether the birth rates are lower due to the birth control campaigns, or if it could be the result of a generation of young people marrying at an increasingly later age, and therefore also having children at a later age.
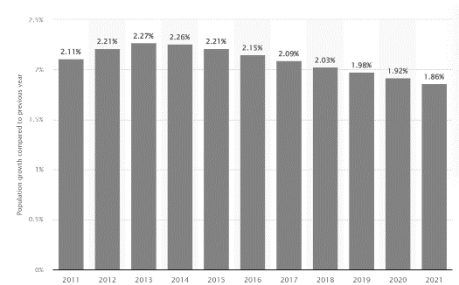
A particularly large youth demographic, the so-called "window of opportunity," can be seen as a positive thing and results from rapid population growth over a short period of time.[45] In a country with

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[40] Nada Berrada, "Youth and Labor Discourses in the MENA region: A Tournament of Narratives and their Implications," *Labor and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa* (January 2022): 33.

[41] "Statistical Yearbook," Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, accessed December 15, 2022, الجهاز المركزي للتعبئة العامة والإحصاء (capmas.gov.eg)

[42] "Leeftijdsverdeling," Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek, accessed May 2, 2023, https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/visualisaties/dashboard-bevolking/leeftijd/bevolking

[43] "Egypt: Population growth from 2011 to 2021" Statista, accessed December 15, 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/377291/population-growth-in-egypt/

[44] Gamal Essam El-Din, "Egypt's population is expected to reach 157 million in 2050: Head of NPC." Ahram Online*, accessed February 2, 2023, http*://english.ahram.org.eg/News/487971.aspx#:~:text=Tarek%20Tawfik%2C%20head%20of%20Egypt's,million%20by%20the%20year%202050.

[45] Mohammad Reza Farzanegan and Stefan Witthuhn. "Corruption and political stability: Does the youth bulge matter?" *European Journal of Political Economy* 49, (2017): 49.

a youth bulge, the entrance of a large cohort of young adults into the working-age population can lead to a decline in the dependency ratio (The proportion of people who are not of working age compared to those who are of working age). This, in turn, can generate a demographic dividend if these individuals are successfully employed in productive activities. Specifically, the resulting increase in the ratio of workers to non-workers can raise the level of average income per capita. However, the failure to employ this young workforce can result in a demographic bomb. Such a scenario arises from the potential for this large mass of frustrated youth to become a source of social and political instability, which can have adverse effects on a country's economy and overall well-being.[46] According to many scholars, among whom Singerman[47] and Campante and Chor[48], the youth bulge contributed to Egypt's 2011 revolution during the Arab Spring. This shows how demographics could affect revolutions, protest and rebellion. Consequently, there is a direct relationship between youth bulges and repression.[49]

The discussion of the youth bulge in the MENA area has drawn criticism for its tendency to ignore the unique experiences and subjectivities of young people. Instead, individuals are frequently grouped as a single entity without taking into account their various identities, objectives, cultures, and needs. This oversimplification is problematic because it may result in policies and actions that ignore the unique challenges and opportunities experienced by various demographic youth segments.[50]

Additionally, focusing on young people as a means to only an economic end might dehumanise them, turning them to simple objects of economic progress. The terminology used to characterise young people in the context of the youth bulge, such as referring to them as a "demographic time bomb" or a "youth explosion," like the words used by Justin Yifu Lin here above, exemplifies this dehumanisation. These words reduce young people to a problem to be solved rather than acknowledging them as active individuals with agency and goals.

According to many, Egypt has already missed the so-called window of opportunity, which means that the youth bulge also leads to problems in other sectors of society, such as the labour market.

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[46] Justin Yifu Lin, "Youth Bulge: A Demographic Dividend or a Demographic Bomb in Developing Countries?," *World Bank Blogs*, January 5, 2023, https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/youth-bulge-a-demographic-dividend-or-a-demographic-bomb-in-developing-countries#comments

[47] Diane Singerman, "Youth Gender and Dignity in the Egyptian Uprising," *Journal of Middle East women's studies* 9, no.3 (2013): 10.

[48] Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, "Why was the Arab world poised for revolution? Schooling, economic opportunities, and the Arab Spring," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 26, no.2 (2012) 167-187.

[49] Ragnhild Nordas and Christian Davenport. "Fight the Youth: Youth Bulges and State Repression" *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (October 2013): 937.

[50] Berrada, "Youth and Labor Discourses in the MENA region: A Tournament of Narratives and their Implications," 34.

Labour market

The political changes around the Arab Spring in 2011 have severely destabilised Egypt's economy, leading to a substantial increase in the poverty rate as growth slowed, tourists stayed away, and the country's budget and foreign exchange deficits grew.[51] These economical instabilities have led to an enormous informal job sector. According to a publication published by the International Labour Office, 91.1 percent of young workers in Egypt are working informally.[52] Another, more recent publication, by Ragui Assaad, Abdelaziz Alsharawy, and Colette Salemi, compared the structure of employment by type of employment over the period 1998 to 2018 using the available statistics. They subdivided the type of employment into the following 6 different categories:

1. Public sector employment: Formal wage work in government or public enterprises.

2. Formal private wage work: Formal wage work in the private sector with a legal contract or social insurance coverage.

3. Informal private wage work inside fixed establishments: Informal wage work in private establishments without a legal contract or social insurance.

4. Informal private wage work outside fixed establishments: Informal wage work outside private establishments without a legal contract or social insurance.

5. Non-wage work inside establishments: Work by employers, self-employed individuals, and unpaid family workers in fixed establishments.

6. Non-wage work outside establishments: Work by employers, self-employed individuals, and unpaid family workers outside fixed establishments.[53]

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[51] Jennifer Bremer. "Youth Unemployment and Poverty in Egypt." *Poverty & Public Policy* 10, no. 3 (2018): 297.

[52] Ghada Barsoum, Mohamed Ramadan and Mona Mostafa. "Labour market transitions of young women and men in Egypt" *International Labour Office, Work4Youth Publication Series,* no. 16 (June 2014): 3.

[53] Ragui Assaad, Abdelaziz Alsharawy, Colette Salemi, "Is the Egyptian Economy Creating Good Jobs? Job Creation and Economic Vulnerability, 1998-2018," in: *The Egyptian Labor Market: A Focus on Gender and Economic Vulnerability*, ed. Caroline Kraft and Ragui Assaad, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) 55-56.

Figure 3: The structure of employment by job type, employed individuals aged 15-64, 1998-2018.

Figure 3 shows that over the years, there has been a decline in the percentage of employment in the public sector, which shows a significant reduction in access to formal employment for workers in the middle-income bracket due to the decline in public employment.[54] We also see a slight increase in formal private sector employment. This trend could be attributed to the increasing privatization of various sectors in Egypt, such as education. For example, there has been a rapid growth in the number of private higher education institutions and schools in recent years.[55] In the meanwhile we see an increase in the informal private wage work, both inside and outside fixed establishments, which simply shows an increase in the overall amount of Egyptian men working in the informal sector. The general non-wage labour has decreased, which could possibly mean that people lost access to agricultural land, so they also became more reliant on informal wage.

These statistics are undeniably remarkable, prompting the Egyptian government to undertake measures aimed at addressing the pressing issues of youth unemployment and restoring economic stability. Unfortunately, the government attention focusses mainly on jobs in the formal sector.[56] Youth unemployment numbers can thus be very misleading. Since more than 90 percent of young workers work in informal sectors, it is almost impossible to come up with correct numbers. The poor must find some type of labour just to survive, often jobs as vending illegally. The better-off youth are those from middle class, who can choose to wait for a job in for example the government. One problem is that the government workforce is not expanding which leaves a large educated workforce unemployed. They can work, but they rather wait than accept work they, and their families, deem beneath them.[57]

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[54] Assaad, Alsharawy, and Salemi, "Is the Egyptian Economy Creating Good Jobs?, 56.
[55] Ghada Barsoum, "When Marketization encounters centralized governance: Private Higher Education in Egypt." *International Journal of Educational Development 76 (*June 2020): 5.
[56] Bremer, "Youth Unemployment and Poverty in Egypt," 299.
[57] Bremer, "Youth Unemployment and Poverty in Egypt," 302.

