

# Return Migration and Female Agency in Egypt: A Study of the Agency of Wives before and During the Migration of their Husbands to the GCC Countries and after their Return

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**Abstract:** *This research investigates the complex interplay between return migration and female agency within Egyptian families. Focusing on the experiences of Egyptian husbands who have migrated to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for employment and subsequently returned, this study explores the shifts in decision-making power and gender roles that occur in their households. Drawing from an extensive review of existing literature, as well as informal conversations with individuals from such families, this paper highlights the unique dynamics that emerge during the absence and return of migrant husbands. The findings reveal that upon their departure, the wives often assume leadership roles in their families, undertaking responsibilities that extend beyond traditional gender norms. However, these newly acquired powers tend to be transient, as husbands returning from the GCC countries reassert their authority within the household. Factors contributing to this phenomenon include the influence of patriarchal norms in the host countries and the pre-existing gender asymmetries in Egyptian society. While this research corroborates the existing literature, it also underscores the complex nature of gender roles and female agency within the context of migration and return. Moreover, it underscores the need for further investigation into the broader socio-cultural impacts of migration on Egypt, emphasizing the importance of understanding not only economic remittances but also the transfer of ideologies and practices from host to home countries. Recognizing the implications of this return migration phenomenon is essential for addressing gender equality and women's empowerment, thereby contributing to broader development goals in Egypt.*

**Keywords:** migration, return migration, Egyptian wife, Egyptian husband, gender roles, family dynamics, female agency, GCC countries

## 1. Introduction

In the wake of their celebrated oil boom in 1973, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were determined to invest in their infrastructure, industrial and agricultural sectors, and social services (Winckler, 1997). The national labor force in the GCC countries, however, could not be counted on for its modest size and participation (Winckler, 1997). Nationals were not always qualified, were sometimes difficult to oversee, and often demanded a higher salary than their foreign counterparts (Winckler, 1997). Vacancies desperate to be occupied by both high-skilled and low-skilled workers abounded, from the teachers entrusted with educating the children, to urban planners who would design the neighborhoods, engineers to erect buildings, construction workers who would lay the groundwork, and domestic workers to manage the households (Winckler, 1997). Foreign workers, therefore, were invited to fill the void in the labor market (Winckler, 1997). Of those foreign workers were Egyptian nationals (Winckler, 1997).

Over 6 million Egyptians are labor migrants, most of whom are men who choose the Gulf region as a destination (United Nations, 2021). For economic and logistical purposes, however, most of those who are married men decided to leave their families behind in Egypt while they took the plunge alone (United Nations, 2021). After all, it was more practical and efficient to be family-less in the host country; the need to find a family-size accommodation, private means of transportation, and school tuition is non-existent when you only have to worry about yourself and no one else (United Nations, 2021).

Upon their migration, it behooved the wives of the migrants to take on the family responsibilities previously shouldered by their now departed husbands. With the absence of the husbands, the decisions needed in order for the family to endure fall upon the wives left behind with the children (Helmy, 2015). While the husbands are the ones financially providing for their families and sending home the remittances, it is the wives who are in charge of managing the household (Helmy, 2015). In addition to their daily house chores, the left-behind wives often find themselves dealing with a newfound set of challenges (Helmy, 2015). Making decisions for the left-behind family that had long been the domain of their now-migrant husbands suddenly became unclaimed territory that required the wives to step up and assert their power (Helmy, 2015).

But after 1982 and again for political reasons after 1990, and when the economy started slowing down, the governments of the GCC countries decided to intervene and control the number of foreigners entering their country, especially when the cost of foreign workers far outweighed the money they brought in, especially if you counted the ideological and cultural changes they brought along with them (Wahba, 2014; Winckler, 1997). A process that started to balance out the population was the nationalization of the labor force where the locals would fill the jobs that had previously been occupied by foreign laborers (Wahba, 2014; Winckler, 1997). The GCC countries also decided to let go of the foreign employees (Winckler, 1997). They instated changes in their immigration and labor policies which started with deporting illegal immigrants, then imposing fees on accompanying family members so that would deter them from entering the host countries as well as prohibiting foreigners from owning immovable property or starting their own projects without a citizen for a partner (who usually did

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not make much of a contribution but was still owed 51% of the revenues), requiring a *kafil* (sponsor) without whom no work permit was obtained, and denying them having their own trade unions for fear of giving them a voice that they would use to demand more rights (Winckler, 1997). Soon, Asian foreign workers began replacing Arab workers since they represented less of a threat to the GCC countries. Asian workers demanded less wages than their Arab counterparts and were less likely, if at all, to covet national citizenship (Winkler, 1997).

