

The Post Covid-19 Pandemic: New Normal for Egyptian Women



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List of Acronyms

CBE	Central Bank of Egypt
FLFP	Female Labour Force Participation
GoE	Government of Egypt
LMPS	Labour Market Panel Surveys
MSMEDA	Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise Development Agency
NCW	National Council for Women





1) *Introduction*

The economic empowerment of women is a main pillar of the Egypt National Strategy for Women's Empowerment 2030¹, which sets out several mechanisms to achieve this goal. These include a) expanding employment options; b) increasing Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP); c) providing equal opportunities in all sectors (including entrepreneurship and the private sector); and d) assumption of key positions by women in both public sector and private entities. Concurrently, the strategy aims to guarantee opportunities for greater social participation of women, expand capacities of choice, and work towards the eradication of practices that are discriminative and harmful against women within the family and in the public sphere. This paper aims to envision the future of economic empowerment of Egyptian women in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Not since the end of the Second World War has the world seen disruption comparable to the events of this past year. During the first three months of the outbreak, several scenarios were put forward by different entities for the future of the world. Many scenarios were excessively pessimistic, forecasting exponential spread of the disease and impact on all aspects of human life including declining production rates, decreasing investments and global trade, scarcity of goods, shortages of basic services, and heightened rates of poverty, unemployment, violence, and crime. This pessimistic scenario went on to warn that even if the outbreak receded, the resulting damage would trigger a lengthy period of unprecedented suffering. At the other extreme, there were those who completely underestimated the impact of the pandemic and predicted no more than a few weeks of inconvenience before the resumption of normal life.

¹ The National Council for Women (NCW). *Egypt National Strategy for Women's Empowerment 2030 (2017)*.



Today, one year after the start of the outbreak in early 2020, the global scene remains alarming (Table 1). The first half of the year witnessed around 10.2 million cases of infection. During the second half, the rate of infection accelerated, reaching almost 15 million more cases during July and August, 20 million cases during September and October, and 36 million in November and December. In addition, an increasing number of countries are witnessing new strains of the virus, expanding uncertainty over methods of transmission, prevention, and treatment. In light of such challenges, health care institutions are racing against time to bring the outbreak under control by providing a safe vaccine to most of the global population.

In Egypt, data indicate that the number of positive cases amounted to approx. 137,000 by the end of 2020. However, the number of actual positive cases may be much higher due to the difficulty of counting cases that receive treatment at home or through the private sector. A survey conducted by Baseera estimated the cumulative number of COVID-19 cases at 2.9 million cases at the end of 2020². It should be noted that the number of deaths caused by COVID-19 during 2020 amounted to approx. 7,500, which is equivalent to 1.3% of the total deaths occurring in Egypt during 2019³.

² Covid-19 Infections Survey, The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera), January 2021.

³ The total number of deaths in Egypt in 2019 reached 570,580, according to the Births and Deaths Bulletin issued by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS).



Table 1: Cumulative number of COVID-19 confirmed positive cases and deaths (Egypt & World)⁴

Date	Egypt		World	
	Confirmed Cases	Deaths	Confirmed Cases	Deaths
To April 30, 2020	5,537	392	3,111,069	225,232
To June 30, 2020	66,754	2,872	10,181,831	502,059
To August 31, 2020	98,727	5,399	25,166,661	846,268
To October 30, 2020	107,385	6,258	45,553,143	1,189,184
To December 31, 2020	136,644	7,576	81,540,597	1,800,298

The future holds both challenges and opportunities. This report assumes a moderate scenario that envisions adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy in both the short and medium terms, especially if a second wave or new strains emerge in several countries worldwide. This view also suggests, however, that adopting appropriate effective national policies and interventions can minimize losses while also maximizing benefit from various opportunities presented by current circumstances.