An important aspect to gain access to the formal workforce in Egypt is to have 'wāsṭa'. Wāsṭa is an Arabic term that refers to the involvement of a person with influence to support someone else in getting special treatment or recourses from a third party. It is often used in the context of gaining an advantage in hiring and promotion decisions.[58] The use of wāsṭa can lead to the appointment of unqualified applicants and hinder equal employment opportunities, since many formal, public sector jobs will be mutually given away between family, friends and acquaintances, regardless of their qualifications.

The difficult labour market is seen as one of the causes for the emergence of waithood, but waithood is perhaps not quite the right term to address this problem for young people. The term has some utility in emphasizing the difficulties young people have in accessing future job prospects, but it also runs the risk of reiterating preconceptions about young people as passive and uninterested. Alcinda Honwana also writes about the wrongness of the term waithood in certain cases in her book about Waithood in Africa. In her analysis, she asserts that young individuals are not passively waiting and hoping for their circumstances to spontaneously change. On the contrary, they are proactively engaged in serious efforts to create new forms of being and interacting with society.[59] This phenomenon is also evident among young Egyptians, who demonstrate resilience by engaging in the informal sector, despite the limited certainty it offers, in pursuit of a better quality of life.

Another reason why one might criticize the concept of waithood is due to its association with a programmatic neoliberal framework. Within this framework, young adults are encouraged to pursue entrepreneurship as a means of addressing their social risks, thereby shifting the responsibility onto individuals rather than addressing wider social and political concerns. This individualizing and depoliticizing contribute to the challenges face by young people who are unable to find employment or are in a state of non-work.[60]

Anyhow, the labour market in Egypt remains very tight; whether you come from a poor Egyptian- or a middle class family. Having less financial resources will make escaping from waithood even harder, as further sections will show.

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[58] Ahmed A. Mohamed & Mohamad S. Mohamad, "The effect of wasta on percieved competence and morality in Egypt." *Cross Cultural Management* 18, no.4 (2011): 412-425.

[59] Alcinda Honwana, "Youth, Waithood, and Protest Movements in Africa," *International African Institute* (June 2013): 2435.

[60] Christoph H. Schwarz, "Family and the Future", in *Coping with Uncertainty*, ed. Jorg Gertel and Ralf Hexel (London: Saqi Books, 2018), 116-117.

Marriage costs

In many cultures, getting married is a significant event since it's considered as a method to cement family ties, guarantee social standing, and ensure financial security. This is no different in Egypt, where the expense of getting married plays a big role in deciding when a couple will get married. These costs may affect people's marital decisions, resulting in waithood or prolonged bachelorhood. Diane Singerman has done extensive research on marriage costs, and how they affect the postponement of marriage. Marriage in Egypt and its high costs are not only a cultural thing, but also a way of ensuring its families financial security. Hence even parents living in poverty do not want to marry their daughters to street vendors[61], and want to get the best deal for their families. Also, a marriage may be delayed for several years, an engagement may be broken, or financial and social expectations may be reduced if a young couple and their family are unable to acquire the anticipated quantities.[62] The following bit, as described in *Consumerism and Negotiations for Marriage among the Middle and Upper-Class Muslims in Cairo* by Ikran Eum, nicely illustrates how strict the financial requirements for marriage can be:

"I met her at work. I went out with her a couple of times and began to feel something towards her, and at a certain point, we started to feel some kind of commitment for each other. This meant that I wanted to make our relationship formal, so I visited her family. But I was frustrated by her father's unreasonable requirement for mahr, shabkah and an apartment. He told me, "Humud, if you want to marry her, you have to present £E30,000 for shabkah and also you have to own your own apartment which costs more than £E200,000." It was obvious that he wanted her to marry a much richer man than me and hoped to get rid of me by asking for expensive shabkah and an apartment."[63]

In this scenario, Humud had a good job for a multi-national company. However, the father wanted the best possible future for himself and his daughter. While parents are critical of marriage becoming more and more expensive, on the other hand they maintain high standards, which does not make marrying any cheaper.[64] Christoph Schwarz sheds a different light on family literature, and states that scholarship on the MENA region often follows the modernisation theory, which suggests that the concept of 'family' is typically linked with tradition, and is often seen as a hindrance to progress. This is partially a result of the patriarchal nature of traditional family structures, which is thought to impede

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[61] Bremer, "Youth Unemployment and Poverty in Egypt," 301.
[62] Singerman, "Waithood, Statehood, and the Struggle for Dignity," 35.
[63] Ikran Eum, "The Impact of Consumerism and Negotiations for Marriage among the Middle- and Upper-Class Muslims in Cairo," *International Area Review* 7, no.2 (September 2004): 177-178.
[64] Eum, "The Impact of Consumerism and Negotiations for Marriage among the Middle- and Upper-Class Muslims in Cairo," 177.

development.[65] It could be interesting to find out in the analysis whether the subjects interviewed feel hindrance by their parents in getting married.

As you can imagine by now, the pressure on a marriage can thus be unbelievably high. In 2003, it was estimated that on average, Egyptian families spend about 4.5 times their Gross National Product (GNP) per capita on marriage expenses. These costs are even higher in urban areas, where families could spend up to 6 times their GNP per capita for their special day and aftermath, whereas this may be slightly lower in rural areas where it is about 4 times.[66] Since then the world has only gotten more expensive, so even without exact recent statistics, you can estimate to what extent the costs will increase.

The costs for a marriage consists of six main expenses including: housing (will be discussed in the next paragraph), furniture and appliances, wedding celebrations, gifts of gold for the bride (šabka), dower (mahr), and the trousseau (ǧihāz), consisting of some smaller items.[67] These costs largely come from the pocket of the groom and his family as they cover an average of 69 percent of the costs of the wedding.[68] figure 4 shows the distribution of costs for marriage. As you can see, the costs for the furniture are quite high. This is partly because the engaged couple have to build their household effects from scratch, and furthermore that modern media has a significant impact on the consumer behaviour of young Egyptians. For middle and upper-class couples, essential items for starting married life now include an imported car, washing machine, dishwasher, television, freezer, king-sized bed, two sets of sofas, a dining table, dinner sets, and other furniture sets.[69]
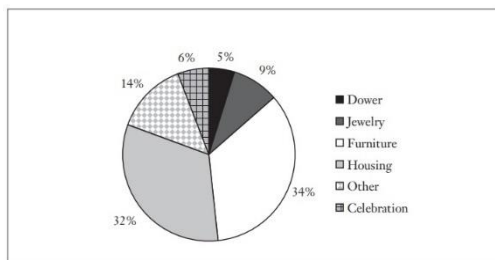

Figure 4: The division of costs for marriage (Diane Singerman, The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities Among Youth in the Middle East).

It is now evident that Egyptians and their families, especially those of a man, have to save for a long time if they want to tie the knot. Years of financial planning may precede this. However, they

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[65] Schwarz, "Family and the Future," 117.

[66] Diane Singerman and Barbara Ibrahim, "The Cost of Marriage in Egypt: A Hidden Dimension in the New Arab Demography", in *The New Arab Family*, ed. By Nicholas S. Hopkins (Cairo and New York: American University of Cairo Press, 2001): 84.

[67] Singerman, "Waithood, Statehood, and the Struggle for Dignity," 36.

