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### The reproduction of privilege: education, jobs and precarity in rural Upper Egypt

Ghosoun Tawfik

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**The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences**

***The Reproduction of Privilege:  
Education, Jobs and Precarity in Rural Upper Egypt***

**A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of Sociology, Egyptology, and Anthropology**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts  
In Sociology - Anthropology**

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## Acknowledgment

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor Dr, Reem Saad. She consistently allowed this paper to be produced in the highest possible quality. She steered me in the right direction whenever she thought I needed it. Without her patient, understanding, support and beautiful soul, this thesis would not be completed. I would also like to thank my first reader, Dr, Dina Makram Ebeid for her fruitful discussion during the thesis production and unconditional support and faith in my project. Lastly, it was a privilege to work with Dr, Hania Soby on the thesis as the second reader. I am thankful for her aspiring guidance, invaluable constructive criticism and friendly advice during the thesis production.

I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Master program. Amira Mahmoud, Soha Mohsen, Nour Salama and Alaa Attiah for their support and the positive environment that has been created between us during the Master program. However, special thanks to Noha Fikry, because without her passionate participation and unlimited input, the thesis could not have been successfully conducted.

My sincere thanks also goes to my team at the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights. They provided me an opportunity to join their team without the required job skills but only for believing in my passion toward education. Thus, Special thanks to Khaled Ali, who decided to establish ECESR in 2009 and Heba Khalil for her supervision because without their precious support it would not be possible to enroll from the beginning in the Master program.

For all of the individuals and families I met during the fieldwork, it was a pleasure knowing them. Without your open hearts and generosity, this project would not have the opportunity to see the light.

Finally, I must express my profound gratitude to my mother, my sisters, friends and the person who the heart beats to for providing me with unfailing support and continuous encouragement throughout my years of study and through the process of researching and writing this thesis. This accomplishment would not have been possible without them.

Thank you.

Ghosoun Tawfik



## **Notes on Transliteration, Translation, and Style**

I used the International Journal for Middle East Studies (IJMES) system for Arabic transliteration. All translations are my own.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

In modern imaginaries, social advantage and mobility are rooted in and linked to the educational achievements and the type of jobs acquired by individuals. In fact, these two factors have long been connected, and have been considered as a stepping stone to a stable and secure livelihood (Assaad & Krafft, 2014). However, with neoliberal policies and the ongoing restructuring of the Egyptian economy and society, as well as around the world, the links between acquiring a formal academic certificate and obtaining a job require new and more nuanced examination. Other factors, such as social networks, now determine the scale and type of the available job opportunities. In fact, the most recent official statistics covering the period 2015-2018 show that the levels of poverty have increased among holders of higher educational degrees while they decreased among the illiterates. (CAPMAS, 2019, P.80).

Some would argue that education is no longer a priority or a key element in reaching a fundamental mode of securing a stable life as it once did through enabling a formal permanent job, mainly in the public sector. Actually, education attainment and occupying a stable formal job became a privilege that has the power of creating inequalities and exclusion (Spark, 2018). However, most families still enroll their children in the formal educational system despite the rapid deterioration of the quality of Egyptian education and the erosion of job guarantees previously provided by the state to educated citizens. Has education become a privilege instead of a route to greater privilege and social mobility? Who are the privileged? How do they reproduce their privilege with respect to the education system and the job market? Why do the non-privileged still enroll their children even though education is no longer a pathway to improve their life circumstances? How do these dynamics play out in rural and more marginal areas? How can an exploration reveal the diversity in rural areas and enhance our understanding of understudied regions? These questions, among others, are examined in this thesis with respect to rural Upper Egypt.

In this chapter, I will first present the theoretical framework, followed by a historical background on the origin of education and state employment in modern Egypt, and will conclude with presenting the methodological approach and the thesis outline.

## The Conceptual Framework

Concerning the theoretical framework, answering the question of who are considered the privileged ones needs a sociological foundation to provide its basis. Thus, it shall be divided into two sections. The first one will tackle the idea of social class and class privilege, with a special focus on Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of capital, and the ways in which his notion of symbolic capital is particularly helpful in understanding who the privileged are. Within this context, I take into consideration how each society frames and defines who the privileged are in its own terms and based on the political and economic changes that constantly restructure it—as Galal Amin argues in his book *Whatever Happened to The Egyptians?* (Amin 2000) The second part of this section will cover the notion of social mobility and how education and careers play an important role in either regulating such a movement or preventing it from being achieved. To analyze the questions of privilege, the historical origin of formal education and its relation to finding job opportunities and the introduction of such concepts to modern Egyptian society will be explored. The final part of this section provides a historical background on rural Upper Egypt, with a focus on the socio-economic structure of the region.

### Bourdieu's Forms of Capital and Variants of Non-Economic Capital

Pierre Bourdieu views the power dynamics between different classes through focusing on the acquisition of non-economic capital along with economic capital. For Bourdieu, different spaces within a society are defined by possessions. Given Bourdieu's background and being influenced by Marx, he weighs the notion of property and its effect of occupying and determining positions in the social structure on the one hand, and the various fields that works as a matrix where different capital formation are being created and have an effect in producing privilege on the other (Bourdieu 1993, p.30). Bourdieu also highlights the importance of exploring a society and its different layers from multidimensional spaces rather than a singular one. Furthermore, focusing on deconstructing societies and its relation to capital, for example economic capital only to be analyzed, from a linear perspective overwrite other forms of capital that cannot be defined only from an economic lens (Bourdieu, 1985, p.736). In other words, social class is not only about its relation to material capital, but it is also the dynamic and relation that is created through the accumulation of different constellations of capital.

Bourdieu illustrates in his article “The Forms of Capital” the importance of the influence of non-economic capital on individuals in capitalist classes and societies. He

explains that there are forms of capital, other than economic ones, that are a benefit to the accumulation of material capital indirectly, and these are cultural and social capital (1986). Firstly, cultural capital is defined as the social possessions of an individual that allow him to achieve social mobility within the class system of his society. This happens through certain body and mind embodiment, possessing certain cultural goods, or finally, through the institutionalized state in the form of academic qualification (Bourdieu, 1986, p.17-21). Another important layer of non-economic capital is social capital. This type of capital depends on the social network that is constructed within the society that the individual and the group belong to. It is a set of social networks that the individual can possess through actual or potential resources and can depend on others to achieve his goals (Bourdieu, 1986, p.22). Additionally, Bourdieu illustrates the influence of non-economic capital on individuals in capitalist societies. He explains that symbolic capital, with respect to cultural and social capitals, benefits from or indirectly connects to the accumulation of material capital. Moreover, there are elements of similarity between material and cultural capital, most significant of which is the time required to accumulate both capitals. Academic certificates and the type of employment an individual acquires are pillars in building and accumulating cultural capital.

On worldwide rates, 89.4% in 2017 have enrolled in schools for the primary education, 65.8% for secondary education, and 37.7% for tertiary education (World Bank, 2019)<sup>1</sup>. Children around the world will spend years inside schools following the rules and requirements of the *institutional state*, which is a type of cultural capital represented by the educational and employment occupation systems. Actually, the average years to be spent in the education system is approximately 17 years (OECD, 2019). The goal behind obeying the examples of the institutional state roles is the guarantee that presumably exists after obtaining a sort of capital, which in this case is the objectification of the official certificate (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 17). The path that a child must go through to be considered worthy of a certificate and to be recognized and be able

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<sup>1</sup> For the primary and secondary education, the used rates are net rate not gross. Net enrollment rate is “the ratio of children of official school age who are enrolled in school to the population of the corresponding official school age” as the official website of the world bank refers. However, gross rate is the only rate that exists for enrollment in tertiary education, which means according the World Bank as “Gross enrollment ratio is the ratio of total enrollment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown. Tertiary education, whether or not to an advanced research qualification, normally requires, as a minimum condition of admission, the successful completion of education at the secondary level.”.

to enroll in university, one of the highest forms of formal education, are: pre-primary, primary, elementary and secondary. Purportedly, the main aim of these long years of formal education is to acquire skills and knowledge in order to be prepared to hold a place in the job market. Being recruited into a position in the workforce that will secure their financial, cultural and social life aspects is the ultimate goal to be achieved. In other words, the job must provide the options and criteria that will result in the individual moving in both relative and absolute positive social mobility. This is supposedly accomplished through the accumulation of cultural capital.

There is a direct proportional relation between seeking an official academic degree at a reputable and certified educational institution and your position as an individual in the class stratification within society. Bourdieu highlights how academic qualifications are an important factor in constructing cultural capital by stating that these are a “certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy” (Bourdieu, 1986, p.20). That is, a certificated degree from a well-established educational institution guarantees its holder the ability to possess a decent slot in the social and economic matrix of society. This is why there is a strong emphasis on the image associated with being a graduate from the top schools and universities, which later supposedly dramatically affects the job opportunities to occupy an adequate social profession. In fact, within the Egyptian context, *wlād ālnās* (literally means the children of people) is a cultural term structured to frame the social position and the cultural accumulation that a certain group or individual obtains after having the ability to complete a university level education and acquire a successful occupation (Elgeziri, 2012, p.102). Such a term classifies those who possess this cultural capital as a group or individuals with privileged status. A critical dimension of this accumulation of cultural capital therefore is the reputation of the institutional educational. In Egypt, the top colleges (*kuliyyāt ālqima*) are the compasses of success for vast segments of the privileged classes in Egyptian society. Engineering, Medicine, and Political Science are considered to be the most famous fields of knowledge, and therefore colleges with those departments or focus fit that criteria. However, the more common colleges among the Egyptian academic scene, which are collectively called “*garāj ālgāma*” (university garage) include the faculty of Law, and are ranked with a lower status and are considered as a less likely path to be taken by ambitious students. (Shalakany, 2013). This is caused by the limited job opportunities available in relation to the high numbers of graduates from most of the majors in the

social sciences and humanities, as well as more theoretical science majors. In the academic year 2016/2017, for example, almost 80% of university students are enrolled in theoretical disciplines (*kulliyyatt nazariyya*), which refers to social and liberal sciences, while less than 20% are registered in the practical departments (CAPMAS, 2018, p.45). As a result, the chances to accumulate the cultural capital needed to fulfill the social position in light of society's classification of the various colleges and disciplines are limited to small percentage of youth, who later have greater opportunity to be employed in advanced careers.

Furthermore, the next step to have the ability to find a job is not fully determined by the academic achievement of youth. In fact, the family background and their socioeconomic status has an influence in the college and later the job of their children. As a matter of fact, the college degree and being a graduate of high-ranked reputable universities and college departments can be considered a form of inheritance that will be passed on to the next generation of the family. The inheriting generation might consequently benefit from their family legacy to initiate their own accumulation of cultural capital, which, eventually, will affect their economic status as well. Ultimately, these factors related to the social and family origin add another layer to determine the degree of absolute and relative advantages, which eventually affect the individual achievement and position within the social mobility and class privilege nexuses (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p. 26). In other words, the family origin and cultural background together can be regarded as an important element in the process of establishing and reproducing privileged status. As will be elaborated further, the next section will cover the concept of privilege and how it is sociologically constructed.