The report assumes that the pandemic, with all its associated disruption, will change patterns of daily life including business practice, access to services, work, learning, entertainment, and time use, creating a new reality. This “new normal” will necessitate forging a new path for sustainable development, with both negative and positive repercussions on critical issues. If properly “engineered”, this paradigm shift may prove beneficial to the dossier of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

⁴ <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/eg> & <https://covid19.who.int>



2) The Economic Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Egyptian economy is affected by global changes. Thinking of paths for the Egyptian economy in light of the pandemic and beyond should not be isolated from the pandemic implications on the global economy. Box 1 presents the features of the global economy in the post-pandemic phase and concludes with some transformation recommendations for the Egyptian economy.

Box 1: The Post-pandemic Economy – Mahmoud Mohieldin⁵

Characteristics of the global economy:

1. Economic performance dominated by a healthy recovery.
2. Unbalanced growth of the world economy.
3. Reshaped globalization.
4. Growing role of smart and sustainable investments.
5. Escalating debt problems for emerging financial markets.

Considerations related to the Egyptian economy in preparation for the post-pandemic:

1. The sources of future growth should depend more on exports and private investments, both Egyptian and foreign.
2. Increasing growth and exports necessitate a qualitative shift in the investment ratio in GDP from the actual of less than 14% to exceed 20%. This should be accompanied by increased efforts to mobilize national savings, which in concept and action exceed the savings of individuals to savings of government and business sectors, including all requirements for developing national savings policies.
3. In order to bridge the savings gap, the importance of using foreign savings in direct and indirect investments will surface, in order for international borrowing to finance development does not to surpass the levels of good management of public debt.

⁵ M. Mohieldin (2021).



It should be noted that despite the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on most world economies, the Egyptian economy has been holding up remarkably well. According to IMF estimates, Egypt achieved the second largest economic growth among emerging economies with a growth rate of 3.6%. A study measuring the impact of Government of Egypt (GoE) interventions on GDP concluded that without the package of interventions, GDP in Q2 may have declined by 8.7%, whereas it only declined by 1.1%⁶. The study estimated GDP growth rate for year 2019/2020 at approx. 3.8%, double the estimates if the interventions not been deployed.

With a new wave of the pandemic expected through 2021, continued resilience of the Egyptian economy while the global economy is in crisis depends on the extent to which the economy can cope with the disruptions shaping this “new normal”. The following points illustrate a vision for the factors that are expected to affect the Egyptian economy:

- A “low-touch” economy and a business environment based on social distancing where interactions and transactions are carried out with minimum physical contact and with precautionary measures in mind. This pattern may continue in the post pandemic for reasons related to efficiency and service delivery speed.
- A change in global trade trends, a growth in e-commerce, a change in the demand pattern favouring certain goods and services, a greater interest in self-sufficiency, and a decline in remittances from workers abroad to their families.
- Accelerated digital transformation and the occurrence of leapfrogs in communications and IT applications in the business environment, learning, access to services, and in daily life practices.

⁶ Breisinger et al. (2020).



- A work environment more receptive to different styles (working from home or remotely) allowing flexible working hours but requiring a new set of skills to compete in the labour market.
- A different learning environment that focuses on self and e-learning which require a new technological setting and a fresh set of life skills. However, this technological setting and new skills may not be accessible to everyone and could result in inequality that must be taken into account.
- Family environments where traditional roles are changing and where unpaid care work may be redistributed in a more balanced manner.
- Winning sectors that provide opportunities for investment and job creation and losing sectors overlooked by investment and subject to shrinking employment.

There is no doubt that moving to this new reality requires cross cutting arrangements, measures, and interventions. Such packages should remain unbiased against women, either intentionally or unintentionally. Table 2 presents implications of such changes on economic sectors and winner/loser sector classification according to their role in the empowerment of women.





Table 2: Classification of economic sectors according to vulnerability and relative importance for the economic empowerment of women

Expected impacts of the pandemic	Classification of sectors according to importance in the employment of women		
	High	Average	Low
Winning sectors	Education Health Agriculture	Communications and IT	Water, wastewater and recycling
Unaffected sectors	Wholesale and retail Government and public bodies	Personal services Business services Social insurance and insurance	Transportation and storage Gas and petroleum extraction, petroleum refining. Electricity
Losing sectors	Micro and small enterprises	Transformative industries. Restaurants and hotels. Financial Intermediation and ancillary activities	Construction. Real estate.