[68] Singerman. "The economic imperatives of marriage: emerging practices and identities among youth in the Middle East," 14.

[69] Eum, "The Impact of Consumerism and Negotiations," 180.

sometimes still aren't able to save enough money, due to inflation, a rising gold price, or other external influences. An additional way in which Egyptians can also raise money to cover the wedding expenses is a so-called ǧamiʿiyya (pl. ǧamiʿiyyāt) with friends, family and relatives.[70] A ǧamiʿiyya is a traditional rotating credit association, and is regarded as an alternative banking system which functions outside of state control. The organization of a ǧamiʿiyya comprise a gathering of people, often led by an older woman, contributing a fixed amount of money at set intervals. At each interval one of the members will receive the money, so they did not needed to borrow from a bank or other acquaintances.[71]

Yet all the diligent saving and participating in the ǧamiʿiyyāt would be in vain if the absence of a fundamental necessity – a house to live in and potentially start a family in.

Housing problem

There have been a lot of ways in which Egypt's officials have described the problems regarding peoples living situation: 'Homes problem', 'homes crisis', 'housing problem' or 'housing crisis'. While the rhetoric has quietly changed over the past decades, fact is that Egypt has been struggling with housing ever since the 1940s.[72] The Egyptian government established severe rent restrictions in the 1960s, with rentals set in nominal terms at the commencement of rental agreements. Contracts had an infinite term under the law and might even be carried down through generations. The Egyptian government enacted a 'new rent' law in 1996, Law No. 4, enabling new rental contracts (signed after the law's implementation) to be of limited term and giving landlords the authority to increase the rate on renewal, and thus started a liberalization policy.[73] Egypt actually saw a small decline in male age at first marriage because of the 1996 reforms due to more rental houses coming on the market.[74] Still, according to David Sims, public housing (masākin šaʿbiyya) in Cairo was affordable before the National Housing Program was introduced in 2005. The cost of monthly instalment payments was within the means of most families, except the very low-income households. The units, mostly built on the outskirts of the city, were substantially subsidized, with estimates showing that up to 75% of direct and indirect costs were subsidized. However, the method of assigning and targeting families, on the other hand, has proven unsuccessful. The government uses standard applications, with no beneficiary

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[70] Eum, "The Impact of Consumerism and Negotiations," 182.

[71] Homa Hoodfar, "Between Marriage and the Market : Intimate Politics and Survival in Cairo," *Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 219-220.

[72] Yahia Shawkat, *Egypts housing crisis: the shaping of urban space (*Cairo; New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2020), 13.

[73] Ragui Assaad and Mohamed Ramadan. "Did Housing Policy Reforms Curb the Delay in Marriage Among Young Men in Egypt." *Policy outlook,* no.1 (November 2008): 2.

[74] Assaad, "Did Housing Policy Reforms Curb the Delay in Marriage Among Young Men in Egypt", 8

targeting based on income or wealth criteria, or social investigations. Typically, there are certain conditions that an applicant must meet to be eligible for a particular opportunity, such as residing in the specific governorate and being married (which is paradoxical since to get married you have to have a place to live first). Additionally, there may be other requirements, such as a declaration that the applicant does not own any residential property. After the application goes through an evaluation process and is approved, and the initial payment is made, the applicants are placed on a waiting list, and units are assigned at random, with no regard for housing necessity or social needs. This bureaucratic method of randomly allocating new subsidised units has little or no connection to housing demand or social requirements, preventing families from bringing their social networks and capital with them.[75] The location of public housing projects outside the city centre, which necessitates commuting to work or visiting family and friends at additional cost, has resulted in more than 50% of recent built projects remaining unoccupied.[76] This vacancy is not limited solely to public housing, as indicated by Dr. Tarek Wafik, former Minister of Housing and Urban Communities. During a period of housing crisis in Egypt, approximately 5.2 million housing units remained unoccupied in 2012.[77] The magnitude of this figure is particularly alarming, given that around two-thirds of the Egyptian population lives in informal housing.[78]

In the meantime, Egypt continues its long-standing initiative of constructing cities in the desert. A key project in this endeavour is the New Administrative Capital (NAC), which was announced in 2015.[79] The project aims to establish a new government quarter that will accommodate the parliament, ministries, the supreme council, diplomatic missions, and a new presidential palace. The architectural plans include the construction of skyscrapers that can reach heights of up to 450 meters. Alongside the main development, there are also 30 additional subprojects planned, which include an airport surpassing the size of London Heathrow, and the construction of the world's tallest flagpole.[80] The justification of the costs behind this immense undertaking includes addressing issues such as congestion, creating job opportunities and tackling the housing crisis.[81] With a projected population target ranging from five to seven million, the primary objective of the NAC was to alleviate overcrowding in existing urban centres by utilizing the expansive desert space.[82]

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[75] David Sims, *Understanding Cairo : The Logic of a City Out of Control* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 157-158.

[76] Sims, *Understanding Cairo : The Logic of a City Out of Control*, 159-160.

[77] wafā' bukari and aḥmad ʿali, "wazīr al-iskān: ladayna 5.2 million waḥda šāġira .. wi muškilat sakan", al-maṣryalyoum, September 6, 2012. https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/161979

[78] Sims, *Understanding Cairo,* 92.

[79] Adam Almqvist, "Rethinking Egypt's 'Failed' Desert Cities: Autocracy, Urban Planning, and Class Politics in Sadat's New Town Programme," Mediterranean Politics (2022): 1-2.

[80] Christian Steiner and Patrick Loewert, "The New Administrative Capital in Egypt: The Political Economy of the Production of Urban Spaces in Cairo," Middle East – Topics & Arguments 12 (2019): 66.

[81] Eslam Hamada Mahmoud Ali Hasan, "The New Administrative Capital of Egypt (Wedian City)," (Diss., Politecnico di Torino, 2020), 16-22.

[82] Almqvist, "Rethinking Egypt's 'Failed' Desert Cities," 2.

However, according to Hassan Elmouelhi, it can be argued that there is a lack of clear vision regarding how this large-scale project will adequately provide housing opportunities for the middle and lower classes.[83] The fears that the NAC will only be for the rich are valid, considering that a two bedroom flat in one of the many planned residential areas in the NAC is up for sale around €60000 euro, while the GDP per capita hovers around €3000 euro. Furthermore, the establishment of the NAC could be seen as a deliberate attempt to relocate the political hub away from Cairo, a city known for its history of protests and uprisings.[84]

Regrettably, despite preceding government efforts, housing continues to be deemed prohibitively expensive for many young individuals, particularly those experiencing waithood, who are confronted with a wide arrange of different costs too.

Literature remarks

Since the inception of the concept of waithood in 2007, a significant amount of literature has been produced. Although scholars such as Singerman, Barsoum, and Assaad have contributed considerably to the academic discourse, a number of criticisms and gaps have emerged during the literature review. Therefore, this study hopes to add something to growing body of research and help to fill the gaps.

One such gap is the tendency to discuss the youth bulge in the MENA region without considering the distinct experiences and subjectivities of young people. This oversimplification may lead to harmful policies. Additionally, focusing exclusively on young people as an economic resource can dehumanize them, reducing them to a mere problem to be solved, rather than acknowledging their agency and aspirations. The use of dehumanizing terminology such as "demographic time bomb" or "youth explosion" to describe young people further exacerbates this issue.

Furthermore, the concept of waithood indirectly implies that the current generation of young people is characterized by unproductiveness and idleness, a perception that often does not align with reality. Also has waithood faced criticism for its alignment with a programmatic neoliberal framework that promotes entrepreneurship as a solution to social risk, individualizing and depoliticizing the difficulties faced by young adults.

