

**Social Background and Attitudes of  
Higher Education Students and Graduates in Egypt**  
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The objective of this paper is to explore the social, economic, and geographic determinants of access to higher education in Egypt, the rates of progression within the education system, and the social attitudes and opinions of university students and graduates. Research shows that access to education, especially higher education, is egalitarian in name only: parents' education and especially wealth are highly deterministic of educational attainment. Geography is also a factor that further limits opportunities, particularly for some young females. This research uses the 2009 Survey of Young People in Egypt, which collected data from a nationally representative sample of young people 10–29 years of age.

When considering access to higher education, the highly deterministic nature of wealth is particularly troubling. One of the ways wealth affects access is through private tutoring, which is necessary for preparing students to pass the exams at the end of secondary school. Rich families can afford to pay for tutoring and therefore their offspring have higher chances of success. Even youth who are equally qualified for higher education in terms of their test scores do not have equal probability of entering general secondary school, which in the Egyptian system is the track that can lead to higher education. Youth from the wealthiest families have additional access, even when their test scores are considered. This means that the ostensibly free university system in Egypt is mostly available to wealthy families, thus becoming a regressive subsidy, as public resources spent on higher education go disproportionately to the well-to-do. A policy justified on the basis of equity ends up favoring those who need the least help.

Findings show that the children of educated parents are more likely to be educated too. The education of the mother is of particular importance. A mother with a university degree predicts a higher probability that her offspring will also attend university, and to a greater extent than a father with such status. Furthermore, having a more educated mother is more influential to girls than boys and increases the chances of daughters going to school and later seeking higher education. Parents' education and wealth are correlated with intergenerational mobility and research shows a strong absence of such mobility in Egypt. When parents have low levels of wealth and education, these same characteristics are passed on to their children in the form of poor educational attainment, and therefore employment prospects. This also means that the best education and the best jobs are and will continue to be held within the same socioeconomic segment of the population.

Gender plays an important role in determining access to education. The evidence clearly shows that girls perform better than boys academically, but this does not always translate into better access. Even though girls usually have higher test scores for the general secondary track than boys, they have a lower chance of attending general secondary than a boy with the same score. Since the test score cut-off is not gender-dependent, this likely represents parents' gender-dependent decisions about whether to invest in additional education for their children. In this decision, parents are discriminating against equally qualified girls.

However, among females who do achieve any education at all, once they have begun on this path, they continue on to additional levels at rates within a percentage point or two of male's rates of continuation. Women in higher education are quite successful and their higher test scores allow them greater choice of schools and majors. If enrolled in university, women are less likely to drop out, more likely to graduate, graduate faster because they repeat school years less often than men, and are more likely to pursue postgraduate studies.

When considering geography as a factor in educational attainment, gender interacts with geography: women's place of residence affects them in different ways than men. Women, especially in rural areas, have worse educational attainment than their male counterparts. Issues of culture and access largely explain these differences. Wealth also plays a role: while less than forty percent of males in the poorest wealth category who attend university or another postsecondary institution do so in the same city where their families live, this figure is more than eighty percent for females. Poor males have to travel in order to access university, but females are unable to do so, and therefore lack access. While social conventions make it easier for males to live without their family, females are constrained to remain with their family and to seek education in the same city. In poor areas, which often do not have universities, if females are unlikely to leave home, they are also unlikely to attend university at all. In general, there are strong observed differences between educational attainment by region in Egypt. University attendance is highest in urban governorates and less common in the lower, upper, and frontier governorates.

Research findings show that university attendees, women in particular, have expanded community connections and social networks. University students and graduates are more involved in society and have more friends, especially friends of the opposite gender, compared with non-university attendees. While both genders are slightly more religious than their non-university peers, females who attend university believe that society is more religiously tolerant. University attendees are also less likely to be satisfied with their educational experiences, largely due to problems with rote learning in universities. Those who attend university are more likely to expect that it is the government's role to provide them with jobs, while non-attendees place slightly higher emphasis on their own agency in finding employment.

The Egyptian government has made some efforts to improve access to education. Specifically, the push to increase enrollment of girls has been successful. For example, about twenty percent of women ages 25–29 have never been to school, compared with less than five percent males of the same age, even though primary and preparatory school is compulsory in Egypt. However, this huge gender gap is closing with time: among the 10–14 year-olds, males average only approximately one percent never attendance and women around three percent. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done. A poorly educated workforce and the poor quality of higher education represent serious impediments to Egypt's global competitiveness. Improving quality of learning and equity of access will be challenging, but is crucial to the country's long-term growth and the wellbeing of the Egyptian society.