3) *The Economic Empowerment of Women Given Pandemic Implications*

The new reality is expected to reshape aspects related to the economic empowerment of Egyptian women. The figure below highlights the areas where effects of the pandemic are expected to be felt creating either opportunities or risks.



a. Women Economic Participation

All surveys indicate a decrease in Female Labour Force Participation (FLFP). According to the Labour Market Panel Surveys (LMPS), in 1998, FLFP was estimated at 21%, rising to reach 27% in 2006 followed by a decline to 23% in 2012. In 2018, FLFP has continued to decline reaching 20%. The aforementioned decline could be explained by the reluctance of women to join the labour market or by women classifying themselves as jobseekers due to a lack of access to viable job opportunities. The pandemic implications on FLFP include a number of positive factors that may encourage more females of all ages to enter the labour market, including:

- growing positive perceptions towards entrepreneurship;
- increasing loans and grants allocated to women to finance new enterprises, whether micro, small, or medium (MSMEs);



- access to flexible work styles allowing a balance between the woman's productive role and assumption of family burdens; and
- a public sphere that provides working women a greater degree of safety and less commuting.

b. Female Unemployment

The female unemployment rate is 21.7%⁷ for 2019. Half of these unemployed females have a university degree. This confirms the gap between achievements by women in education versus employment. The post-pandemic phase may witness a decline in female unemployment rates as a result of limited access to new job opportunities in winning sectors, namely: pharmaceuticals, communications and IT, and health and educational services. Unemployed females must increase their capabilities to become eligible to compete for job opportunities provided by the winning sectors. On the other hand, the risks arising from a possible reduction in employment in losing sectors will lead to an increase in unemployment for both men and women alike. Unemployment rates are expected to increase in sectors of tourism, entertainment, construction, and the garment industry, in addition to a general recession caused by the pandemic and the pessimistic business climate affecting the volume of foreign and national investments. Therefore, there is no doubt that successful policies and interventions would maximize positive and reduce negative impact, thus preventing higher female unemployment rates.

c. Working Women

As previously mentioned, the post-COVID-19 era will involve significant shifts in the work environment. These transformations include a move towards increased remote working and expanded adoption of flexible hours. This provides

⁷ CAPMAS, Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2019 (2020).



women employed in the formal sector with greater opportunities to strike a balance between their work requirements and family responsibilities. However, the success of women in the new work environment requires acquisition and mastery of new skills and behaviours. These skills include the use of telecommunications and IT in remote work, effective communication through “video conference” techniques, teamwork, leadership, and the acquisition of knowledge and experiences through an environment based on social distancing. A set of behaviours related to effective and efficient remote working is required too, including discipline, commitment, rapid response, time management, and performance of tasks to the required quality without direct supervision. The success that women attain in the new work environment determines the extent to which they will continue to work and determines their chances of advancement. Therefore, programs for female capacity building must take an appropriate approach to the new work environment.

It may be appropriate here to differentiate between females employed by the formal public sector versus the private sector. In the public sector, formally employed females constitute approximately 41% of total female employment. Their risk of losing jobs is limited and advancement opportunities are present at a higher rate, particularly for women who are able to master skills and adopt behaviours required for the new work environment. In the formal private sector, which employs almost a quarter of total working females, opportunities differ according to the sector. Risks of job loss are concentrated in losing sectors that face problems related to production and exportation of goods and services, a challenge not to be underestimated and which requires employed females to become more competitive in the labour market, either to retain their current jobs or to gain access to equivalent jobs in winning sectors. This may require appropriate transformative training.

In the informal sector, which represents almost a third of total female employment, negative challenges are also extensive. To address these challenges, parallel interventions are required to support women working in the informal



sector while gradually transitioning them into the formal sector. An alternative path is to promote entrepreneurship and encourage women working in the informal sector to establish their own small productive or service projects.