### **Class Privilege**

Privilege as a noun is originally derived from the classical Latin word *privilegium*, which means a “bill or law against or in favor of an individual, special right, individual, prerogative, claim having special rights, privileged claim” (Harries, 2016, p.100). In fact, privilege is a condition of a positive connotation that describes individuals and groups aspiring to obtain status. In addition, the exact Arabic translation of the word “privilege” is *imtiyaz* (امتياز) as a noun and *mayyaza* as a verb provide the same understanding of the Latin word. On the other hand, from a social science perspective, the meaning of privilege has evolved over time. First, it was used to reflect the exact opposite of

inequalities, oppression, and social exclusion of disadvantaged groups that were always the main focus of studies in sociology (Howard, 2014, p.5). With time, privilege has conceptually evolved and developed into two main concepts of analysis. First, the “unearned entitlement” described as the rights that people obtain unequally in order to access life opportunities, based on social or family origin. Later, the concept transformed to the “unearned advantages” and was confined to members of dominant groups, who believe that these rights are earned through hard work and effort and cannot be abandoned (McInotsh, 1988). The second form of privilege is “conferred dominance” that takes place when a group has the control and dominance over another group (Howard, 2014, p.6: Sparks, 2018, p.4). Both forms are constructed socially and include further factors affecting their practice and performance. Race, gender, sexuality, religion, and class are the main determinants in the process of structuring the privileged status. With respect to the thesis argument, class privilege, mostly based on the unearned advantages definition that I lean toward, is a main factor influencing the reproduction process through education and jobs.

Class privilege describes the position of achieving advantages based on the social class stratification that the individual or group belongs to. In her research on the challenges facing black communities in the United States, Karyen Lacy (2015) argues that American society shifted from a white privilege society into class-based privilege that the black community becomes part of (p.1246). The main reason for this transformation is the role that state institutions played after War World II and the civil rights movements that promoted social mobility to black community through education and employment (Lacy, 2015, p. 1247). As a result, the growth of black middle and upper classes took place because of the economic advancement they achieved and the social status they obtained. Unfortunately, neoliberal policies caused deterioration of public services like education and wage reductions, which disrupted the state of homogeneity that once existed in the black community. This was mainly a result of the widening of the economic gap between the most privileged black individuals, who benefitted from that situation, and the most deprived, who were excluded (Lacy, 2015, p. 1248). In fact, the new privileged class focused on reproducing their privilege through enrolling their children in elite schools and universities along with moving to better suburban neighborhoods. This reproduction was supported by family efforts and their socioeconomic status rather than state institutions to achieve upward mobility for their children. Therefore, it is important to remark here that there is a direct relation between

the direction of social mobility, whether it is in a positive or negative direction, and the positionality of privilege among various classes. In fact, in the next section, it is important to state why for the sake of the research class privilege is followed instead classical classification of social class.

### **Why Class Privilege and not the Classic Class Stratification?**

In his explanation of what class means, Max Weber defines class as “any group of people that is found in the same class situation” (1946, p. 181). “Class situation” refers to the state and condition of the market, where property acquisition is the main factor that affects such situation (Weber, 1946, p. 182). From the same angle of capital, Karl Marx identifies classes based on their relation to the means of production: the bourgeoisie, who own the capital, and the proletariat that offer its labor time and power (1848, p. 246). Moreover, economists follow the approach of explaining modern societies based on the income and wealth. Accordingly, the basic classification includes the rich, the poor and the middle class between both (Temin, 2017, p. IX). In fact, the middle class is affected the most by the income and wealth inequality. Thus, Kanya Lacy (2015) expands on the layers within the middle class in her work on the black community in USA, dividing it into three groups: lower middle class, core middle class and elite middle class (p. 1249). The measures of classifications depend on the income value per year and the occupation nature in terms of requiring college degree or not and having sort of job security (Lacy, 2015, p.1249). Actually, the way Lacy elaborates and differentiates between different groups in the same class is much similar to the approach I am trying to follow in thesis. However, it contains some rigidity that might exclude other forms of classification that influence the degree of privilege, such as the demographic affiliation, gender, race and identity, a complexity that the concept of class privilege offers. Interestingly, the most suitable theoretical concept from the classical theory is Weber that clearly states that what makes class is the class situation — but not in relation to the capital acquisition as much as the privilege status. That is why choosing the concept of class privilege to be the lens of analysis in the thesis allows for flexibility and more complexity especially when it intersects with other issues such as social mobility and inequality of opportunity.

### **Social Mobility and Inequality of Opportunity**

Christian Houle explains the social mobility ladder as “the degree to which an individual’s status (e.g., income or profession) at one point in time (e.g., childhood) can predict his or her status at a later point in time (e.g., adulthood)” (2019, p.87). On the other hand, inequality of opportunity is “the difference in individuals’ outcome” that is determined based on uncontrolled prerequisites such as “the socioeconomic background and area of birth” (Brunori & Palmisano & Peragine, 2019, p. 1). For example, two children, one who was born in a disadvantaged environment while the other in a privileged environment , reached the adulthood phase. The first couldn’t preform any change in his social status as his community lacked services, such as schools and hospitals, that couldn’t offer opportunities to improve life condition. On the other side, the advantaged child in the adult stage positively preformed a smooth move because of the skills and healthy environment that made the number of opportunities wider and better. Thus, for both children, the point of departure was the same but the point of landing in adulthood was much different as a result of factors related to the place of birth that both couldn’t control. Notably, education in the contemporary time identified as a crucial factor in limiting the inequalities of opportunities between children in their journey of achieving social mobility (Temni, 2017, p.xiii). As a matter of fact, educational policies play a significant role in achieving a change regarding social positionality whether vertically or horizontally (Cremer & Donder & Pestieau, 2010, p.358). That said, however, the most favorable type of social mobility, in the eyes of disadvantaged people, is the vertical or ascending mobility, through which improving life conditions is achievable. It would be then safe to argue that education and the socio-economic policies are linked to social mobility in order to introduce a novel step toward success and guarantee an equal ground of opportunities—a step that will enable the less fortunate classes to enjoy social fluidity (Nazimuddin, 2015, p.177). In other words, empowering individuals with personal and market skills and promoting vacancies in the job sector based on the individual's capabilities are the key elements for marginalized people to upgrade their social and economic class. For example, the government in India has preserved a fixed percentage of positions in the professional sector for educated individuals of lower class communities as a chance to break and deconstruct the social caste that deprived some groups of obtaining success or changing their social status (Nazimuddin, 2015, p.178). Meanwhile, it might be difficult to find a prestigious job without having been formally educated. Holding an official certificate acts as a type of proof and recognition, which exposes a certain rigidity in regard to rising within social

classes. Thus, there is always a direct correlation between education and acquiring jobs—the amount of acquired or inherited accumulative capital. In fact, a person's capital is directly proportional to the expectations of attaining a certain economic status, which will then provide sustainable positions and privileges. In order to be a candidate for ascending to a higher social and cultural level, the accumulation of non-economic capital is a crucial component at both the individual and societal levels.

This relationship has been examined empirically as well as theoretically. Some empirical studies also show the weak role that education plays in social mobility. A case study in Scotland shows that parental origin social privilege has a direct effect on acquiring professional and managerial positions based on social class. Iannelli and Paterson (2005) claim that the social class structure in Scotland is fixed and that education plays an insignificant part in this situation. Their study shows that most of the highest and reputably professional occupations in the job market are attained by individuals from middle class families, while the working class are deprived of such opportunities (2005, p.3). In fact, many scholars argue that finding opportunities and the expansion of skills and talents through the educational system are not provided/introduced equally to all children with different backgrounds. In that case, privileged groups are the winners. Along these lines, Major and Machin state: "The education system was expanded and upgraded with the aim of widening opportunities and developing talent from all backgrounds. Yet at every turn the privileged have found new ways to distinguish their offspring in the academic stakes" (115). Simply put, the degree of tension between professional skills and academic credentials among the privileged ones experiences a higher level of flexibility, unlike the rigidity that controls the lives of the unprivileged individuals. In a similar vein, the Egyptian experience of social mobility will be discussed next, with a focus on the implementation of neoliberal policies that have dramatically affected educational and employment situation.

### **Different Forms of Social (Im)mobility in Egyptian Society**

When the social protection for citizens is in the responsibility of the state, there are greater chances to accomplish social advantages based mostly on the individual efforts. In contrast, changing the system to be controlled based on business interests and market demands is translated into conditions under which each individual's life is his/her own responsibility (Ashurst & Venn, 2014, p. 162). Actually, the former is the expected

situation under the welfare state (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.248), while the latter is indicative of the neoliberal state functioning primarily through the social inequalities and insecurities (Lorey, 2015, p. 2). With each political, economic or social policies change during the history of contemporary Egypt, livelihoods were affected in two overarching ways with respect to social mobility and privilege; it either sustains or stabilizes certain groups or class status over the welfare of other classes, or it strengthens or weakens a specific class, causing the social gap to grow wider and fiercer. In other words, the formation or elimination of social inequality between various classes is influenced by the existence of the welfare state and how effectively or passively it performs. This comes in relation to the previous section that explains how the equality of opportunity that various states promote or prevent through their policies can direct the path of mobility for its citizens.

In fact, Christine Binzel and Jean-Paul Carvalho (2017) conducted a study that measured the scale of intergenerational social mobility between two generations under different policies; the first under the Nasserite regime and the other with the policies of economic liberalization that started in the 1970s. They argue that in the 1960s, a huge portion of the population, particularly from the lower socioeconomic class, had the chance to receive an education and be labeled as “the new educated class”. Then, another state policy cemented their new upward status which is the guaranteeing public sector employment scheme (Binzel & Carvalho, 2017, p.2558). Both steps were considered sufficient to obtain upward mobility and privilege that didn’t occur because of the individual’s origins. Conversely, the economic and political changes that occurred in Egypt in the 70s and afterwards through the open door policy and market liberalization caused a decline in social mobility. Put differently, the financial cuts for public services such as education, and the cessation of employment in the public sector were the main two factors for blocking the avenue of social mobility through its known pillars (Binzel & Carvalho, 2017, p.2569). These steps draw a new definition of the reality of precariousness and the limitation of creating opportunities to achieve social mobility or privilege. In other words, the problem of unemployment is the amount of time passing without moving or obtaining different social status from origin and being in the liminal phase of waithood for most of the graduate youth during their adulthood transition (Assad & Krafft, 2014, p.1). Despite these realities, neoliberal policies still created new channels of achieving social mobility.