Moreover, traditional family structures are still frequently associated with resistance to progress, which is problematic. This perspective could perpetuate stereotypes and oversimplify the complexities

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[83] Hassan Elmouelhi, New administrative Capital – Cairo : Power, Urban Development and Social Injustice – the Official Egyptian Model of Neoliberalism," in Neoliberale Urbanisierung, ed. Ala Al-Hamarneh (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2019), 228.

[84] Maged Mandour, "The Sinister Side of Sisi's Urban Development," Carnegie Endowment, accessed June 6, 2023, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84504.

of familial dynamics. Rather than assuming this resistance to progress, I believe it is important to investigate the interplay between tradition and adaptation within these family structures.

Lastly, the predominant focus of the existing literature is primarily on socioeconomic factors (such as the labour market, or wedding costs), neglecting not only the agency and humanity of the individual but also their mental well-being. According to Jenny Liu, the limited consideration of overall health and welfare is a significant limitation in our comprehension of the progression to adulthood in the MENA region, as the way young individuals navigate this stage can have enduring effects on various health and socioeconomic results.[85]

This study seeks to contribute to the discourse by examining the aforementioned overlooked aspects and shifting the focus from a socioeconomic approach to a ethnographical, anthropological methodology. This methodology has led to the formulation of the research question, "What is the lived experience of waithood among middle class unmarried men in Egypt?" This research question aims to explore how individuals perceive and respond to the issues discussed in the preceding section.

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[85] Jenny Liu, Sepideh Modrek, Maia Sieverding, "The mental health of youth and young adults during the transition to adulthood in Egypt, *Demographic Research* 36, no. 56 (2017): 1723.

Analysis

In this chapter, we present the analysis of the six interviews conducted as part of our research on the lived experience of waithood. Building upon the methodology, the historical overview, and the literature review, outlined earlier, our objective is to delve into the insights derived from the interview data.

Thorough examination of each of the six interviews conducted, enabled us to identify recurring patterns, themes, and subtle nuances, providing a deeper understanding of waithood. By considering the participants' unique circumstances, social and cultural contexts, and personal perspectives, we were able to elucidate the experiences and challenges they face during this transitional phase.

Moreover, this chapter includes a collective reflection of the individual interview analyses, emphasizing the commonalities and distinctions found within the participants' narratives. Through this process, the aim is to offer a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate aspects of waithood and its implications for individuals.

By giving the individuals, often overlooked by waithood literature, a voice and a story, a contribution will be made to the broader understanding of waithood, and its influences on everyday life.

Youssef

Youssef was my first real friend in Egypt. I met him about three weeks after I arrived in Cairo. I was still discovering the city with my two Dutch friends from home and college when we went to the Cairo Jazz Club in the al-ʿağūza district. It was a nightclub as we know it in the Netherlands, with an angry-looking security guard outside, a dark atmosphere and thumping techno music. Normally you could only enter if you are in the company of one or more ladies, to keep the balance, but because a classmate knew someone, we were able to enter despite the exclusively male company. When we were ordering an uber outside at the end of the evening, we struck up a conversation with an enthusiastic Egyptian. His name turned out to be Youssef. Because I only had a few catchphrases of Egyptian in my vocabulary at the time, it was nice that Youssef spoke fluent English. Despite the fact that it was four o'clock in the morning, our newly made friend was not lacking in energy. He invited us to come along for a meal and then play a game of FIFA in one of the many 'PlayStation rental shops'. Naturally, Youssef chose Liverpool to play with, then continuously passed the ball directly to Mohammed Salah, "the best player in the world". Me and Youssef got along really well, and he was eager to help me improve my Egyptian.

I got to know Youssef well because the two of us occasionally met to drink a cup of coffee or a beer and practice my Egyptian. In my later periods in Egypt Youssef was the one who introduced me to his entire group of friends and the neighbourhood. In hindside, Youssef immediately turned out to be the most internationally oriented friend I would get to know. He had travelled through Europe for a while and really wanted to go back. He was a big fan of Techno music, and the biggest scene was of course in Europe. Due to his predilection for going out and occasionally wild ideas, his nickname was also kaḥraba, or electricity (literally translated into short-circuit, but with the meaning of having a screw loose).

Youssef lived in a Downtown Cairo apartment, where he cohabited with his father. His elder brother, who was two years his senior, had already entered into matrimony and had children. Regrettably, their mother had passed away several years prior to our acquaintance. As Youssef and his father were the only occupants of the house, he enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. However, this independence also came with the responsibility of attending to his father's needs, who was of age, and which he perceived as quite a burden. What also felt like a burden was his job, providing remote services to an American company. The occupation required long hours of work and strict adherence to a timetable that was unpredictable, since it was in a different time zone.

When I first asked Youssef last January if I could interview him, he responded very enthusiastically. A few days later, when it suited him, we met at Groppi, a cafe near ṭalʿat ḥarb square. That's where we started the interview.

Youssef had studied English literature and translation just to get some kind of degree. He mentioned that if he really wanted to study something he really liked, he should have done it at a private institute, which he unfortunately couldn't afford. He referred to his twenties as the time when you are active, have the energy and the ambition, but the revolution and most recently the pandemic had made it very difficult to be successful and happy. The difficult time had made him a grown man; he therefore considered himself a grown man. According to him, the difference between a child and an adult was taking responsibility and having qualities such as life experience, dignity and generosity. When I asked him if being married wasn't part of this, he said: "al-rāǧil miš biyikbar". It is an Egyptian saying which translates into a man doesn't grow old. In this scenario Youssef meant that you can marry at any time, or at any stage of life.

One thing Youssef mentioned that I found very interesting was his interpretation of a hadith. The Hadith narrates that there are 4 reasons to marry a woman; money (business), beauty, religion or good reputation/responsibility. Youssef added having a bond/love. This addition to the old hadith contrasted a fair bit with other things he said in my opinion. For example, he indicated that he would not want to marry a girl he had dated before. The dating would be for after the engagement in 'the getting to know phase'. A girl who was no longer a virgin was also not an option (while he himself was no longer a

virgin). In addition, he also disagreed with people who married in the ʿurfi way, when they had too little money to get married in the regular way. As far as he was concerned, an ʿurfi marriage was less legitimate because there was no wedding and therefore less joy.

It seemed to me that Youssef struggled with modernity and his need for love on the one hand, but his respect for his culture, traditions, and values on the other. This dichotomy also came forth when asked about the financial expectations surrounding marriage and whether it would be better to reduce wedding costs, Youssef responded that it is worth considering. However, he also pointed out that it if the costs are then lowered, it could be challenging to determine if someone is genuinely hardworking and financially struggling due to a crisis or if they are just lazy.

The case of Youssef seems like it reveals a complex gap between ideals and reality. Despite the challenges Youssef faces in his life, his enthusiasm, energy, and willingness to help others showcase his persistence to succeed.

Ali

I got to know Ali through Youssef, and he was also one of the few guys from the group of friends who was actually proficient in English. That is why I spoke to Ali a lot, especially during my first period in Cairo. Ali was 29 years old and had an imposing appearance. He weighed about a hundred and twenty kilograms and his arms were covered in tattoos, but despite his tough, masculine appearance, it did not take long to find out that he was quite smart and gentle.

When we sat at an ahwa[86], he often arrived a little later on his roaring motorcycle, then sat down, lit a cigarette and started a game on his phone. In general, Ali was a big fan of games at all. Whether it was on his phone, a game of chess, or at home behind his PlayStation (of which he was very proud). He told me that he learned most of his English skills from playing video games and scrolling through social media like TikTok.