Policies and programs must also take into account the distribution of employed women among different economic sectors, since interventions differ according to the sector (manufacturing, agriculture, or services).

d. Care Work and Unpaid Work

Working women suffer from the double burden of undertaking both paid work and unpaid care work in the form of household chores. Regardless of her role as a working woman, she receives little support from the male family members in shouldering domestic or family burdens. In light of the new reality, there is an opportunity to more equitably distribute this unfair distribution of roles.

According to the 2018 LMPS , the definition of “extended female labour participation” includes counting females participating in the production or processing of primary commodities for domestic consumption, which corresponds to a participation rate of 37% for women in the labour market. This percentage exceeds the rate of women's participation in the labour market, according to the earlier definition of FLFP. The difference between both rates (17%) indicates the volume of unpaid care work at home provided by women to their families. This high percentage justifies exerting more efforts towards the equitable redistribution of unpaid care work roles within the family.

e. Access of Females to Economic Resources and Capacity Development

Access to economic resources is one of the key tools for women’s economic empowerment. This includes access to finance and credit facilities allowing women to establish their own new project or expand existing ones. In recent



years, Egypt has come a long way towards expanding financial inclusion for women. The pandemic period has unleashed the electronic finance sector's growth, represented in emerging and wide spreading new financial products relying on mobile technologies. The use of such financial products is expected to increase during the post-COVID-19 era. This constitutes a greater opportunity to create job opportunities for women and to attract more women who can benefit from these convenient services. The ability to profit from this transformation will depend on building the capacities of women and girls in this field whether as producers or users of electronic finance services.

f. System of Values and Cultural Heritage

The prevailing system of values has played a major role in limiting women's ability to join the labour market due to the widespread unbalanced division of work according to the model of “male breadwinner and female caregiver”. Traditionally, males work outside the house and females care for their family members and children and assume sole responsibility for the housework. In light of the economic pressures during and after the pandemic, it seems more appropriate to attempt to reshape public awareness on the importance of adopting standards of competency for job placement and advancement without any biases against women. These calls are now more perceptible in the new remote work environment that also allows flexible working hours. This will contribute to changing the traditional mental stereotype of women being considered less competent because family burdens affect their attendance at work and cause them to reject longer working hours and consume more leave for childcare compared to their male counterparts⁸.

⁸ For more details on policies and interventions, see NCW periodic reports monitoring policies and programs that respond to the needs of women during the pandemic.



4) State Initiatives to Mitigate Negative Pandemic Implications

In March 2020, the GoE announced the allocation of EGP 100 billion to finance a plan to address the COVID-19 pandemic including precautionary measures that had been managed through general reserves allocated for exceptional circumstances. The GoE's initiative, launched in cooperation with the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE), involved a three-pronged initiative to support factories and companies:

1. Waivers of tax dues, fees, and service charges, including reduced prices for natural gas and electricity for industry and the delay of real estate taxes due on factories and tourist establishments.
2. The reduction of payments that GoE would have had to pay for future public debt. Such payments were reduced through the decision to reduce interest rates on public debt and redirect the surplus to the EGP 100 billion package.
3. Regarding direct payments, only two decisions have been made to date: the provision of EGP 1 billion to exporters during March and April, and the availability to clients of funds from the Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise Development Agency (MSMEDA).

In May 2020, the CBE announced a package of measures and decisions to limit COVID-19 implications on the Egyptian economy. This has greatly helped support Egyptian economic performance and contributed to alleviating the negative impact on companies and individuals from different social classes and to safeguarding the economic gains achieved since the launch of the Economic Reform Program⁹. In December 2020, the CBE issued a new incentives package with 18 measures and decisions to stimulate the economy and limit COVID-19 implications on the business sector.