When the Egyptian state started to withdraw from its obligation in terms of public services in the 1980s, the expansion of the private sector, migration to oil-rich Gulf countries and working for foreign companies were the new channels that provided non-standardized elements for achieving social and economic privilege. In fact, it was time to add a new term to the Egyptian dictionary that describes the newly wealthy population as *nouveaux riches* (*muhdith ni'ma*) (Amin, 2000, 22). Social mobility has always existed, but it finds new ways to be achieved differently, depending on the current socio-economic situation. In addition, some groups of less privileged people encounter moments that enable them to achieve mobility despite their socio-economic background, which was the case during times of inflation and changing demands of the liberalizing economy and regional labor market. In the 70s and 80s, for example, and with the rapid rise of oil revenues and the urgent need of cheap labor workers in the oil-rich Gulf countries, there was a real opportunity to improve living standards for those who belong to the disadvantaged groups in Egypt through depending on their physical attributes to work as construction workers in order to earn higher wages and transfer funds back to their families in Egypt (McMahon, 2017, p.98). This step secured a push in the path toward social mobility that did not require any previous (non)material capital. However, regardless of the shift of methods to attain social mobility and the elevation of inequality of opportunity, education attainment as a route for securing a public sector job *wzīfa* are still an aspiration for some families that heavily invest in their children's education. In order to better understand the rationale for such an aspiration, the next section will cover the historical aspect of the strong relation between education and the public sector job and how both were, and still are for many Egyptian families, the key to be incorporated in the middle class and to achieve a relatively comfortable livelihood.

## **The Historical Relation Between Mass Education and *wzīfa* in Modern Egypt**

During the reign of Muhammad Ali, education and the modern state in Egypt restructured the Egyptian class segregation and the introduction of a new group in the middle class: state official employees, or *muwazzafīn* (blue collar employees in the governmental or public sector, or white collar employees (Ebeid, 2018, p.1). As a matter of fact, the new modern system accelerated the development of new social needs, such as

the formal academic certificate and the public state job. In his book, "*The History of Education in Muhammad Ali's Era*", Ahmed Ezzat Abdel-Kerim examines various writers' points of views on why mass education was seen and defined as an essential need. For many, this need arose from the link between human capital, in terms of skills and knowledge, and the state office and factories. Thus, strong links are formed in order to structure an education system that will help in improving the future of labor workers under the growing umbrella of the workforce (1950, p.8). In fact, a social class found its way to emerge in this process: the blue collar (*Muwzfin*) middle class, as aforementioned, depends on the state capital. Historically, the Pasha introduced the education system in order to establish a strong army. However, another state institution needed to be established in order to facilitate a coherent and united modernized Egypt that would serve its citizens. These new demands of converting state institution toward modernism were the core reason behind the consequent birth of a new labor division in Egypt called *wzifa* "which denotes white collar or blue collar employment, in the public and governmental" sector (Ebeid, 2018, p.4). For both, the army and *wzifa*, mass education was the key to serve such duties. (Abdel-Kerim, 1950, p.30).

In fact, individuals who worked for the state public institutions were expected to receive stable economic capital and would have thus been afforded a decent position within society. In other words, they were not working for a particular individual, who privately owns the means of production, nor did they own their own labor time. In the case of Egypt, these groups can be identified as *Muwzfin* who work in *mirti* jobs. As a matter of fact, the magnitude of security that those jobs were offering at the time brought about the emergence of a famed Egyptian proverb, which states "If you cannot have a *mirti* job, wallow in its dust" (Amin, 2000, p.24). Elaborating more, working in the public sector gives guarantees to enjoy a comfortable life because of the privilege that comes with it. This privilege includes securing a stable material income, having job security and producing a new social reality through joining middle class. In fact, it is important to clarify that there has always been a direct relationship between the middle class and the state in Egypt. It is safe to say that the Egyptian middle class has been rendered the class of the state, especially during the Nasserite regime (Lotfy & Shahata, 1998). However, and as mentioned before, with the neoliberal policies that were implemented in the 1970s and afterwards, achieving advantages and securing stable life conditions depending only on the state welfare and services were considered to be too absurd to be real.



## **Private Sector Entry: More Private Schools, More Inequality of Opportunity**

The social and economic privileges that middle and lower classes had gained before started to decrease as the state began to withdraw from providing acceptable social services, most significant of which were the educational and employment services. In fact, the private sector increased its interest and profit after the state opened the market for them. As a result, the education sector underwent a process of transformation and competition. It transformed from being a right to a commodity that can be consumed solely based on the financial ability of a particular class, group or individual (Bronwyn & Bansel, 2007). Privatizing education followed the same pattern as the other social sectors in neoliberal Egypt, and that is propagated by international financial institutions such as the World Bank as the “engine of strong and sustained growth” (Hanieh, 2013, 115). This means that the governments have a limited control in determining the guidelines of the accessibility of social services that the private sector will take advantage of and institute these services for profit gains (Marsh, 2014, p.381). This trend is not confined to Egypt. As Hania Sobhy (2012) states, “the privatization of education is a phenomenon that has swept across much of the global North and South under neoliberalism” (p.30); however, “educational neoliberalism and privatization take on very different meanings and scope in Egyptian education” (p.31). Private official schools and the introduction of private tutoring are commonly the most popular manifestations of privatization that the Egyptian families enforced to follow in terms of achieving educational outcomes and the dream of a secure job (Ille & Peacy, 019, p.105). In fact, such enforcement can be seen in terms of the families’ expenditure on education. To illustrate, in the last updated Income, Expenditure & Consumption Survey 2016, the figures show that the families’ total average annual spending on education is 3700 Egyptian pounds (CAPMAS, 2015, p. 324). Most of the spending is directed towards private lessons averaging 1460 pounds, and tuition and school fees averaging 1180 pounds<sup>2</sup>.

In addition, the educational system in Egypt consists of various types that reflect the social class (dis)advantages. In other words, public, private, and international private education, and foreign curricula are different routes of education systems that produce tremendous inequalities in terms of students’ educational outcome (Tawfik, 2018). This is because the ability of one’s socioeconomic background can and does in fact determine

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<sup>2</sup> These figures represent pre-pound flotation which happened in November 2016, and that now, the figures are most likely much higher, but what is significant is the percentage that is allocated.

what type of education one can enroll in. Moreover, from the total of household spending on education, 55.6% was spent by 90% of the population in 2015. The remaining 44.3% of household spending on education was spent by the wealthiest 10% of the population. This shows that the wealthy spend an enormously greater sum of money on education than the low and middle income families, such that 10% of the population (the wealthiest) spends on education nearly as much as 90% of the population(CAPMAS, 2015, p. 324). This discrepancy is explained by the exorbitantly high tuition fees of private and international schools, which can only be afforded by the wealthiest.

On the other hand, the scope of privatization is structured and practiced differently in specific locations. In neoliberal Egypt, for example, the expansion of new cities has been closely associated with the proliferation of private schools and universities (March: 2014; Dixon, 2010, p. 389). Actually, the effect of neoliberal policies varies tremendously in terms of the society location and demography, such as rural or urban. As the educational and job opportunity depends on the socioeconomic background, the location of one's birth or place of living has the power to identify the possibility to enjoy chances to obtain privileged status. For example, families in urban regions spend an average of 5500 pounds, while in rural areas they spend almost 2350 pounds. This means that the families in the urban areas spend double what rural families do. However, less spending does not mean that the educational services offered are any better. Actually, tn relates to high numbers of private schools in the cities and urban regions over rural areas. In neoliberal Egypt, for example, the expansion of new urban cities has been closely associated with the proliferation of private schools and universities (March: 2014; Dixon, 2010, p. 389).

With respect to the location of the research ethnography, Upper Egypt is classified as the most underdeveloped area in Egypt, and it is currently considered to be at the lowest standards of human development in the region (Abul-Magd, 2013, p.10). In addition, social services operating in urban regions are higher in quality than those in rural areas of Egypt (Sharaf & Rashed, 2016). However, and as the thesis argues, the possibility to create or find opportunity to be privileged exists in any location or demographics region. Therefore, the next section will reflect the position of rural Upper Egypt as to how neoliberal policies and social inequality shaped its particular formation.

### **Rural Upper Egypt: A Case of State Marginalization**



Upper Egypt mostly suffers from marginalization with respect to state development and social services. In this context, Asef Bayat describes a marginalized community or individual as “economically exploited, politically repressed, socially stigmatized and culturally excluded from a closed social system” (2012, p.20). Remarkably, rural Upper Egypt struggles with exclusion from the state’s development policies, both politically and economically. In fact, there is enough evidence on the relative deprivation of rural regions as opposed to urban areas. The strongest evidence is the existence of some of the most economically impoverished villages in the Egyptian nation in rural Upper Egypt (El-Nour, 2012, p. 155). On this particular point, Saker El Nour (2012) states that there is a direct connection between poverty and the agricultural sector in Egypt, which is the main source of income for farmers in rural Upper Egypt (p. 157). In fact, the agricultural dimension suffered the most of the aftermath of neoliberalism (Hanieh, 2013, p.220).

Regarding exclusion from the government’s policies, the marginalization lurking in the rural community has occurred throughout the different phases and eras in contemporary Egypt. Again, this has certainly affected small and landless farmers the most. Neoliberal policies apparently “emphasize the continuing significance of unequal landholding that keep landless and near-landless in poverty” (Bush, 2007, p. 81). Furthermore, the sharp inclination of poverty in the Egyptian countryside increased the wealth of landlords and expanded the gap of the social variation (Bush, 2007, p. 82). Thus, the constant reproduction of capital accumulation in capitalist societies under neoliberal policies is directly proportional to the reproduction of poverty in lower classes (Bush, 2012; Harvey, 2010). Concerning the political historical analysis, there are three important political events that have shaped the rural reality nowadays: state capitalism in Nasserist era, the liberalization of the agriculture market under the umbrella of the neoliberal policies, and the impact of implementing the 96 Renting Lands Law in 1992. The impact of those events on small-scale farmers in rural Upper Egypt is most starkly exhibited in the deprivation of economic property represented in their ownership of lands. In the Nasserist era and the state of capital system, for example, the ownership and redistribution of agricultural lands were the most visible consequence. Then, the state began to retreat from its obligation of financially covering the social welfare services in the 1970s under Sadat's regime and instead handed this responsibility to the private sector. This economical pattern was in line with the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) supported by the IMF (El-Mahdi 2012, p.134), in which the World Bank identified

Egypt as the leader of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in terms of economic adjustment (Hanieh, 2013, p. 120).