As a result, the migrants returned to their countries of origin—of which Egypt was one—to stay, which carried the potential of disrupting the power dynamics in the family of those who were married. The return of the husband usually meant their resumption of their role as the head of the family. The question arises, therefore, as to the consequences of the return of Egyptian husbands from the Gulf region to their homeland and the need to anticipate and address the concerns of that growing segment of returnees. That is, how much decision-making power is the wife afforded before the husband's migration? What happens to that power when the husband migrates and does the return of the migrant husband change that power?

## 2. Significance of the Present Paper and the Research Question it Attempts to Answer

There is no shortage in the literature on migration and return migration. Most of the research on return migration focuses on the economic impact of said migration and return, however. Although the discipline abounds in studies that investigate the impact of male migration on gender roles, few are the studies that examine how the return of the husband affects the roles of the wives. Fewer are even the studies that explore the effects of returning husbands on gender roles, and specifically on female agency, in Egypt.

In their constant pursuit of the consequences of return migration on Egypt, researchers have often been obsessed with the economic gain: remittances that Egyptian migrants bring to the sending country at the expense of another aspect: the ideas and behaviors they might import alongside the money. Endemic in exposure to exotic cultures is the transfer of particular ideologies from the receiving to the sending countries; importing beliefs—that extend to practices—which might be alien to the country of origin often eludes researchers who are more inclined to associate remittances only with finances (Zohry, 2014). In fact, one of the limitations *and* recommendations Zohry (2014) made in his studies was for researchers to take that road less-traveled and explore the socio-cultural impact of migration and return on the countries of origin. Since then, not many studies have investigated the socio-cultural impact of migration on Egypt, hence the need for the present paper.

In a struggling economy like that of Egypt, migrants bring home with them what might be the answer to the country's dilemma: hard currency (Zohry, 2014). The remittances they send home help boost the economy both at the macro and micro levels, which is much-needed and praised (Zohry, 2014). But Egyptian migrants—and all migrants for that matter—might also bring home with them more than just

money; they might bring ideas, behaviors, and values the consequences of which—especially for development—are seldom explored (Zohry, 2014).

Research confirms that migration does indeed impact gender roles and family power relations (Samari, 2021). This begs the question of what would happen when the husband migrates to a country that espouses patriarchal norms, such as one of the GCC countries. In order to narrow down the focus of this paper, only studies of Egyptian husbands who migrated to the GCC countries and returned will be surveyed. Also, women's agency will only be narrowed down to the decision-making power of the left-behind wives.

The present paper will, therefore, aim to answer the following question and sub-questions:

- 1) How does the return of Egyptian migrant husbands from the GCC countries affect the agency of their wives?
- a) How—if at all—does the migration of the husbands change the role of the wife as decision-maker in the family as compared to before migration?
- b) What happens to that decision-making role of the wives—if any—upon the return of their husbands?

Due to the fact that Egypt boasts practices of gender inequality epitomized in the burden of house chores falling mostly on the women and the ratio of women receiving higher education and employment being less than that of men (Assaad et al., 2018, as cited in Samari, 2021), it is the proposition of this paper that the Egyptian migrants to the GCC countries will hold the decision-making power prior to their departure to the Gulf region but will abdicate that role to their wives in their absence only to reclaim it upon their return to Egypt.

## 3. The Agency of Wives Before and After Migration: Who Holds the Decision-making Power in the Egyptian Family before the Husband's Migration to the GCC Country for Labor? How—if at all—does the Wife's Role as Decision-maker Change upon the Migration of the Husband?