When I called Ali to ask him if he might be interested in doing the interview with me, he didn't immediately respond enthusiastically. It took some persuasion from Youssef to get Ali to help me. However, it turned out to be even easier to persuade Ali than to actually meet him. Twice he cancelled just before we were supposed to meet, and only the third time, when he arrived 3 hours late, did he manage to do the interview. I knew in advance about the Egyptian time and the non-binding way of meeting, but with a time limit of about two weeks, this was still frustrating and time-consuming. We met downstairs at my hostel, near ṭalʿat ḥarb square, to have a coffee and to prepare for the interview

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[86] ahwa, literally means coffee, but meant is one of the many coffee houses on the roadside.

and reassure him a little, since Ali was quite nervous. I arranged for us to meet on the roof of the hostel for once (normally Egyptians weren't allowed to visit), which reassured Ali that at least we had a quiet place to conduct the interview.

Ali worked in the travel industry, in the office of his uncle's tourism office. He had studied information technology, but he was happy that he had managed to find a job at all. Nevertheless, he hoped to find a job in the future that better suited his education and where he would be paid a little better. Still, he couldn't complain, "*al-ḥamdullilah*". For him, being an adult was to be independent, both financially and mentally, with no help needed from your family, it wasn't about marriage at all. "*No, at first you have to be able to take care of yourself and your crew. Only after you are able to do this, you can maybe think of starting a family.*" When I asked him if he wanted to get married he said that of course he wanted to get married, ideally at the age of 32, or at a maximum of 35. He wanted to marry someone he had known for a long time, and who he knew he would want to be with for the rest of his life. As far as he was concerned, his wife could be of any religion, "*kullina ahl al-kitāb*"[87]. When I asked him if his parents would agree with this, he said it was his decision, not his parents'. He did not seem extremely confident on whether he would succeed in finding the one before his own set maximum of 35 years old. This also had a specific reason; about three and a half years ago, his brother, with who he had been living together with, died in a tragic traffic accident. They supported each other financially, so apart from the fact that he lost his brother at a young age, he also suffered financially. On top of that, his mother had to move in with him (his parents had been divorced for a long time) because she too was having trouble making ends meet financially. His plans to save up money for a possible marriage could thus be put on hold. I asked him if he wouldn't consider an 'urfi marriage then. He was firm about that, "'*urfi is just paperwork, and marriage is not about paperwork, people have to know that you are together and in my opinion you don't need paperwork.*"

To conclude the interview, as I did with everyone, I asked Ali how he saw his future. Ali hoped that he could get married soon and start a family, because that was the purpose of life according to him. Until he got married the answer was simple; girlfriends. He had already had many girlfriends and would have many more.

It appeared evident that Ali had established a stable trajectory for his life; however, his aspirations to accumulate funds for a prospective marriage have been interrupted as a consequence of his brother's passing. The financial burden and the responsibility of caring for his mother have compelled him to temporarily set aside his plans.

Ali expresses a desire to find a job that better suits his education and pays him better. This suggests that he is experiencing a sense of frustration with his current situation and is actively seeking ways to

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[87] A common Egyptian saying, meaning: *we are all family of the book.*

improve it. He sees being an adult as being independent both financially and mentally, and is prioritizing achieving financial independence before starting a family, which seems very wise.

Umar

Somewhere in January of last year I crossed paths with Umar for the first time. It was a late evening and I was at an ahwa with a few friends amongst whom Youssef. I had been concentrating on my Arabic all evening, so I was tired and found myself lacking the energy to actively engage in the ongoing conversation. At times like these I usually zoned out and let my mind wander. When three men randomly joined us at our table because they knew Youssef, I met Umar. He could hardly speak English and since I was tired, communicating was very difficult. Thanks to Youssef's translations and the necessary gesticulation, we managed to have an enjoyable evening. We decided to exchange phone numbers before I headed home to get some necessary sleep.

As time went on, Umar and I developed a close friendship. I attended school during the day, while Umar followed a different routine. He did not have a job so he didn't have a lot of responsibilities. He would stay up very late, hanging around at the ahwa's, playing chess and smoking cigarettes. Around the time that I finished my classes, Umar would get up to go out and meet me at an ahwa. During these daily meet ups my Arabic improved substantially and improving my Arabic subsequently meant strengthening our friendship.

When I came back a year later to conduct interviews, Umar was happy to help me. Thanks to our daily meetings the year prior, I was therefore confident in conducting my first interview in Egyptian with him. One problem was that we only had three days together, since he was in the army in the meantime. This meant that he would be in Cairo only occasionally throughout the year, and would be stationed somewhere on an army base in an undisclosed location for the rest of the year.

On the second day, after catching up a bit, I gave him the stencil and he promised to prepare well for the interview. The next day we met, of course late in the afternoon. However, I had no idea what would be a suitable location to conduct the interview, as this time I would conduct it entirely in the Egyptian dialect, and Umar was a familiar face in all the surrounding ahwa's. After wandering around in vain for a while through the neighbourhoods of ʿābdīn, mūnīra and wisṭ al-balad, we decided to conduct the interview somewhere in a quiet side street, between two permanently parked cars. It felt very sketchy to conduct the interview in this place, but we didn't have a better alternative at the time.

As promised, Umar had prepared the interview well, and had already written down a number of keywords to each question. Umar was 24 years old at the time of the interview and was still studying commerce. He hadn't finished his studies yet for a reason, because as long as you were studying, you

didn't have to spend as long in the army. Being a student, he was 'only' required to serve in the military for a period ranging from 12 to 18 months, otherwise he might have served up to 36 months. He said that he thought this was very unfair, as additionally men who are the only son, the breadwinner, or whose brother is already serving in the army, are exempted. Consequently, Umar believed that he had already begun his life with a disadvantage, feeling as if he was starting at a score of 1-0 against him.

As for getting married, according to Umar, it was very simple. He wanted to get married, but really the only problem was money. He was lucky enough his parents were able to afford an appartement in Sheikh Zayed City, but he did not have the financial means to cover for the rest of the expenses. He told me there were several ways to get money for the marriage. For example, you could use ǧamiʿiyyāt, take a loan from the bank, or ask for help from your family. When I asked him if he would consider any of these methods, he said that one thing led to another, and he knew many people who got into debt because of it and couldn't pay it off.

The lack of money led many young people who wanted to get married to turn to ʿurfi marriage. Umar turned out strongly against the ʿurfi marriage. It would lead to problems and it was also not a legitimate marriage, according to him it was considered by society as a zawāǧ mutʿa.

I'm not sure if he didn't feel comfortable telling it during the interview, or if he had learned a lesson from the past, but a day later he told me 'off the records' that a few years earlier he himself had engaged in an ʿurfi marriage. Out of the blue, he showed me the original marriage contract and told me his experience. He had fallen in love with a girl in his teens and luckily this love was mutual. After a period of secretly dating, they wanted to seal their love, so they decided to go to a lawyer to put words into action. After a while, they wanted to step out of the shadows, so Umar decided to go to the girl's parents, confess honestly about the ʿurfi marriage, and immediately ask for her hand in a traditional marriage. However, her parents felt disrespected that Umar and their daughter had done this behind their backs and also did not consider Umar financially stable enough to marry their daughter. Since that given moment it was forbidden to interact with each other and love had slowly faded.

Despite the loss of his great love and the prospect of completing his military service, Umar was positive about his future. He would find a job (*in šā'allah*) after the army, save up, find a wife and move with her into his apartment.

Umar's experience of waithood is marked by a strategic delay in pursuing his studies to minimize his time in the army, yet simultaneously extending the duration required to acquire the necessary qualifications for entry into the labour market. Although his parents possess the means to purchase an apartment, Umar still faces challenges in entering into marriage, particularly in the conventional manner rather than through an ʿurfi marriage.