Ray Bush explains that the last two decades identify the recently emerged neoliberal policies, which are considered the ugly side of capitalism, as the main reason of poverty in Egypt (2012, p. 58). On the one hand, those policies increased the profit of the investors. On the other hand, they negatively affected the life and precarity of people in extreme poverty and of those who depended on the state subsidies to withstand their vulnerable life conditions, such as landless farmers. Notably, those neoliberal policies are the processes that created the winner and loser model (2012, p.56–58). The accumulation of capital was in favor of the groups that own the means of production in Egypt, such as the military and investors. Decreasing the subsidies that were offered as welfare for small-scale farmers and offering the production requirements to the free market, without framing any regulations or instructions, were another push towards further economic and social exclusion for the lower classes. At that time, class division and exploitation were substituted extensively with poverty and marginalization (El-Mahdi 2012, 136). Considering all of these points, most of the youth in the countryside were limited to job options that would exploit their physical labor, power, and time without the use of the accumulative symbolic capital they gained from the schooling system. However, with the high rates of inflation in Egypt with SAP, the job seeking were directed outside the official Egyptian borders. Gulf countries became the most popular destinations for young Egyptians to offer their confined labor power abilities to. Another reason for this choice was the conservative and traditional culture of the Gulf, which bore similarities to the culture of Upper Egypt (Millar, 2005, p.24).

To conclude, "In Egypt, half of all poor Egyptians live in the rural areas of Upper Egypt" (Hanieh, 2013, p.192). Hence, considering all of the aforementioned givens, it is possible to propose the question of privilege in a well-defined space of marginality, such as in rural Upper Egypt. However, this region carries its own complexities that create another layer of challenges in spite of its economic, social and cultural character. Through this particular case study and lens, it is possible to examine the intricacies of education and career opportunities as elements that redefine privilege in a society that has its own definitions of privilege, despite the marginalization it suffers from.

### **Why Rural Upper Egypt?**



To make sense of the discussion and to connect it to the previous themes of privilege, education, employment and Upper Egypt together, we should take a step back and look for the link between rural and education in terms of an unearned advantage. Actually, during the Nasserist era, Egypt was the first state in a third world country to announce the initiation and elaboration programs of welfare and public education (Bush, 2009, p54). Thus, taking such steps helped many marginalized groups in Egypt, especially peasants and small farmers, to secure and enjoy social services and economic stable income that was a matter privilege class exclusively and solely enjoyed. Raouf Abbas (2009) states that before the independence and Nasser's administration and during the monarchy system, education was limited to the elite classes and urban children from upper classes. Furthermore, the privileged class has the financial and cultural ability and bias to send their children to Europe in order to receive academic degrees (Abbass, 2009, p.259). This means that a large scope of the Egyptian population, whether middle or lower class didn't have the tool or right to send their children into schools and achieve social mobility. In addition, the topic of free education for all in the Egyptian parliament at that time was subject to tension that is built on classist analyses. Interestingly, the debates did not address citizen's right to enjoy secondary education or tertiary education. The debate focused on what is the need and outcomes behind educating children, especially peasant children (Abbas & Eldesoky, p.195). In fact, the parliament at that time suggested limiting the formal education on reading, farming, writing and limited mathematical skills to be used during their performance of agricultural and industrial roles. Unless, providing them with further and more expanding epistemology might cause class disturbance for the landowner and consciousness for positionality and political rights (Eldesoky, 2007, p.274). However, as mentioned in the previous sections, free education policy expanded the middle class in the 50s and 60s, which absorbed an adequate amount of peasant and farmer children in this process. To put it differently, the options to secure or obtain financial income were not confined to an occupation related to agriculture or physical skills to be used in farming. A new generation in rural Egypt was exposed to new occupations called nonagricultural employment, which allowed them to achieve social mobility after obtaining the university or academic certificate. Not to forget that education brought the new generation too with the required cultural and social prestige among the privilege class. Unfortunately, with the deterioration of the public education system and the freeze in the hiring process under the neoliberal policies the situation greatly fluctuated. In fact, the rural regions in Upper Egypt were mostly affected

by the marginalization of state policies that made the World Bank in one of its reports label it as “the lagging area trapped in a vicious cycle of low education, high fertility and poverty” (2012, p. 3). As a result, spotting the light on the question of how education in the current state can influence the lives of the upper Egypt residents and does it has an effect in their process of producing privilege situation are necessary to be asked and that is why I chose to conduct fieldwork in rural upper Egypt.

## Methodology

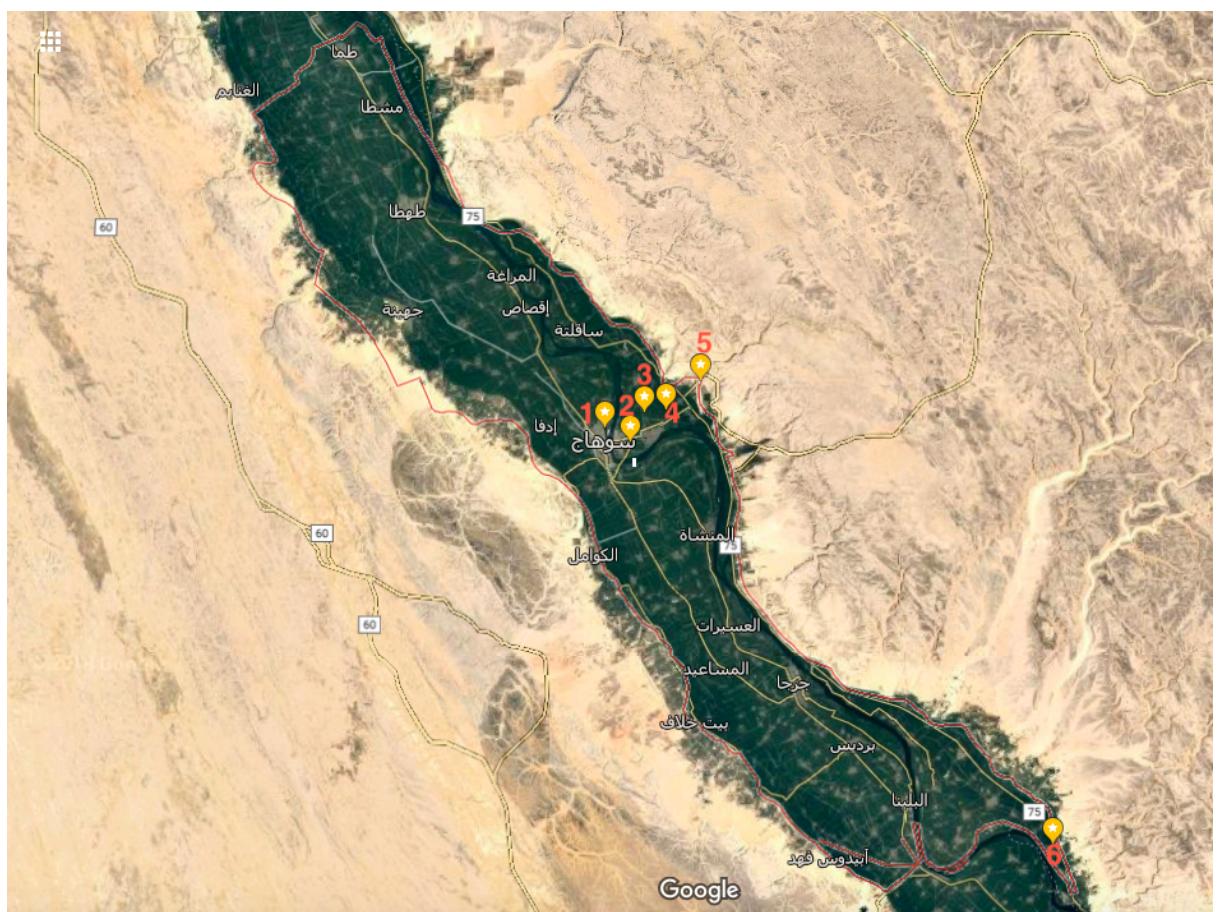


Figure 1: Google Map – Suhag governorates – places where the researcher visited during fieldwork are pinned.

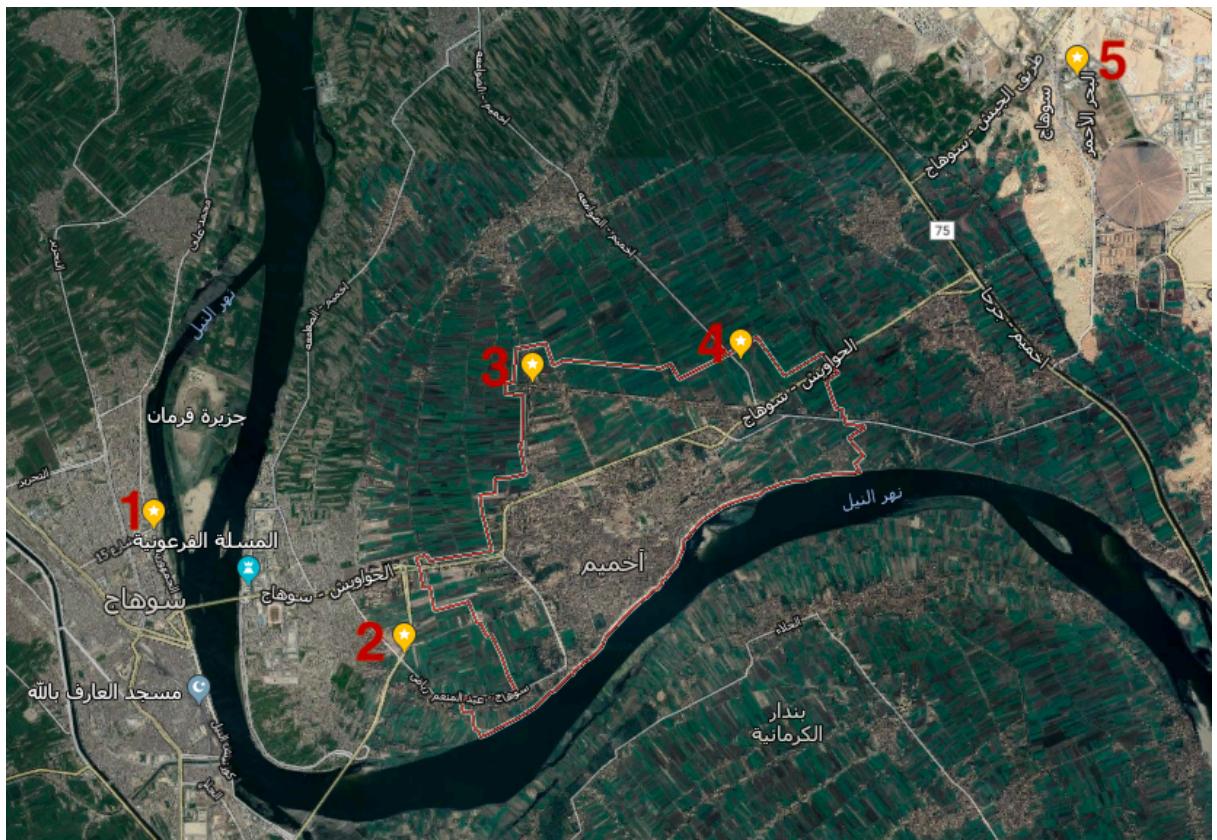


Figure 2: Akhmim, Suhag – the places visited and conducted the ethnography and interviews at are numbered.