In what could be dubbed “a benchmark study” in Egypt, researcher Marwa Helmy (2015) interviewed 19 Egyptian females in middle- and low-income families to examine the effect of male migration on female empowerment for her thesis in migration and refugee studies. In her study, she explored how the wives' control of remittances sent home by the migrant husbands in the family possibly enhanced the role of the left-behind females in terms of authority and making decisions in the household and whether this change—if any—was temporary upon the return of the husbands as well as what it meant for the gender roles in the family. Her study concluded that there was a difference between the two groups of families when it came to the decision-making power the wives assumed in the absence of their husbands. The left-behind wives in both the low-income and middle-income families in Egypt were, indeed, the ones left in charge of making the decisions for the whole family when their husbands were away. However, the starting point for each group of families was different: Prior to the departure of the husbands to their respective GCC countries of destination, they were the ones who held the

power in the low-income families leaving their wives no decision-making authority, while for the wives of the middle-income families, the power sharing was not new since they formed a united front with their husbands when it came to the family decisions they made before their migration as well.

The perception of each group of families of that power was not the same, either. Most of the low-income family wives believed the newfound power to be a burden, while only a few of the middle-income family wives saw it as such. Helmy (2015) attributed that difference to the wives' level of education explaining that the low-income family wives were less educated than the middle-income family wives who held a high-school diploma or a college degree. It was that education, she emphasized, that gave them more confidence in making decisions for their families on their own. They felt they had the tools to make the right decisions. She still stressed that the fear of making the wrong decisions or not being qualified enough to make decisions that the low-income group experienced could have also stemmed from the fact that they had not been in that position of power before their husbands left and, therefore, were more overwhelmed than their middle-income-family counterparts.

Despite its significance, Helmy's (2015) study was not the first to explore the agency of left-behind Egyptian wives. Before 2015, Lopez-Ekra et al. (2011) reviewed the literature conducted by IOM on—among other countries—Egypt and the ensuing changes of migration on gender roles in the family and concluded that two-thirds of the left-behind wives whose husbands had migrated for labor became the heads of their households as a result and half of them carried the sole responsibility of deciding how the remittances sent home by the husbands would be spent. Such was the empowerment of these wives that their autonomy enabled them not just to manage the daily expenditures of the household but to also make decisions with respect to investment projects that might serve as an alternative source of income, run the family business, and represent the family—thereby filling in for the absent husband—in social functions held in the public sphere.

Along the same lines, Ullah's (2017) article investigated the autonomy of Egyptian wives—among many other nationalities—after the migration and return of their husbands. The researcher reviewed an earlier study that had interviewed wives of male migrants and yielded results that did not diverge from those of Helmy's (2015) study. The study highlighted the differences between two groups of left-behind wives: those who lived in the same house, building, or within close proximity of their in-laws' dwellings and those who lived alone with their children after the migration of the husbands. Those who lived with or close enough to their in-laws unanimously shared that they suffered. Their in-laws barely allowed them to single-handedly make decisions without their interference, since they believed they filled in for the husband. Although the dual decision-making authorities were mostly manifested in the in-laws' imposition on the decisions related to the future, education, and discipline of the children, they also often had something to say about the visibility, mobility, and personal freedom of

the left-behind wives resulting in strained relationships in the cases where the wives resisted that intrusion. Those who were left alone with their children away from the grip of their in-laws, on the other hand, enjoyed more freedom and independence in decision-making. The powers delegated to them by their absentee husbands placed them as the heads of their respective households. Rather than celebrating this autonomy, however, most of these wives still shied away from being at the helm and chose to involve the migrant husbands in their decisions for fear of being held accountable by the husbands for their (wrong) decisions.