Ahmed

Ahmed was one of the boys in the neighbourhood who could not be found around the ahwa's every night. That was also the reason that I didn't know him as well, and I even thought he might have been married. At one point, a group of friends and I decided to gather at a famous restaurant called ḥaḍramawt ʿantar in madinat al-salām district to bid farewell to Umar, who had to go back to the army. While enjoying a table full of traditional dishes such as stuffed pigeon, moloḫiyya and waraʾ ʿinab, I found myself engaged in a genuine conversation with Ahmed for the first time. I shared details about my project with him, and it piqued his interest. Being a lawyer, he believed he could offer an intriguing perspective on my questions, especially when compared to the other boys in the neighbourhood. And so it happened - we arranged to meet at his parents' house, an apartment in a huge housing block in wisṭ al-balad. It was a delightful setting talking in Ahmeds' room, as it permitted us to talk uninterrupted, and it clearly made Ahmed feel more comfortable so he could give his answers with unrestricted freedom.

Ahmed grew up in the area and went to high school in assayida zaynab, a renowned *šāʿbī* area.[88] While some of his friends became officers and doctors, others became criminals. He, "*al-ḥamdullilah*", became a lawyer. Proud he showed me his business card. Upon seeing his business card, I asked him if he deemed himself lucky to have found a job with the current labour market. He did not agree with the difficulties in the labour market. "*illi ʿāyiz yištraġal hayištraġal* ". The one who wants to work will work. He had had a part-time job since primary school and believed that Egyptian youth often blamed the Egyptian state too easily. Instead of feeling sad, the youth had to concentrate on themselves and their personal development. He more or less took the same attitude on the postponement of marriage. According to him, if you found someone, you loved her, and you wanted to marry her, you would do anything to make it happen. You would work any job to meet the standards of marriage. She would be the motivation.

In his view it was too short-sighted to say that postponing marriage was a social problem. Everyone had their own living conditions. He brought up an example of his father, who had gotten married when he was forty years old, while his brother wanted to start a family quickly and was therefore already married at the age of 23. Ahmed himself did not wanted to get married yet. His personal focus at this moment was on developing himself and his career as a lawyer. He showed me a picture of a fancy sports car on Instagram, indicating his intention to buy the car first, before considering the prospect of a potential life partner.

I asked him if he had ever loved anyone. Yes, was the answer. When he was 23 years old, he had already been in love once. He called it *ḥubb murāhiqa*, or teenage love. When I further questioned

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[88] šāʿbī means "of the people", specifically "locally popular", but is sometimes used for poor too.

him, however, it seemed to go beyond innocent teenage love. He had already been engaged with her. He had even gone to her parents to ask for her hand in marriage. He had received both his parents' and her parents' blessings. His parents wanted him to get married so that he could have a more consistent life and thus stay out of trouble more easily. In fact, his parents were so eager for him to get married that they offered to pay for practically everything. If he had really wanted to at the time, he would have been married by now. At the time, however, he thought it was too much responsibility, because it meant that he would lose a lot of freedom, and he actually wanted to be able to pay for his own wedding, not rely on his parents. For those reasons, he had withdrawn himself from the engagement.

Ahmed held an optimistic outlook on his future. He aspired to work diligently towards opening his own law office, viewing this as an important milestone. Success in this endeavour would then open up the possibility of buying the long-wanted sports car. Only after accomplishing these two goals did he perceive himself as being prepared for marriage and its responsibilities. However, Ahmed did acknowledge the possibility of an unexpected twist. There was a possibility that he would meet his *naṣīb*, or destined love, along the way. In such a scenario, the trajectory of his life could suddenly change, potentially leading to an accelerated path towards marriage. An example where he had seen this happen before was with his cousin. His cousin was indulged in 'single-life' activities such as drugs, promiscuity, travel, and alcohol until he encountered his naṣīb. Following their meeting, his cousin underwent a transformation, shedding his previous recklessness and embracing a more responsible lifestyle. Ahmed, therefore, did not rule out a similar trajectory for his future.

Ahmed's situation offers an intriguing perspective on waithood, as he seems to be less affected by its drawbacks compared to the others. Ahmed chooses to prioritize his professional development and financial stability ahead of marriage despite having a stable job and the financial support of his parents. It is also noteworthy that he withdrew from his engagement, indicating experiencing a relatively low level of pressure from family and perhaps even society.

The emphasis Ahmed places on personal effort and individual responsibility is another outstanding feature. Rather than blaming the state for the challenges faced by young people, he adopts a philosophy of self-reliance and personal development. Although Ahmed's perspective exhibits a positive outlook on personal agency, it is also important to take into account the larger socioeconomic and political variables that shape the experiences of young people. It is important to consider the consequences of Ahmed's approach, as it raises questions about the extent to which individual efforts can address the structural issues associated with waithood.

Amir

During my second period in Cairo, I developed a regular routine of dining at a local street restaurant called Ornina, situated on Mohammed Mahmoud Street in the area ʿābdīn. The establishment, run by a Syrian couple, specialized in delicious homemade dishes served on simple plastic tables and chairs set up on the street. For me it was often cheaper to go and eat here than to do groceries and cook food myself. With limited seating available, I gradually became familiar with the faces of other frequent guests as I continued to visit Ornina.

One evening, one of these familiar faces approached me with curiosity, asking about my regular presence at the restaurant. Jokingly, I redirected the question back to him, asking why he, too, was a frequent visitor. In response, the face broke into laughter and introduced himself as Amir. Amir, a 27-year-old, had been living in wisṭ al-balad since 2014. He was originally born and raised in šobra, a working-class district. The reason for moving to wisṭ al-balad was the passing of his grandmother. At that time, his unmarried uncle decided to inhabit his grandmother's house, and Amir was asked to join his uncle. As time went on, Amir's uncle eventually got married, and Amir stayed living in his grandmother's old house, which he has called home ever since. We talked for a bit and exchanged numbers, so we could meet up once in a while, to share a meal together at Ornina.

Amir proved to be a good conversation partner, always open and forthcoming in our conversations. I believed he could be a fresh perspective beyond my regular circle of friends, so I reached out to him, and we arranged to meet.

Regrettably, when we met, Amir told me that our tradition of dining at Ornina could no longer continue. The restaurant's owner had passed away, leaving his wife to single-handedly attempt to keep Ornina operational. Despite her efforts, she ultimately made the difficult decision to permanently close its doors.

Ornina being closed, we sat down at an 'ahwa across the street called Porto. I ordered a coffee for both of us. We started the interview. Amir considered himself and his family situation to be middle class. His family could always make ends meet, but had no extra money for holidays or the like. Nevertheless, he cherished a pleasant childhood. He had completed his high school relatively easily and then made the decision to enrol in the military academy. Eventually, he graduated from the Air Force and became an aircraft mechanic, a role he succinctly referred to as an Army Officer. He was satisfied with where he was now in life, or as he said "*al-wadaʿ dilwaqti kuwayyis*", i.e. the situation is good now.

As he was not yet married, I asked him if he considered himself an adult. Amused, he laughed and remarked that he already had laughed at this question when he had read the stencil. Of course, he considered himself an adult. He was fully capable of taking care of himself, fulfilling his

responsibilities, and living independently. He emphasized to me that the concept of maturity in this context was synonymous with its interpretation abroad, such as in the Netherlands. According to him, the traditional correlation between marriage and being recognized as an adult was out-dated and no longer applicable in today's society. Amir contended that there were numerous young people who got married early, in whatever way, but were unable to sustain themselves or carry their responsibilities adequately. Consequently, society did not automatically regard them as adults. Amir found Singerman's assumption overly simplistic and generalizing in this regard.