In Suhag, a governorate in Upper Egypt, I had the opportunity to conduct most of my fieldwork research in a region called Akhmim and one meeting in a place called "El-Balabish", located near Dar El Salam Center at the south borders of Suhag. The fieldwork took place over the course of four visits in five months and was divided into conducting participant observation and holding meetings and interviews with stakeholders.<sup>3</sup>

As shown in Figure 1, I visited six places in Suhag. Number 2, 3, 4 and 6 were in the northern region of Suhag. Number 1 is Suhag city where I met Ashraf, the main informant for the ethnography, and number 5 is an industrial area at the borders of Akhmim called "El Kawmar." However, point 2, Mohamed Alam's agricultural field, is considered to be the departure point where I met my main informants during the fieldwork. It was there that I met Mohsen Hela who welcomed me and invited me to live with his family in a rural residential area called "Naga Tamana"<sup>4</sup> for more than 20 days. I lived there for thirteen days straight and participated in the family's daily routine. Prior to that, I spent the whole day there for a week in order to build rapport before having the

<sup>3</sup> Names of all my interlocutors, families and villages have been changed.

<sup>4</sup> Naga Tamana pointed as 3 in Figure 2

chance to live temporarily with the family. During that time, I conducted fourteen interviews. I had the chance to do multiple visits to three schools in rural areas. Two of them were in "Nagaa Tamana," a primary and a secondary school, while the third school was in another rural village called "El-Maraghaa." The purpose of the visits was to meet teachers and see how they relate to the notion of privilege and what they think education and jobs can do for achieving a decent status. I also held another interview with the youth in the Kowthar industrial area. Furthermore, I had the ability to meet different individuals who work closely and deeply in producing policy decisions related to education. Some of them are educators and work in the Ministry of Education, some others are investors who have plans and projects in the private education sector.

However, it is important at this step to map the “privilege” and who I worked with. Thus, I spent time with different families, who can be identified as privileged in Suhag in order to gain a better understanding of the elements that can answer the research questions as chapter two fully discusses. Knowing these families was thankfully done through my main informant, Ashraf. He generously offered me various ways to conduct good quality fieldwork. In fact, through my work as a researcher in the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, I was able to network with Ashraf, who works in the field of human rights. He is my main informant and supporter to form most of the materials for the fieldwork. However, his social, cultural and familial positions in Akhmim were the real reason behind me being introduced to and welcomed by different families. In addition, I conducted separate focus groups and individual meetings with interlocutors outside the family members. Some of them fit the criteria classified as privileged in terms of the economic, social or cultural status, such as the teachers, investors and NGOs worker as they are represented in chapter three and four. On the other hand, in chapter four and five, a group of the interlocutors I have identified as underprivileged due to their circumstances of unemployment, lack of formal education and family background that does not have social or cultural capital.

Further, there were multiple obstacles that I faced during the fieldwork. Being a female in the field was one of obstacles I faced. This was strongly shown in my body language especially in interviews or events that gathered me with males. I always talked in low tone, my body was stiff in position and cross armed and confining the laughs and how is it sounds in order not to be called *Qāhirīyyaa* (Cairene). Actually, my geographical identity as a resident of greater Cairo was another layer of complexity for

my position in the field. Elaborating, more than once in different occasions it was stated by the interlocutors, males and females, that girls in greater Cairo are exposed to western global influences, which conservatism is substituted with weaker morals. However, being a student at the American University of Cairo (AUC) sometimes granted me better labels, but in other occasions it caused awkwardness and lack of trust with the interlocutors. Simply put, some of the families helped me and were really open as soon as they knew that I am a university student, while others questioned why I am collecting data about them and how this is related to a university that has “America” as a part of its name. Furthermore, my title as a “Doctor”, which I acquired because of my Bachelor degree in dentistry, helped construct a highly valued social image that made most of the informants take the discussion seriously. Finally, being a veiled female played a role in communicating and receiving respect, which is the result of the religious bias which Upper Egypt is known for. In fact, it gave me more privilege than my connection to Ashraf.

### **The house when it hosts a researcher**

As my status as a guest, Helal’s family house was re-designed to welcome my short stay with them. Living with Helal’s family in their house had to include a new order and subtle movements for some of the family members. More elaborately, the family consists of four brothers and their family who occupied two rooms each; one for the children and the other for the parents. As the youngest brother is working abroad in Kuwait, the parents’ room is closed and his wife sleeps with the children. Thus, the room was reopened when I moved into the house. The room had the privilege of having a tiny, one-meter long by one-meter width bathroom with a squat toilet, *q’da baladī*<sup>1</sup> and with no heater. In addition, they offered a clean new towel for me to use. During my stay, I shared the room with one of the youngest daughters. Concerning the food, at the beginning, there was always a source of animal protein that was served for me in the first two days. However, and after a while of building a good rapport with the family, what I would eat was no longer a concern to Helal’s family, which is for me a good sign of adjusting. Eating what was served to the whole family became the norm for the rest of the stay. However, that did not mean that I was allowed to cross the line and get food by myself for the family. For example, one day after finishing one of the interviews outside Tamana, I had the idea of buying fruits for all of the family and the girls - including myself – for when we would watch television together. Unfortunately, this idea was

responsible of re-clearing my position as a guest. In fact, the family considered my act of buying fruits as an insult and spontaneously blamed me for doing such an action. “If you wanted fruits, why didn’t you say and we would get it for you. Next time, if you need anything, tell us and we will bring it.” I tried to explain my intentions, however, one of the girls later told me “did someone tell you that we can’t buy fruit?” At this moment, I realized the damage that I made and how could it be translated as if they are financially burdened by my stay.

## Thesis outline

To explore the privileged in rural Upper Egypt and how it can be reproduced with respect to education and jobs, the thesis is divided into five chapters; each one engages with a specific concept through which privilege is better analyzed and more critically understood. Chapter Two discusses who the privileged are and the ways and criteria that define them in rural Upper Egypt, along with exploring the dynamic and complexity of structuring privilege position. This chapter is based on the theoretical analysis as well as how the families that I met frame and prioritize what privilege is for them.

Chapter Three then focuses on how educational decisions, whether those from the state educational policies or from the families, relate to the reproduction of privilege. These decisions are being structured around mostly two contexts of evaluation regarding the Egyptian educational system; one sees education under neoliberalism as completely worthless, while the other still believes that there is good that comes out of education in respect to better career opportunities, upper social mobility and gaining privilege.

Meanwhile, Chapter Four investigates whether there is a process of exclusion in order to reproduce privilege. Thus, the ethnography in this section targets the private sector in the education system. Regardless of their minimal expectations for acquiring any advantages from the public formal education, I examine the motives that the deprived families hold in their decision and continue to support their children’s education. Chapter Five, on the other hand, examines the influence of various social hierarchies with respect to the job market and how the strategies for attaining a ‘good job’ relate to the notion of privilege. Moreover, the relation between the social capital, which is originated from the socioeconomic family origin, and the process of attaining a *wazīfa* (job) is another important aspect that I explore in this chapter. Lastly, I investigate the reasons that most of the youth I met with use to rationalize their bias toward public jobs over private ones. Ultimately, by delving into these different aspects, the thesis gives a deeper

understanding of how privilege is reproduced in a critical socioeconomic and political time that is mostly shaped by social inequalities.

## Chapter Two

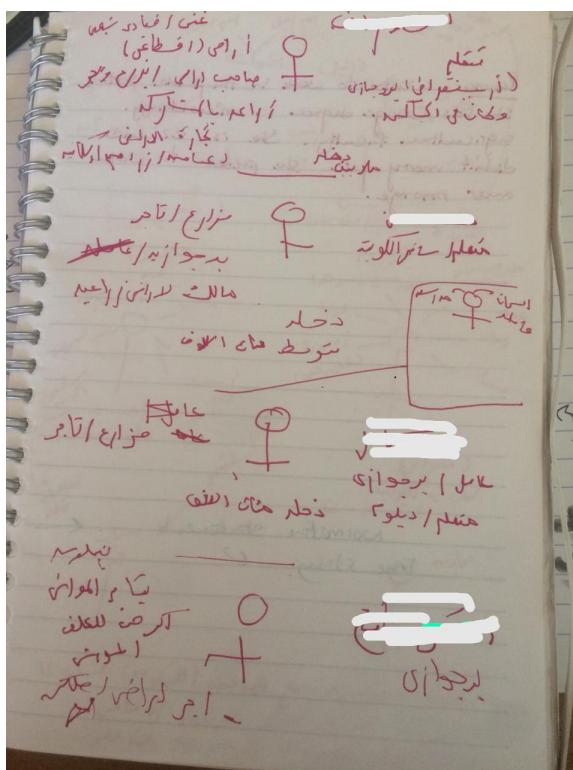
### Who are the Privileged?

The previous chapter discussed the various forms of capital that affect the stability of keeping and reproducing privilege, the historical relation between attaining social mobility through education and formal public sector jobs, and the timeline of state welfare deterioration that dramatically caused a strong wave of exclusion and inequalities that influenced mainly the unprivileged. Meanwhile, this chapter pushes this forward through identifying who is privileged and what are the criteria that define the privilege status. In order to understand how the reproduction of privilege is obtained in mediators as education and jobs, as the next chapters will cover, it is important to note that the main aim of this research is to support the argument of how privilege is not a static matter but rather has a strong effect on the process of exclusion and limitation (Harries, 2016, p. 101). This chapter will combine two related perspectives of comprehending the privilege. First, the sociological analytical aspect through Bourdieu's interpretation of material and symbolic capital changes (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In other words, economic capital, education accomplishment and professional jobs in additional to the family origin are all factors that intersect in various ways in order to characterize the privileged and his/her position in the social hierarchy. The second perspective will cover what constitutes someone as privileged and what does it take to be recognized with that status. It is important to note that the local analysis of privilege is overlapping somehow with most of the symbolic capital, especially the cultural and social. With respect to this concept, the chapter starts with an overview of the previous research done on attempting to describe and analyze the privileged. It then proceeds to introduce the families that I met during the field work. It is necessary to mention that these families are characterized as privileged in different ways. Moreover, knowing these families and the factors that made them enjoy that status is linked strongly to the upcoming argument that covers the relation between the socioeconomic origin of families and how this affects their children, and, more specifically, the production of the opportunities through education and job market.