#### **4. Return Migration and the Agency of Wives: How—if at all—does their Return Change the Decision-making Role of their Wives?**

Whereas the literature may be divided on how empowered Egyptian left-behind wives are before and during their husbands' migration, there is not much divergence when it comes to the findings of studies of the wives' agency—or lack thereof—upon the return of their husbands to Egypt. Lopez-Ekra et al. (2011) found that the autonomy gained by the Egyptian wives during the migration period of their respective husbands was short-lived, ending upon the return of the said husbands who had to readjust to new realities in their countries of origin. Re-induction into the local labor market, soaring prices, and skewed priorities were but some of the novelties they had to come to terms with upon their return. Yet another challenge for the husbands was to accept the new version of their post-migration wives who had learned to assert more decision-making power in their absence. This especially took a toll on the wives whose husbands struggled to find new employment. In some cases, the returnee husbands sometimes resorted to physical violence to re-assert their power as heads of the household when they perceived their wives' new prominent roles as a personal affront to their already-threatened masculinity. Sadly, the wives found themselves reverting to their submissive roles and allowing their husbands to take the decision-making wheel to avoid adding more drama to their lives.

Zohry and Debnath (2010) further singled out one particular GCC country—Saudi Arabia—as a culprit in Egyptian return migrants' discrimination against women and, consequently, their wives (as cited in Zohry, 2014). A proponent of the idea that migrants remit back more than just tangible objects, Zohry's (2014) article reviewed the literature on migration and development in which he emphasized that migrants returned carrying home social remittances which might be comprised of the ideology, sets of practices, and/or social capital from the host countries as well (Levitt, 1998, as cited in Zohry, 2014). He regretted that those social remittances might sometimes have a negative impact on the country of origin, citing Saudi Arabia as an example of such countries (Zohry, 2014). Home to the Wahhabist movement, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has successfully transferred its radical interpretations of Islam, especially in terms of marginalizing the role of women in decision-making, through the return migrants to Egypt (Zohry & Debnath, 2010, as cited in Zohry, 2014).

This sentiment was shared by Ullah (2017) who lamented that it was not always smooth sailing for the wives when their migrant husbands finally returned. Although the left-behind wives—including those who had initially dreaded the burden of having to make decisions on behalf of their husbands—took pride in shouldering the new responsibilities of decision-making, this did not lead to a permanent gender role shift, but a rather temporary change in the power dynamics in the family. This new agency was not well received by the returnee husbands who could not fathom that the head of the household was now a position that might be shared with their wives. The result was often conflicts and power struggles between the two of them on who would make the decisions for the family.

Samari (2021) also reviewed the Egyptian Labor Market Panel Surveys, which interviewed over 7,000 wives in 2006 and almost another 9,000 of them in 2012 to investigate the correlation between return migration from the GCC—among other Arab—countries and gender norms as well as power dynamics in Egyptian families. The study concluded that although wives assumed more responsibilities in the absence of the husbands when it came to decision-making, that role was relinquished upon the return of the husband. The wives interviewed regretted that, despite the power bestowed upon them when their husbands were away in order to provide for their families, the husbands resumed their role as sole decision-makers in the household when they permanently returned to Egypt.

Samari (2021) admitted that the irony of the findings did not elude him, especially since the wives did not only take on responsibilities previously exclusive to men while they were away, but also because it was the wives who had decided with their husbands that the latter should be the ones leaving for another country without them in the first place. He did, however, assert that it should come as no surprise considering the countries of destination the husbands had just left. The tenets of the culture in the Gulf region proudly rests on patriarchal structures which do not promote gender equality, he lamented. Women empowerment was not necessarily high on their list of priorities, and this eventually rubbed off on migrants who lived there long enough. The migrants came back saturated with new-found ideals from the region they had just departed, not the least of which included the number of children to have as well as the position of women in society and role in the family. Since the Gulf region prided itself on having many children and restricting the role of wives in the family mostly to bearing and raising those children while the husbands provided for and made the decisions for them, returnees from the region often embraced some of those practices and carried them home with them.