Speaking of marriage, Amir continued to discuss his personal situation. He explained that he had not yet entered into matrimony primarily due to the timing and the challenging financial conditions present in Egypt. The country had been significantly impacted by inflation resulting from the COVID-19 crisis and the war between Ukraine and Russia. Nevertheless, he had saved a considerable amount and with the possession of an apartment, the material conditions were favourable to get married. He had already found a suitable partner, and both families were currently at the stage where they were getting to know each other, to see if it would all be a good fit. Amir emphasized the importance of sharing a similar intellectual and socioeconomic background with his future partner, as he believed disparities in these aspects could lead to future conflicts. He exercised patience in making a well-informed decision, recognizing the high divorce rate prevalent in Egypt. By avoiding a hasty marriage, he aimed to prevent such an outcome. He did not experience any external pressure from his parents or from society. He was ultimately the one who made the choice, and his parents played a supportive role to guide him ensuring he made a good decision.

During the interview, Amir placed significant emphasis on the importance of upbringing/education (ṭarbiyya). He expressed that education begins within the family unit, where from a young age, children learn the distinction between right and wrong, as well as the do's and don'ts of life. A proper upbringing instils a strong work ethic and a sense of responsibility. Amir believed that a well-rounded upbringing also would prevent young men from sexually harassing women and it would keep them closer to their Islamic values. It could also be a reason for the postponement of marriage, like in Amir's own case, as men would possess the qualities of patience and self-sufficiency. This ability to prioritize self-care and personal developments would then contribute to their readiness for marriage at a later stage.

Despite Amir's stable situation, as an officer in the army and his independent living, the challenging financial conditions prevailing in his country have led him to postpone his wedding. However, his decision is not solely based on financial considerations; he also exhibits patience in order to ensure that he enters into marriage with the right person, thereby minimizing the risk of future divorce. Contrary to the commonly held belief, Amir challenges the notion that marriage is an inherent marker of adulthood. He argues that this correlation is not universally applicable and oversimplifies the

complexities of adulthood. According to him, true adulthood should be assessed based on an individual's capacity to independently carry responsibilities, make informed decisions, and demonstrate self-sufficiency.

Samir

There were moments when I grew tired of drinking coffee and tea every night, and yearned for a beer that resonated with my European sensibilities. However, being surrounded by many Muslim friends who did not drink alcohol, I sought a place that could cater my desires. Al-ḥuriyya, a renowned cafe in wisṭ al-balad established in 1936, held a special allure as it was said to have been a colonial meeting place of English officers and other VIPs. Stepping into the cafe would transport you to a bygone era, and people were always available to have a chat. Often I went to al-ḥuriyya alone, but on occasions when Youssef was free from work, he would accompany me. Every now and then, his other friends, including Samir, would join us.

It didn't take long for me to understand the reason why Samir did join and drink alcohol with me. On the side of his wrist he had a cross tattoo, a distinct symbol commonly associated with Coptic Christians in Egypt. Samir explained he was a skilled teacher of both guitar and lute, which directly uncovered our shared passion for music as I also happen to play the guitar. We would talk about music for a couple of hours, accompanied by a couple of 0,5L bottles of Egyptian Stella beers, until the café closed its doors. A decision was made to meet at his place in ʿābdīn for a jam session, where Samir had an extensive collection of guitars and lutes.

We started jamming regularly, and that's how I got to know Samir well. So it seemed like a good candidate for an interview, not only because we felt comfortable with each other, but the fact that Samir was a Coptic Christian seemed like an interesting angle.

Samir turned out to have grown up in Kuwait, but moved to Egypt around his 10th birthday. He spoke extensively about his experience of the differences between the two worlds. He quoted an anecdote explaining the difference in economies between the two countries. He was sent down by his father to get bread, when he asked for a bag with it, he had to pay extra for the plastic bag. Something that had always been a free matter of course in Kuwait. He continued that he initially had trouble fitting in with his peers. Both in ʿābdīn and at the church he didn't quite fit in. In the end he did find some friends, including Youssef and Umar.

He was currently a music teacher, but had not always been. Previously, he had worked as a repairman of electronic devices, among other things, but he had already made many career shifts. He said about

his situation the following: sabaʿ ṣanāʾir wi al-baḫt ḍāyiʿ which translates into*: I have 7 qualifications, but no luck.*

When asked about his perspective on adulthood, Samir initially remarked that men never truly grow up. However, upon deeper contemplation, he recognized that maturity transcends age, financial status, or marriage. In his view, true maturity originates from education, encompassing not only formal knowledge from home, but also wisdom and education fit for the streets. It was crucial, he emphasized, to primarily focus on self-improvement rather than fixate on societal divisions of wealth and class. Demonstrating maturity meant consciously evading trouble and overcoming its effect on one's life.

As our conversation naturally progressed, we effortlessly transitioned to the topic of marriage. However, Samir exhibited a degree of scepticism towards marriage. He voiced his belief that many people perceive marriage solely as a means for sexual gratification an procreation, growing disinterested in their partners once those two primal needs are fulfilled. Due to this, Samir observed many problems which couples had to deal with, ranging from heated arguments and divorces to even legal battles. Consequently, he regarded marriage as a weighty matter, acknowledging that he himself was not yet ready to undertake such a commitment.

Samir had set his sights on alternative goals, surpassing the importance he placed on marriage. The most important of these aspirations was his desire to acquire a Ferrari. He held the conviction that once he possessed such a luxury car, women would naturally be drawn to him. At the same time however, he expressed deep concern regarding temporary women, complaining that women had an excessive focus on material wealth and a scarcity of genuine love. He remarked that nowadays, a man had to possess the qualities and material wealth of Ali Baba or Sinbad to capture the attention and affection of modern women.

Only once in his life had Samir truly experienced love – a profound connection that extended beyond physical desires and material wealth. It was a relationship where he and his partner profoundly understood each other and he unequivocally felt that she was his soulmate. Regrettably, their path to matrimony was obstructed by challenging financial circumstances, stemming from his inability to secure a well-paying job. As time passed, the age disparity between them contributed to her eventually losing faith in their future together, leading to their separation. Since then, Samir had refrained from pursuing romantic relationships, as his heart still carried the weight of that significant bond. Recognizing the sensitivity of the topic, I decided to respect the emotional boundaries and change the subject accordingly.

I questioned him about the disparities between the Christian faith and Islam concerning marriage, Samir elucidated that within Christianity, the concept of marriage entails a lifelong commitment. According to his understanding, once a Christian individual enters into a marriage, the option of

separation becomes virtually non-existent. Consequently, there was substantial pressure to carefully select the right partner, as making a wrong choice would result in being indefinitely bound to that decision. Moreover, while financial considerations may hold lesser importance in the Christian context when it comes to the ability to enter into marriage, the minimum was deemed to be having a separate home from your parents.

The interview with Samir provides an interesting glimpse into the life and perspective of Samir, with a focus on his experiences, aspirations, and views on marriage and waithood. Among the individuals interviewed thus far, Samir emerges as someone who encountered considerable hardship due to economic circumstances. As the oldest participant at the age of 32, he has doubts about the possibility of marrying in the future, indicative of the challenges he faces in establishing stable personal and financial foundations. Samir's story highlights some aspects of waithood as he navigates through different career paths, seeks meaningful relationships, and contemplates marriage. He expresses frustration with his current situation, and his statement, "I have 7 qualifications, but no luck," reflects the frustration and disillusionment that can arise from a prolonged of waiting for financial opportunities. Despite his experiences, Samir underscores the need for people to focus on self-improvement and personal development rather than attributing their circumstances to external factors, such as the Egyptian state.

Collective reflection

The comprehensive analysis of the interviews provides a nuanced understanding of how each participant experiences waithood in their everyday lives. While it is crucial to assess their experiences individually, it is equally important to examine them collectively, identifying both the similarities and differences that emerge across their stories and life circumstances. By considering the broader patterns and unique variations within their narratives, we can gain a deeper insight into the diverse realities of waithood and the many ways in which individuals navigate this transitional phase.