In this particular case, the individual socioeconomic background functions to increase the expectations of continuing higher education and the chances of getting a job. In fact, one of the most significant meetings I conducted in Suhag, and which supported

such a claim, was with the First Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education of Suhag. The interview was mainly concerned with the inequality in the Egyptian education system and particularly how the ministry responds to this situation. The interviewee made it clear that the ministry gives chances to children equally. However, the potentiality to finish education is directly linked to the economic level of the child. In fact, as he puts it, *mirtāh* (literally means comfortable), is a popular Egyptian word that describes individuals or families with suitable economic capital that would ease their life demands and gives a sense of security and stability. He stated that students who come from a family that lives comfortably and enjoys economic stability has more of a chance to complete their education. Finally, he drew a comparison between the '*umda's*' (mayor) son and the farmer's son, and he concluded that the matter is in favor of the '*umda's*' son. There is no doubt that this part of the ethnography reflects only the educational component of how class privilege can guarantee education to their children. However, finishing higher education is considered the first milestone in the journey of achieving and reproducing a *mirtah* status. Apart from the theoretical work that was covered in the above section, the next section depends entirely on the ethnography through analyzing the class privilege of the families that I met during the fieldwork. This section mainly depends on Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction as categorized into: economic, cultural and social capital, and more importantly how they intersect with one another.

# Identifying the Privileged in Akhmim



*Figure3 Hand drawn diagram trying to analyse the individual social status in respect of their economic capital based on their private property and income. In addition to characterizing them based on their culture capital in terms of their educational degree.*

In Akhmin, meeting four families from various villages and locations was an opportunity that I was fortunate enough to experience. At face value, identifying these families as privileged was a simple matter as they were known to be “*mirtāḥīn*” because of the material capital they are accumulating. In contrast, as time elapsed and as we grew closer, the concept of privilege unfolded as an ever more complex matter rather than a static one. In other words, accumulating economic capital does not eventually increase the accumulation of cultural or social capital (Fitzgerald, 2014. p.221). On the contrary, accumulating the symbolic capital does not always support the accumulation of material capital. In spite of class privilege, the families state of privilege is here framed based on Bourdieu’s concept of: economic capital as including private properties and income; cultural capital, specifically institutional that refers to the educational attainment: social capital that means the social networks that can produce to individuals’ power and

advantages (Fitzgerald, 2014. p.220). And lastly, the job occupation *wazīfa* shares various aspects of capitals. In other words, the job occupation directly reflects the cultural capital because of the social embodiment that has strong connection to the notion of credentials and education degree. In addition, it affects the material capital with respect to the salary received from the professional occupation, as well as holding certain types of jobs have the ability to build and create networks with people in power (Sullivan, 2001, p.895).

It is important here to begin by clearly stating that throughout this chapter all of the families and individual who are represented in the analysis are identified as privileged based on the next classification that I am referring to. They are four families consisting of parents and their children: Mowafi family, Helal's family ( where I had the opportunity to stay with them for over 20 days), Zalta family (that live in the same community as Helal) and finally the Salem family. The next diagram sums up the data collected for each family. it is categorized as: family members, income and private properties, education achievement, job affiliation, social capital and their network to state position, and finally their children education and jobs. As a matter of fact, the main, fixed type of property for most of these families is lands and livestock, such as domestic animals. Those two elements are considered assets that most households in rural regions have. Interestingly, most of the cash flow the families receive as income from trade deals or from overseas transfers almost immediately turns into assets through buying lands and livestock. The notion of saving cash in banks was considered unfavorably and is dismissed by a high percentage of Upper Egyptian families. All in all, framing families within these categories arguably helps in recognizing their privilege, how it is formed, and whether or not it is passed on to their next generation.

**The privileged families in Akhmim that I have met and conducted Fieldwork with**

**Mowafi**

**Family Members:**  
Ahmed Alaam (the head member of the family)  
Ashraf Mowafi  
Mahmoud Mowafi  
Amal Mowafi

**Helal**

**Family Members:**  
Four brothers and two sisters  
  
Mohamed Helal  
Ahmed Helal  
Hassan Helal  
Hussien Helal  
  
The two sisters I couldn't meet as they live with their husbands outside Tamana

**Zalta**

**Family Members:**  
Mohamed Zalta and his wife Nawal are the members that I met from Zalta family.

**Salem**

**Family Members:**  
Ahmed Salem and his wife Amina whom I managed to meet.  
They have three daughters and one son.



Ahmed Alaam is a landowner (agriculture and building) and works in trade that secures him with profits.  
Ashraf has an NGO and private apartment.  
Mahmoud is an investor and owns shares in a private international school.  
Amal depends financially on her husband and her public job salary.

The family owns collectively agriculture lands and livestock  
The family collectively owns a house that consists of three levels, which all brothers and their families live in.  
The family collectively owns a small farm in Menya.

Zalta family owns most of the agriculture lands in Tamana, Akhmim.  
Mohamed Zalta works in land trade  
He owns a large number of livestock and also trade in them.  
He lives with his wife and son in a three level spacious house.

Salem owns one level spacious house (more than three rooms).  
He owns agriculture lands and livestock.  
He invests material capital with his brother in construction in Giza.



Academic Achievements

All family members graduated from higher education and hold a university degree.

One brother has a university degree  
One brother has a vocational secondary education degree  
One brother dropped out from education before finishing primary education  
The eldest brother didn't enroll in school in the first place.

The husband dropped out from basic education.  
The wife holds secondary vocational level.

Salem has a teaching degree from Teacher Institute.  
His wife has a vocational secondary degree



Job Affiliation

All the family members are working in public official jobs with full time contracts.

One brother was the bank manager for the Agriculture bank in Akhmim, which is supervised by the Ministry of agriculture.  
Another brother who holds the vocational degree works as a laboratory supervisor in a primary public school.  
One works as a constructor monitor in a construction company in Kuwait  
The eldest brother is a farmer

No one from the family of Zalta (Mohamed and his brothers) has a public job or a registered private company. They work in trade (land and livestock).

Salem works as a primary school principal in Samwon village.  
His wife works in the same school in an administrative position.



Social Capital and their Networks to State Positions

They are from one of the strongest families in Suhag and descended from a tribal original that relates to Prophet Mohamed.

All of the family males and females that I met are working in ministries of Interior and Justice except for Ashraf, who works in the ministry of finance in the legislation department.

Ahmed Alaam was a member of the parliament for more than two parliament elections. While Ashraf was a member in the municipal local council of Akhmim.

The Helal's family is newly established in the 50s and 60s after their greatest grandparents left the Suhag the city and settled in Tamana next to their agriculture lands.

Their strongest and main social capital is accumulated through their relations and networks with the Mowafi family

Zalta family is the Largest in Tamana Village and has a large capacity of human capital that allows the family to hold a position in the local municipal council in Akhmim.

No one from the family has a position in a high ranked jobs in the state such as the police and judiciary.

For security reasons, the village youth and men are excluded from acquiring occupation in a sensitive public jobs such as the police.



Children Education and jobs

Alaam's sons completed their university degree and working as judges in the ministry of justice. Ashraf's children are in a private Arabic school, primary level.

Mahmoud's children are in international schools, the American diploma system. Amal's children are in a private language school, primary and secondary level.

The eldest brother children:

The girls reached the secondary vocational level while the boys dropped out and didn't complete their basic education. The girls currently are housewives and married to uneducated males who have craft jobs. The sons are working in construction. The eldest works as constructor in Kuwait and the other is helping his father in farming and construction in the new cities around Suhag.

The second brother children

Five girls and two boys. Three girls have vocational secondary degree, while one managed to reach upper vocational degree in hospitality (5 years) and the youngest finished her general secondary education. Meanwhile the eldest son has dropped out while the youngest has graduated from a private institute of accounting after finishing his general secondary education. The girls who finished education are housewives except for one, who is working in an administrative position in a public school and married to carpenter. In addition, the eldest son is working in Kuwait as constructor monitor, while the youngest son preparing his papers to travel after he finished his military conscription.

The third brother children

Two boys and a girl. One boy and the girl managed to reach university level, while other boy currently in vocational secondary education. The girl is a housewife and married to a teacher in a preparatory public school.

The youngest brother

Three girls and one boy. The eldest two girls finished their university education. The other children are in vocational education.

A girl and boy.

They didn't complete their education and dropped out from primary level. The girl is a housewife while the boy is spending his military conscription.

The eldest girl has a bachelor degree in Archaeology and is currently unemployed.

The other two girls in the university level, one in medicine faculty, Suhag public university. While the other is obtaining her pharmacy degree from a private university in Cairo called Badr University in Cairo (BUC). The son in his last year in the general secondary education.

Figure 14A detailed diagram explaining the social position each family holds in respect of: 1- Material capital 2- Educational attainment 3- Job affiliation 4- Social capital their networks to state positions 5- children education and jobs.

## **Alaam's Family**

Of all the families I met during my field work, Ahmed Alaam is the person who owns the highest number of properties; namely agricultural land and buildings. In addition to this, he rents parts of the land he owns and some of his shares to others. He secures another source of fixed income from the trading deals he achieves from selling crops. As for Ashraf, Mahmoud and Amal, the stable income they receive comes from the salaries of their jobs in the public sector, in addition to their houses here taken as private property that exist in the urban side of Suhag city. However, there is another source of income that Ashraf and Mahmoud have. Ashraf is the co-founder and CEO of an NGO, and he directs and manages its projects. Meanwhile, Mahmoud has shares in investment projects.

Secondly, the El-Mowafi family members occupy most of the high ranking jobs among the families I met. There is no doubt that this relates to their educational attainment. The whole family completed their education and obtained university degrees, which is quite a significant and unusual matter in comparison with the other families. Ahmed Alaam, for instance, has a degree from the Faculty of Commerce, and he was a manager at the Nile bank. Ashraf has a law degree and works in the Taxation Department at the Ministry of Finance. Mahmoud is a police officer and works in the Investigation of Public Funds department, in Ministry of Interior.

Additionally, as social capital and networks constitute one of the pillars in the class privilege structure and the reproduction of power, Alaam was a member of the Egyptian consultative council (*majlis alshura*) for years since the 90s. He then had the opportunity to run for parliament and won more than two rounds. All of his sons and daughters are working either at the Ministry of Interior as police officers or at the Ministry of Justice as judges, which are jobs known for creating social networks. Ashraf and his brother, interestingly, are following the same path, where Ashraf was elected twice in the local municipal council and his brother is a judge. Looking back at the family history, the El-Mowafi family has always had a seat in either the parliament or in any other official state council, even before 1952. When I asked Ashraf about this and the reason for it, he said that it is an unwritten agreement in Upper Egypt that the members of big families or families that have rich human and cultural capital have secured positions in state elections, ranging from the village elections to parliamentary elections.



In terms of children's education, Ahmed Alaam's children had the chance to finish their university education in the Faculty of Law. They are two boys now occupying high profile jobs as judges in the judiciary Egyptian system. Moreover, Ashraf enrolled his children in a private language school but he had to transfer them to a private Arabic school due to financial difficulties. Similarly, Mahmoud and Amal are enrolling their children in the same private language school; with Mahmoud's daughter currently taking her exams in American Diploma at a school in Cairo.