##### **5. Informal Conversations with 2 Egyptian Families: Who Makes the Decisions Before, During, and After (Return) Migration: The Husbands or the Wives?**

“It’s a shame that we always look up to the West for traditions when we have much to learn from Arab countries,” professed an Egyptian migrant to the Gulf region in an informal conversation as he boasted embracing a tradition of the country where he had spent the past 7 years

of his life, namely the power of the husband in the family. The 47-year-old accountant proudly proclaimed that he had learned the secret to a happy family in the host country; this secret entailed the complete segregation of spousal roles. “It is the blurred lines between the territories of the husband and wife that cause tension to mount in the relationship,” he added before elaborating that it was exactly what he replicated in his own family. He shared that he made sure that his responsibilities were set apart from his wife’s where he was expected to financially provide for the family and manage the major household decisions while his wife was entrusted with raising the children along with completing the house chores.

His wife, on the other hand, confided that she struggled with the new role she was confined to. Having had to juggle her teaching job and her domestic responsibilities while her husband was away, she often found herself making all the decisions for the family since it was easier than to “burden” the husband with “everyday tasks” on a regular basis while he had enough to worry about living alone abroad. In fact, she felt it was her duty to protect him from any piece of news that might “cast a dark shadow over his peace of mind”. She even recalled that she made it a point to refrain from troubling him with the emergency surgery their daughter needed to undergo lest he would “hop on the first flight out and get fired”. Although that was more than she had bargained for in their first years of marriage where her husband was the designated decision-maker, taking the reins from him came with a gratifying sense of empowerment that she regretted forfeiting upon his return.

Such was the dilemma of one family upon the return of the husband from the GCC country where he had been employed. The experience was so testing that the spouses failed to keep their struggles bottled up even during celebratory gatherings. This was not the only family suffering, however. The stories got bleaker. At a different social function held later that week, one domestic worker’s bruises were put in context.

A daughter of a construction worker complained that ever since her father returned from the Gulf country where he had been employed for the past five years, the quarrels between her parents have been on the rise. “He has suddenly become hypersensitive about my mother’s involvement in our lives since he was terminated and failed to land a job here,” she explained. Despite the fact that he refused to be so much as updated on their lives when he was away even when he was back on his annual leave, his over-involvement in their everyday business upon his return was frustrating. No matter how mundane the decision was, the father wanted to be in charge, much to the dismay of his family. “Whenever he saw me speaking on the phone, he had to ask who I was talking to, why, where she lived, and who her parents were. And when I needed to go out, I needed to let him know where I was going, with whom, and how long I would stay there, not to mention that he stopped me at the door in order to make sure that I was dressed modestly enough, which if I’m not, I would have to change. I remember that he once made me change 3 times before I was allowed to leave the house,” she almost cried. This was a far cry from the father’s detachment when he was away although prior to his departure, he only

partook in the major household decisions that had to do with the family. Marriage, property, and children's education and employment were his domain, while he delegated the mundane decisions of food and socialization to his wife. He never interfered in what they ate, where his children went, or what they wore.

When he migrated, he could not be bothered with anything beyond the money he sent home to his family. His wife, therefore, was the one assigned the responsibilities of procuring land, building the new house, and deciding on the jewelry to buy for investment in addition to all her original duties. "Before my father left, I overheard him reminding my mother that she would have to be both the father and mother in his absence," she elaborated. She further explained that the uncertainty of the circumstances awaiting him in the host country prevented the father from assuming his role in the family lest he would be "distracted or weighed down" by the family problems. "I remember that even when my brother was proposing to my now sister-in-law, my father did not fly back to be with us. When my mother asked my brother to wait until my father came back for the summer, my father objected and asked her to take care of everything with my brother so he would not have to worry about anything when he was back," she shared. Upon his permanent return, the daughter could not help but notice that the father was over-involved in their lives, however, leaving his wife no decisions to make except for the food and house chores. The ensuing struggle to reclaim the authority she had lost rendered the wife vulnerable to domestic abuse when the husband refused to relinquish his power. Ashamedly, the daughter confided that whenever her mother would propose a solution or voice an opinion with regards to the family, her husband would resort to inflicting physical harm and verbal abuse on her until she stopped trying.