⁹ إجراءات البنك المركزي المصري للحد من تأثير كورونا على الاقتصاد - الهيئة العامة للإستعلامات (sis.gov.eg)



In terms of addressing the needs of women, who overwhelmingly reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives (see Box 2), the National Council for Women (NCW) has prepared a white policy paper on Egypt's plan for rapid response to their needs. The paper includes a package of measures for quick and medium-term response that involves the following parameters:

1. Addressing the impact on the human component, including health, education, social protection, and psychological wellbeing. Established support programs were activated to address health aspects including psychological, physical, mental, and reproductive services as well as social protection programs. A special focus was given to measures responding to the needs of the elderly, women with disabilities, pregnant women, and women of childbearing age. In the field of education, the focus was on the repercussions of school closures and the potential resultant dropout of girls.
2. Supporting women's effectiveness and decision-making capabilities including leadership and participation in decision-making during crisis management and protection from violence). The inclusion of women in decision making could improve mechanisms for monitoring health-related issues, detection, and prevention of disease, and ensure women's ability to obtain relevant information. Response measures also include the provision of psychological, social, legal and advisory support to women who may be exposed to violence resulting from negative social conditions triggered by precautionary decisions to confront the outbreak.
3. Influencing economic opportunities. The proposed interventions rely on both existing mechanisms and on the launch of new ones to support female workers whose livelihoods were affected or who witnessed a reduced income from self-employment, proposing alternative solutions to confront the impact of the economic downturn on women, whether in the formal or informal sector.



4. Enhancing data and knowledge. These interventions require a) collecting data disaggregated by sex, age and disability in relation to the outbreak and tracking emergency response; b) supporting policy research and social innovation, monitoring and evaluation of COVID-19 impact; and c) conducting public opinion surveys to understand differences of exposure and treatment and to help design preventive measures accordingly.

Box 2: Public opinion trends among females post COVID-19¹⁰

- * More than half of the women (59%) indicated that the outbreak of COVID-19 has significantly affected their lives; 16% mentioned that it has moderately affected them; 18% said that it had a little or no effect on them; and 7% could not determine the effect.
- * 80% of women have changed their daily lifestyle habits since the outbreak. Most of the changes mentioned were “stay at home” (56%); followed by increased sanitization and use of disinfectants (41%); frequent house cleaning (22%); frequent washing of hands (17%); then using alcohol and hand sterilization (10%).
- * 88% of women limited their presence in gatherings.
- * Almost one third of women reported that problems among family members have increased after the outbreak.
- * 11% of respondents who are currently married had experienced domestic violence (from their husbands) during the week prior to data collection.

The Egyptian government has implemented a package of measures to support Egyptian women, including:

1. The launch of the “Ahalena” initiative, which supports the most affected groups through community partnership under the slogan “A Hand in Hand

¹⁰ Survey on the impact of COVID-19 on Egyptian women, the National Council for Women (NCW), Baseera Center, and UN Women, 2020. Data were collected through phone interviews during the period (4-14 April, 2020) from a representative sample of 1518 women in all Egyptian governorates.



- Helps” to support day labourers economically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic by providing them with direct financial support in partnership with the private sector and individuals.
2. Disbursement of grants in the amount of EGP 500 three times for day labourers for a total of EGP 1500 each. The number of beneficiaries was 1.6 million male and female workers.
 3. Expansion of the beneficiary base for the Takaful and Karama programs by including 160,000 new households.
 4. Increasing the number of female beneficiaries of soft and simple interest loans directed towards micro-enterprises.
 5. Expansion of the elderly social protection umbrella to include dependent females aged ≥ 65 years.

Box 3: Examples of Civil Society Initiatives

- * The Egyptian Food Bank launched the campaign “Supporting Day Labour – A Social Responsibility”, distributing over 500,000 food boxes to those disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly day labourers.
- * The Sawiris Foundation for Social Development decided to allocate EGP 40 million to support day labourers and the most vulnerable families and EGP 60 million to support the GoE’s precautionary efforts to meet the health and economic needs of beneficiaries.
- * Sona3 Elkheir Foundation for Development launched the “Hemaya” initiative to provide vital, practical, and effective support to the neediest groups to face the dangers of COVID-19 outbreak and reduce dangerous negative effects of the virus on lives and livelihoods of thousands of day labourers, irregular workers, widows, women-headed households, and the financially vulnerable.