### **Helal's Family**

One can possibly argue, based on my fieldwork encounters, that the process of creating private property and material income is done collectively. As for Helal's family, for example, it is difficult to pinpoint an individual definite asset for each brother. Their capital, which consists of pieces of land and livestock, is considered to be collectively owned by the whole family. This was very confusing to me. However, through participant observation, I was able to understand the situation only when I saw that the crops bought from the market divided equally among all family members with the same food being cooked for everyone. In fact, and from what I was told about the history of Helal's family, this was originally the mother's will, which stated that <sup>5</sup>"if someone isolated the brothers, Allah shall punish him." That is why the Helal brothers, even after the death of one of their siblings, still shares the same household, capital and assets.

As for education and job affiliation, the family has medium ranking jobs. Only one of the four brothers, Ahmed, had the opportunity to complete his education and graduate from the Faculty of Agriculture. Then, he managed to have a public job *wazīfa* in the Agricultural Bank of Egypt and was called *bashmuhandis* (engineer). On the other hand, Hassan was only able to obtain a vocational diploma and works as a lab technician in a public school; nevertheless, he took a long vacation from his public job and traveled to Kuwait from the mid '90s until 2012 to work there. The oldest brother did not go to school and worked as a farmer his whole life, while the youngest dropped out when he was in primary school, and now works as a construction site supervisor in Kuwait after living there for more than twenty years. These men's wives did not complete their education, and they only work at home, the youngest brother's wife, who has a diploma,

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<sup>5</sup>"الله يعزز بين الاخوات، ربنا ينتقم منه"

worked as a nurse in a private clinic but had to quit as soon as she started planning to get married.

The main source of social capital that Helal's family has is their connection with the Mowafi family. As a matter of fact, Helal's social capital and protection are provided by the close friendship of Ahmed Alam and Ahmed Helal. Usually, the family name history or its social position are achieved through university educational and formal job occupation along with the economic level that can produce social capital accumulation. In contrast, these factors did not serve the process of social accumulation for the Helal's family. Actually, the family moved to Tamana village at the end of 60s where the grandfather and mother were farmers who occupied a low position in terms of class stratification. They had benefited from Nasser's agrarian reform laws but the moment that made them start to accumulate their economic capital was when the eldest brother travelled to Saudi Arabia in the late 70s. This was when capital accumulation proceeded with every money transfer. This is mainly the main reason for securing an economic capital that puts them in a privileged position. On the other hand, one single brother had the ability to complete his university education and enroll in Faculty of Agriculture. While his high school scores could have allowed him to enter the more prestigious Faculty of Medicine in Cairo, , the family preferred agriculture because of the financial burden that going into medicine might have cost them. . In other words, the accommodation and tuition fees at that time in the 60's would have required that they sell a *faddān* of land to be able to afford such costs, which was a difficult decision to make. At another level, the friendship between Mowafi and Helal gave them respect among the Tamana community.

As for the family's children, the girls were more likely to finish school and pursue a university degree than the boys. Actually, most of the girls had the chance to go to college or obtain an upper secondary diploma, while some of the boys dropped out from elementary level and others while studying for their secondary diplomas. Most of the boys did not manage to reach secondary level (*thānawīyya 'amāa*) except for two, one of whom went to Al Azhar and then to the Arabic Department of the Faculty of Science, while the other graduated from a private institute with an accounting degree. When I asked the male children why they chose to leave school, their answers were due to the high rate of unemployment they observed among the elder youth in their community. In addition, they preferred using their time to work and get paid rather than wasting it in

school. However, later, they regretted this step and wished that they completed their education.

The level of education among the children varies between brothers. For example, one of two brothers, who did not complete their education, managed to have his daughters graduate from university, while the others only finished vocational level and are housewives now. In contrast, Ahmed, who is the only brother who finished university, did not have any of his daughters enroll in university until now. They are five girls, four of them are graduates from a vocational school, except for the youngest, who is currently in general secondary level in pursuit of entering the pharmacy field, which would give her a prestigious title; the “doctor.” On the other hand, the youngest brother, who dropped out, pushed his daughters to finish the general secondary level and graduate from university. With respect to jobs, all of the males are either working in Kuwait in construction or waiting to finish their military conscription to eventually join their cousins. Meanwhile, the females are housewives except for one who is working in an administrative position in a primary public school.

### **Zalta's Family**

The Zalta family is the first and largest family to live and settle in Tamana. They moved from Akhmim, the center, to Tamana, the village, in the 1950s and 60s when they started to own land in the area. Over time, the family gathered the wealthiest and poorest family members together in the same place thereby creating a large human capital in this region. Mohamed Zalta owns most of the lands that surround the area. Parts of the land are rented to others. The Zalta family members are labeled as nouveaux riches as they accumulated enormous wealth in a short period of time and started to show it off. I met the eldest brother, Mohamed Zalta, and visited his family three times. He is a *muzāri'* (which means the person who farms an agricultural field) not a peasant *fallāh* as he clearly identifies himself. He also trades crops and livestock, in addition to other trades.

The Zalata family has a different educational profile than the other families as Mohamed did not go to school, and does not have formal public job or a *wazīfa*. His wife has a diploma and had an opportunity to work in an administrative position at a school but her mother-in-law refused. She claimed that her work will cause disputes between the wives of his siblings as they will have to work in the household while she will dress up

and go to work, or as they may say: "we do the household work while she dresses up and goes to her job."

Because of the human capital that Zalta family has in Tamana, they secured a seat in the municipal election in Akhmim. In addition, their work in trade and selling land allowed them to create proper networks with other families and individuals that can benefit from them and increase their privilege. Here, Bourdieu's argument on how economic capital accessibility opens opportunities to accumulate other forms of capital is particularly relevant (Fitzgerald, 2014, p.220). However, it is not always applicable for other forms of symbolic capital as culture.

Perhaps one can argue here that the economic accumulation had an influence on producing social capital, yet it could not affect the cultural capital regarding children education and job affiliation. In terms of Tamana's children, for example, a boy and a girl dropped out of school. The girl reached the third preparatory level and dropped out in order to get married, while the boy dropped out as he reached the secondary vocational level and is now spending his time completing the compulsory military service.

### Salem's Family

Salem's family lives in Samwon village, far east of Akhmim. The Salem brothers, Ahmed and Mostafa, own agricultural lands and work in the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Youth. As such, they can secure another source of income other than their capital. They are also partners with one of village's men, who lives in Giza, in his construction work. They are financially participating in constructing residential buildings in the El-Haram district in the Giza governorate. In fact, they are not the only ones who do so, as other village members financially participate in the construction projects by sending money to the person in charge, for which they would then receive profit after the apartments are sold.

In the Salem family, Ahmed graduated with a teaching degree from the Teacher's Institute and is currently a principal of a public primary school in his village. His wife has a vocational secondary degree and works in the administrative department of the same school. Notably, Ahmed cares a lot for his children's education. He has three daughters who go to university and one son in the secondary level. The eldest girl graduated from the Archaeology department, the second girl studies in the Faculty of Medicine at Suhag University, while the youngest girl studies pharmacy at a private university in Cairo

called Badr University in Cairo (BUC). The decision to send one of the girls to complete her education in Cairo was complex, especially for a girl, and is usually not allowed. That said, however, the family made the decision to support their daughter to pursue her dream through investing in her education (given that this is a private educational institution requiring high fees) and disregarding the geographical relocation from Suhag to Cairo. Later came a piece of news announcing the opening of a new private university in Suhag, which will include pharmacy department, which was also a justification for the family to cope with or rationalize the decision of sending their daughter for a year to Cairo until she can move back to Suhag.

The social capital that the Salem family holds might be problematic. During my conversation with Salem's family about the available educational institutions and the potential job opportunities in Samwon, Ahmed informed me that Suhag is a place that repels its youth because of the lack of investment or development in its labor market. I then asked him about the youth's opportunities to work in administrative or security positions that all communities need. He immediately explained that young men in Samwon are not allowed to join the police or military academies. It was not clear why such a situation and exclusion might exist. However, while we were heading back to Tamana, Ashraf informed me that the reason behind this type of exclusion is that Samwon has a reputation that it is a place where illegal business is conducted. Thus, none of its male residents is allowed to become an officer or a judge. It is a social stigma the state decided to enforce on them and it has the ability to marginalize all of the village members and deprive them of such a chance.

## **Privilege: Dynamism and Complexity**

After exploring the families and their class privilege, it is now important to understand the complexity and dynamism that the privilege status holds for each family. This is also a question of how privilege has the ability to shift from one generation to another, and from one space to other. Hence, being privileged can hardly if ever be identified as static. It is actually complex and multi-layered (Minarik, 2017, p. 55), especially considering the constant changes of the political economies of societies. More clearly, for example, in the 60s there was the chance for the underprivileged in terms of family origin to win advantages from the benefits that the state at that time created regarding education opportunity and jobs in the public sector (Binzel & Carvalho, 2016,

p.2444). This was the case for Helal's family after one of the brothers managed to finish his education and get a job in Ministry of Agriculture. At this time, the economic, cultural and social capital were accumulated simultaneously. However, when the state politics changed and shifted toward neoliberalism which began in the 80s and 90s, the chances for the next generation worsened as the quality of education deteriorated, since the public job opportunities were limited, and the rising inflation and prices (Saad, 2016, p. 4: Assaad & Krafft, 2014, p.13). The gap between the generations, in terms of life opportunities and guaranteeing a comfortable life *hāya karīma* expanded dramatically. As a result, families had to choose between what type of capital accumulation should be favored and what is favorable based on their abilities to benefit from and reproduce what they already have. At this point, the parallelism between different capital accumulation began to wane. In other words, Helal's family supported their male children to travel abroad to Kuwait, which would allow them to able to obtain an economic value and preserve what they already accumulated. Unfortunately, the cultural capital experienced had an adverse effect with the lack of educational degree and formal job occupation for most of their children. It is important to note, however, that this was not the case for all of the brothers. The youngest uneducated brother pushed his daughters with the help of his wife, who has only vocational diploma, to reach university level. This not only gave them the time to accumulate their own cultural capital, but also delayed any potential offers of marriage until she finished her education, which is a remarkable move compared with the other brother and his daughters and the broader community at large. This rather socially daring move was arguably rationalized through the awareness of the importance of the production of cultural capital that the parents were deprived of. In other words, they did not want their children to be as unprivileged as themselves.

Privilege complexity was not confined only to the Helal's family. In fact, the state policies that affected the reproduction of privilege for them had a rippling effect on one of the members in Mowafi's family. Due to the wage shrinkage that reached its peak in the late 90s (Said, 2015, p.4), depending only on the income of one job was not enough to secure stability and preserve the class position. Thus, most of the public workers had second and third jobs to cover family needs (Binzel & Cravello, 2016, p. 2565). This was the case for Ashraf Mowafi, who works in the Ministry of Finance and does not have any further private capital that can produce income. As aforementioned, Ashraf has established an NGO that organizes and holds projects with the help of international sponsors such as Plan International NGO and the European Union. He thus has another

source of income. However, it is not a constant or permanent source; it depends on each project's duration and budget. In spite of his problematic situation to reproduce material capital, Ashraf's social capital was secured and gave him advantages especially in dealing with the state official offices and escaping numerous steps in the bureaucratic system that normal citizen are forced to experience.