Sadly, those were not the only stories about Egyptian return migrants from the GCC countries. There were more 5 unfortunate anecdotes shared by females seeking solace but the two aforementioned conversations are representative of the remainder of the unshared stories.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate how, if at all, return migration of Egyptian husbands from the GCC countries affects their wives' decision-making power. It started out with the proposition that although the wives of the migrant husbands may not partake in decision-making in Egyptian families, this is challenged upon the migration of the husbands when the wives find that they need to step up and cover for the husbands' absence by assuming the leadership role when it comes to the family monetary and social decisions and representations in the public sphere. It is short-lived, however, since the husbands reclaim their power upon their return and the families regress into the male-head-of-the-household mode. The findings of this paper confirm the proposition that Egyptian wives do, indeed, become heads of their respective households upon the departure of their husbands to the GCC countries, a leadership role that contradicts their role prior to the departure of the husbands. Before we rejoice that the migration of the husbands ushers in a new feminist era for patriarchy in Egypt, however,

research indicates that the wives revert back to their resigning roles when the husbands return back to the driver decision-making seat.

The informal conversations held with Egyptian family members of return migrants from the GCC countries corroborated the literature reviewed in terms of how much agency the left-behind wives enjoy before and during the migration of their husbands as well as what happens upon the migrant husbands' return to Egypt. The conversations also corroborated Lopez-Ekra's (2011) findings that some husbands might resort to domestic violence to re-assert their decision-making power after their return.

The common denominator between all the returnees is not just their stripping their wives of their power upon their return but also the receiving countries which they had just left. Murray and Zhang-Zhang (2018) analyzed factors contributing to GCC countries' female participation—or lack thereof—in the labor force. So deeply entrenched in their societies is patriarchy that it informs even the interpretations of Islamic texts on gender roles and equality. Patriarchy is premised on gender asymmetries of power implicit in which is the male as provider, protector, and decision-maker and the wife as child-bearer and confined to the private sphere.

Although the findings converge as to the returnees' conservative ideology when it comes to their wives' agency, it is impossible to prove that the conservative gender roles epitomized in the Egyptian husband's being the head of the household upon his return despite the wife's assumption of said role in his absence could, indeed, be attributed to the GCC countries' espousal of patriarchal practices. Correlation does not necessarily mean causation. Just because the male migrants had spent some time in the GCC countries where patriarchy was endorsed does not mean that their practices were informed by the host countries' culture. Despite the fact that the Gulf region is ranked among the highest countries on the Global Gender Gap Index in terms of the gender-role and inequality practices and the fact that migrants do import the ideology and practices of the host countries (Courbage, 1996; Fargues, 2006, as cited in de Haas, 2007), the fact that Egypt is not exactly a chart-topper when it comes to gender equality does not make it any easier to credit the GCC countries with the traditional gender norms, either. In fact, a closer look at gender norms in the Egyptian family renders these results explainable. Egypt's families rest on the tenets of patriarchy to begin with. Long before the migration of the males of the family, the conservative gender roles of the father/husband being the head of the household and the mother/wife receding to a subordinate role were celebrated in Egypt (Friedrich et al., 2021; Yount et al., 2015). Attempting to answer this question, therefore, might easily turn into a *which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg?* game and will still lead us nowhere, not only because multiple social, educational, economic, and personal factors might be at play, but also because of the gender roles in the Egyptian family to begin with.

Still, the answer to the research question is much more complex than the studies reviewed here. As much as there is

literature corroborating this paper's initial proposition, evidence might always be found to the contrary. Such is the reality of research. What cannot be contested, however, is the correlation between female agency and development. Diebolt and Perrin (2013) emphasized the impact of gender equality and female empowerment on development. The higher the bargaining power of females—be it wives, sisters, mothers, or daughters—in the family, the higher their chances of pursuing and furthering their education and entering the labor force, they explained. This investment in education and contribution to the labor market have a positive impact on women and their families. Female education and employment factor into their decision to have fewer children so as not to interfere with their careers. And in addition to increasing the household budget, women's education and employment further improve the health, life expectancy, and education of the children they bear on account of their preparedness to raise the children and build their character. Thus, female empowerment and autonomy positively impact development.

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