The findings of the interviews indicate that participants belonging to the Egyptian middle class perceive the consequences of waithood to varying degrees, depending on their individual circumstances. None of the participants were married yet, primarily due to their inability to accumulate the necessary financial resources. The exception was Ahmed, whose parents were financially capable of supporting his marriage. However, each participant faced specific obstacles in saving money. For instance, Ali and Youssef were responsible for caring for family members following the loss of a loved one, which prevented them from saving despite having employment. Umar chose to postpone his studies to reduce his time in the army, resulting in a prolonged duration before entering the labour market. Samir and Ahmed held stable jobs, while Amir struggled to secure a

well-paying position. These findings emphasize that not only economic factors but also external circumstances hindered the participants' ability to get married, highlighting an aspect often overlooked in waithood literature.

The experiences of the participants shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced in the pursuit of marriage within the context of waithood. It is important to recognize that beyond economic barriers, external factors such as familial responsibilities, military service, or even a revolution or pandemic play significant roles in hindering their path towards marriage. Understanding and addressing these external factors is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of waithood and its impact on individuals' lives.

With the exception of Amir, it was observed that the majority of participants, regardless of their age, continued to reside with their parents. Significantly, it is worth noting that all participants reported having positive relationships with their parents. This finding challenges the notion that traditional family structures are necessarily associated with resistance to progress or the delay of individual independence. Interestingly, none of the participants expressed a sense of urgency or pressure to leave the familial home, indicating a departure from the traditional expectation of early departure. While occasional introductions or discussions about romantic relationships occurred, it was not driven by external pressure but rather stemmed from the parents' desire for grandchildren. These findings highlight the complexities and variations within familial dynamics and underscore the importance of understanding the nuanced interactions between waithood, familial support, and societal expectations.

In contrast to the findings discussed in the literature review, the concept of ʿurfi marriage was perceived as socially unacceptable among the participants, and did not seem popular. None of the participants expressed willingness to consider this form of marriage, except for Umar, who had previously entered in such a marriage. However, it became apparent that the ʿurfi marriage did not provide a lasting solution, and even Umar had ultimately abandoned the idea.

Furthermore, an interesting observation was the internalization of neoliberal ideologies by some participants, a phenomenon that aligns with the concerns raised in the literature review. Both Samir and Ahmed expressed the belief that young individuals should not hold the state or societal divisions of wealth and class accountable for their challenges, but rather prioritize personal development. While Ahmed's perspective could be attributed to his professional standing as a lawyer, it is noteworthy that Samir, despite acknowledging his possession of seven qualifications without finding success, appears to have internalized the neoliberalist discourse, which tends to individualize and depoliticize systemic issues. This finding highlights the impact of neoliberal ideology on the participants' perceptions, potentially shaping their understanding of their own struggles in a manner that obscures larger societal and structural factors.

A striking finding was the prevailing belief among the participants that marriage is no longer inherently linked to adulthood in contemporary society. According to their perspectives, indicators of maturity encompassed factors such as assuming responsibility, possessing qualities like life experience, dignity, and generosity, and achieving mental and financial independence. The participants emphasized that maturity transcends age, financial status, or marital status, as highlighted by Samir's perspective. Additionally, it was noteworthy that some individuals who were married at a young age were not necessarily regarded as adults, as acknowledged by Amir. These findings provide evidence challenging the traditional notion that marriage serves as the definitive marker of adulthood in the Middle Eastern context.

The emerging theme of patience for true love and the belief in naṣīb, or destined love, is noteworthy among the participants. Marriage is viewed not solely as a means for sexual gratification and procreation, but as a profound commitment. Ali, for instance, desires to date someone and take the time to ensure a lifelong connection, while Ahmed prioritizes his career while remaining open to the possibility of meeting his destined partner. Amir demonstrates patience in seeking perfection to avoid future divorce. These perspectives align with the ideas presented in "The Price of Love: Valentine's Day in Egypt and its Enemies," where the concept of a stereotypical middle class lifestyle, sought after by political factions due to its social centrality and alignment with Egyptian modernism, emphasizes emotional expression and fulfilment within the institution of marriage.[89] The participants' experiences with marriage reflect their navigation of societal expectations, cultural values, and modern influences, highlighting the role of love and marriage as a means through which individuals shape their identities amidst evolving social dynamics, nationalism, and cultural shifts in Egyptian society.

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[89] Aymon Kreil, The Price of Love: Valentine's Day in Egypt and its Enemies. *The Arab Studies Journal* 24, no.2 (fall 2016): 140.

Conclusion

This research has delved into the first-hand experiences and everyday realities of waithood within the middle class population of Egypt. Through an comprehensive analysis of the available literature and the conduct of six in-depth interviews, we have gathered a substantial body of material that has eventually allowed us to address our research question; what is the lived experience of waithood among middle class unmarried men in Egypt? The examination of the existing body of literature on waithood has enabled us to situate our research within the broader academic discourse on youth transitions, economic hardships, and other challenges faced by young Egyptians in their journey towards adulthood. A strong foundation for the research findings were created by combining and critically evaluating a variety of scholarly literature.

The findings from the study shed light on various aspects related to waithood and marriage among participants from the Egyptian middle class. The first set of findings highlights the challenges participants face in saving money for marriage, with economic factors and external circumstances playing significant roles in hindering their progress. Although the economic hardships are consistent with the pre-existing literature, several personal factors emerge that contribute to the financial difficulties. The second set of findings explores the participants' living arrangements, their relationships with their parents, and the absence of pressure to leave the familial home, challenging traditional expectations. The third set showed that ʿurfi marriages were seen as socially unacceptable, and my participants showed little interest in pursuing it, as it also became evident that it was not a viable long-term solution. The fourth set of findings reveals the internalization of neoliberal ideologies among some participants and their impact on perceiving personal development as a solution to societal issues. The fifth set of findings challenges the association of marriage with adulthood, emphasizing that maturity goes beyond age and marital status, but has more to do with the ability to carry your responsibilities. Lastly, the emerging theme of patience and the belief in destined love demonstrate participants' perspectives on marriage as a profound commitment influenced by societal expectations, cultural values, and modern influences.

This study has made a noteworthy contribution to the existing body of knowledge on waithood by presenting unique findings that depart from the generality and neoliberal perspectives often seen in the works of scholars like Singerman. In contrast to this previous literature, this study recognizes the individuality and diversity of experiences within waithood. It highlights the significance of personal stories and demonstrates how various factors contribute to the potential postponement of marriage. By considering these often overlooked aspects, this research expands our understanding of waithood in a more comprehensive and nuanced manner.

Despite the valuable contributions this study has made, it is also essential to acknowledge certain limitations. Firstly, the sample size of six participants is relatively small, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to the broader middle class population. Secondly, the language limitations could have posed a potential constraint as my proficiency in Egyptian Colloquial Dialect is not perfect. Lastly, it is crucial to recognize the inherent subjectivity and potential bias in qualitative research. My personal background, experiences, perspectives and the fact that my participants were all acquaintances to some extent, could have led to some degree of subjectivity in the research process.

Considering the acknowledged limitations, it is recommended that future research projects undertake qualitative comparative studies encompassing diverse socioeconomic classes, including individuals from both upper- and lower-class backgrounds. Such comparative studies would provide valuable insights into the variations and similarities in waithood experiences across different segments of Egyptian society. By examining the variables that influence waithood within socioeconomic circumstances, a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon can be achieved. This approach would contribute to the broader understanding of waithood as a social and cultural construct, enabling researchers to grasp the nuanced complexities and dynamics that shape individuals' experiences of waithood across the entire Egyptian population, not just the middle class.

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