5) Policy Recommendations and Interventions

a. Interventions by Sector

This paper proposes policies and interventions based on expected growth in various economic sectors, taking into account the relative importance of each in the employment of women. The paper further proposes adopting packages of policies and interventions in line with each group of economic sectors according to the classification laid out in Table 2 above.

- The winning sectors present opportunities to increase the rate of female employment and advancement thanks to expected growth in the near and medium term.
- For unaffected sectors, the focus must be on balancing the double burdens on working women (productive paid work combined with unpaid care work). The aim is to help these sectors effect institutional, legal, and administrative changes allowing women to have broader and more sustainable opportunities for flexible work and to achieve balance without affecting their productivity. In parallel, various programs should be launched to raise women's capabilities to work using modern methods such as remote work. This is not limited to vocational training in communication and IT, but also extends to a package of soft skills related to remote working such as time management, self-motivation, commitment, and self-regulation.
- Losing sectors are expected to face challenges in employee retention. Therefore, policies related to the empowerment of women should aim to provide transformative training for female workers in such sectors to qualify them to work in winning sectors where growth accompanied by new job opportunities is expected. This could partially compensate for the jobs attrition in losing sectors. In parallel, discrimination against women should be discouraged to prevent the reduction of employment opportunities whether through layoffs or through the redirection of women to less lucrative part-time positions.



Sectors	Policy and interventions
Winners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✦ Seizing opportunities to increase female employment✦ Qualifying females to take advantage of advancement opportunities
Unaffected	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✦ Maintaining the current level of female employment✦ Expanding small and medium enterprises operating in such sectors
Losers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">✦ Transformational training to increase female employment in such sectors✦ Non-discrimination against women in the case of reducing employment

b. Capacity Building at Different Social Levels

The launch of a national program to build women's capacities and raise competitiveness in the labour market is vital. Interventions must be adapted according to the needs of each social stratum as outlined below:

- Female workers in the state's administrative apparatus and public entities: Training programs aimed at advancing their career ladder.
- Female workers in the formal private sector: Training programs to raise the capacity for remote and flexible work.
- Women working in the informal private sector: Training programs on entrepreneurship, IT, and financial inclusion.
- Highly qualified female jobseekers: Training programs on entrepreneurship, IT, financial inclusion, and transformational training programs to qualify them for work in winning sectors that offer more attractive job opportunities.
- Female jobseekers with intermediate qualifications: Training programs in IT and e commerce.



c. Reshaping of the Value System that Prevents the Empowerment of Women

The pandemic has imposed a new reality that could be used to reshape public awareness of the role of women in public spheres and within the family. Within this context, this paper proposes launching media campaigns that present lessons learned from the pandemic to contribute to reshaping public awareness. Themes that will be explored include the following:

- The importance of employment and advancement on the basis of competence and without prejudice against women—especially in light of a work environment that depends on remote work and adopts flexible settings—and of the reduction of resistance to female employment on the pretext that their family role comes at the expense of their productivity.
- A more balanced and fair redistribution of roles within the family, moving away from the traditional pattern of division of labour. The pandemic has created a reality that highlighted the importance of the role played by females, especially working women, in terms of domestic and unpaid care work for children, the elderly, and family members with disabilities.
- The rejection of domestic violence against women and girls and the provision of psychological support to females to cope with the behavioural changes required to compete in the labour market in light of the ‘new normal’.

d. Information and Policy Research

There is an urgent need to continue conducting surveys and public opinion polls that provide gender-disaggregated data to serve as updated input to the policymaking process and the evaluation of interventions. This includes quantitative monitoring of the effects of the second wave of the pandemic on various aspects of women's economic empowerment, domestic violence, and the use of time and the pandemic's impact on the prevailing value system in relation to the empowerment of women.



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