In my second visit to Helal's house, I was waiting for Hassan Helal with Ashraf Mowafi in the car. As Hassan arrived in his white Mercedes, I asked Ashraf, "Is Hassan richer than you?" He paused for a few seconds and then said: "Financially, yes. But socially *'ijtimā'iyyan* surely no". Ashraf has limited economic capital in comparison to Helal's family that owns lands and livestock. The social capital he possesses comes from his family name which places him in a much higher position and status. In addition, this position gives him the advantages to produce and reproduce through networking and doing favors for people. The favors are done based on the cultural and social capital that his family members occupy from their public jobs *wazā'f*. What I am pointing to here is the intersectionality between institutional cultural capital and social networking with positions granted through certain occupational affiliations. These positions have the power to produce favoritism *wasta* that depends entirely on the notion of who one knows (Ahmed A& Mohamed S, 2011, p.412). For Ashraf, he has connections with and from his family members, who occupy jobs as judges, police officers and powerful political status as parliament members, which gives him an authority to support individuals with advantages such as job opportunity, only because of knowing him. That said, then, maybe the economic capital is not a concern for Ashraf; however, having the required social networks and power to maneuver a given situation is what he prefers to identify as a privilege.

For Zalta's family, the complexity lies in their definition of different forms of capital and how they prioritize them. As they are known in their community for being privileged for their advanced economic capital and private properties, they lack the institutional cultural capital with respect to educational attainment or formal public jobs. As explained, Zalta's daughter dropped out from preparatory stage in order to get married. As a matter of fact, early marriage and childbearing are main pillars in identifying the rural Upper Egypt community (Sieverding & Elbadawy, 2016, p.129). Interestingly, the process and marriage preparations are the engines of accumulating cultural capital that Zalta's family recognizes. Illustrating, Rania Salem (2018) argues that parental investment in daughters' marriage is a cultural focus for most of the

Egyptian families to show off their power and privileged status (p.2615). Therefore, during the Zalta's daughter's marriage preparations, the family loaded all of the wedding furniture, such as electronic devices and furniture, on three open trucks that were driven in the community streets in order to be seen. This step adds another advantage in their privileged status.

### **Conclusion**

To bring all of these ethnographic vignettes together, I argue that privilege can be understood as a phenomenon composed of various matrices through which the same group or individual can be regarded as both privileged and unprivileged (Harries, 2016, 102). A family or an individual can be labeled as privileged for having wealth, while another can be ascribed such a status based on his social status and family history. The most favorable position, indeed, is accruing all the capital requirements, whether material, cultural or social, to somehow shield oneself from the state policies that might endanger one's privilege. Such political shifts have the capability of creating insecurities potentially resulting in losing some class privilege advantages. In this case, the issue would not be focused on the individual or family strength to produce more privilege, but would rather be a question of practicing the right strategies to reproduce its already accumulated advantages.

## Chapter Three

### **The Educational Decisions: Between Poor Public Education and the Privilege to Encounter it**

In the previous chapter, I discussed who the privileged in Akhmim are and analyzed the dynamics at play for the successful labeling of the ‘privileged’ as such. As previously noted, education status is an integral factor that has the ability of aiding the identification of the privileged not just for the individual but also for the family in the long term. In fact, schools and university institutions are considered social tools with important effects in the equation of obtaining a privileged position for the Mowafi, Helal and Salem families. Furthermore, the educational institution is the space where most of the symbolic capital accumulation and the mechanism of its gain or loss occur (Bourdieu, 1960/2007, p. 193). On the other hand, educational policies that are implemented have the ability to support social justice or enforce inequalities (Albadrawy, 2015).

As will follow, this chapter focuses on the formal education system in Akhmim and how educational decisions are related to the reproduction of privilege. In order to determine the methods of reproducing social advantages, it is important to understand the external factors that might influence such an aspiration. One of these factors, which is at the core of this thesis discussion, is the educational system. Yet, to achieve reproduction of social advantages based on education might not be an easy task to follow. More specifically, the outcomes that can be concluded from the education process might negatively affect the mechanism of (re)producing privilege. Thus, families need to be aware of the educational system situation in order to evaluate their options and then construct their decision that ultimately affects their privilege . Asking whether education under neoliberalism is worthless or can still be considered an appropriate medium for a good career/mobility/privilege is a fundamental question on which families can build the required strategies to reproduce their privilege. In order to explore the impact of educational policies, I had the chance to conduct parallel qualitative research through various interviews and focus groups with teachers, school principals, as well as NGO workers involved in education. The school where I conducted most of the interviews was a shift school. Multiple school shifts, are response to high class densities, which lead to shortening the school day and the use of the physical classes for two or three shifts of different students. In fact, this type of multiple shift system in schools is most known



among the lower quality of educational systems compared with single shift (Elbadawy, 2014, p.9). Of course, one school cannot represent all other schools in Egypt and assuming they all share poor school preparation. It can still be an opening to think about in relation to this thesis discussion, for analyzing the discourse of poor state spending on public education. It also helps us consider how this is correlated with either the decision to attain an education or to drop out.

The overall conclusion from the interviews is a clear and grounded realization of the discussion about how the educational services are poor in Egypt and especially in rural upper Egypt. In fact, rural Upper Egypt has the highest number of illiterate youth in Egypt; roughly 31% (Elbadawy, 2014, p. 4). As explained in various literatures, there is a direct relation between the input of resources that are being invested in the education structure and how it translates into outputs that reflect student performances (Winch, 2010). Taking the example above of school shifts to explain; when the public financial resources on the public education are insufficient, this effects the ability to provide enough classes with reasonable numbers of student. Consequently, the government comes up with a solution for this dilemma by applying the system of schools having multiple shifts. As a result, first, students in the multiple shift school are subjected to higher rates of dropping out, which eventually cause unequal opportunities for attaining education (Elbadawy, 2014, 10). Put differently, decreasing the input resources to apply fair and adequate education makes the decision for families to support their children's education "difficult to trust the worth of its outputs" (Winch, 2010, p. 21).

One of the fundamental issues that impact the quality of education therefore is the allocated governmental spending. Unfortunately, the financial spending on education in Egypt is insufficient. As various studies have concluded, basic public education in Egypt is disappointing and excludes poor and disadvantaged children (Assaad & Krafft, 2015, 27). This results in either poor or barely any coverage of basic needs for establishing education as school building or qualified teachers (Dixon, 2010, p.41). Since 2014, the Egyptian constitution obligated the government to spend 4% from the total GDP on pre-university education and 2% on the university level. However, these standards have not been met (Tawfik, 2018, p 2). In the current financial year, 2018/2019, the government allocated around 112 billion Egyptian pounds to the university and pre-university levels. This is only 2.2% from the total GDP (Ministry of Finance, 2018). As a result, the

average annual expenditure per student was 3,377 Egyptian pounds (about 201.5\$<sup>6</sup>), on the national level. This spending was distributed mostly across teacher's salaries, educational equipment, or maintaining educational investments (which means building or repairing new classes). If we compared the Egyptian student spending share with the international standard supported from the World Bank, which is 8000\$ per student annually, the correlation is evident between the low government spending on public education and the poor educational outcomes. As reflected in the fieldwork findings, the situation becomes more complex when investment in the quality of curricula or teachers training are financially supported by international organizations such as the World Bank or USAID.

As a matter of fact, 26.8% of the population has not enrolled in schools at all, while 7.3% of them dropped out and did not complete their basic education, either primary, preparatory or secondary in 2017 (CAPMAS 2018). Regarding the concept of distrusting the educational outcomes, the same report states the various reasons that structured or enforced the decision of leaving education. Surprisingly, 56% of those who did not enroll or dropped out of schools are either unwilling to complete their education or their families are refusing them to complete their education. Of these, 18% report not enrolling or dropping out for financial reasons, 9% drop out after repeated failures, and 6% drop out to get married (CAPMAS, 2018, p.19). Concerning rural Upper Egypt, based on numbers, 33.6% of Suhag's population are illiterate and 85% of them are found in rural regions.

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[1] This is done by calculating the overall budget for every governance over the total number of students. The conversion rate from Egyptian pound to dollars is 16.7 on 9/6/2019.

## **Public Education: Between the Lack of Inputs and the Poor of Outputs**

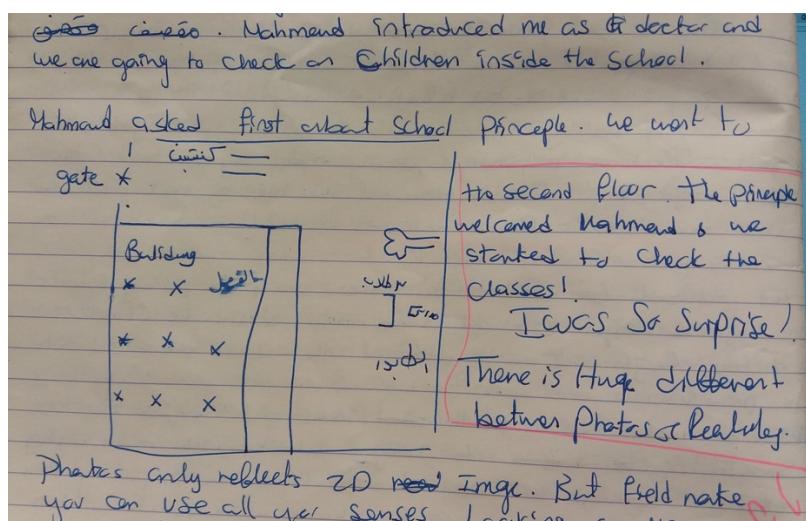


Figure 5. A rough description of the school building, field notes

Visiting a public school during the fieldwork was a pivotal moment in understanding the reality of the education system. As mentioned in the previous chapters, public formal education struggles with various matters that affect its quality dramatically. In my second visit to Suhag, I arranged a fieldwork visit to an evening shift of a primary school in a small village. However, at noon in Megawra primary school, students in the fourth, fifth and sixth grade occupied the classes after the previous stages (first, second and third primary grade) finished before them in the morning. I had the chance to enter the school as a doctor after using my cultural and social status of holding an ID card from the Egyptian dental syndicate. Actually, Morsi who is a health inspector that I met through Ashraf Mowafi, facilitated the visit and introduced me as his colleague to the school principal. The moment I stepped inside the school is also the moment when I realized that the reality is starkly different from what one reads or visualizes about the inadequate conditions inside public schools.

Firstly, I was surprised by the smell, which was a result of the overused equipment and the poor ventilation of the facilities. The school building was small and consisted of three floors, each had two classes for every stage. The student class volume occupied more than 60 female and male students, with some sitting on desks and others standing, all however so monotonously repeating every sentence after their teacher. In the playground, there was a desk under a tree that was occupied by a male teacher and three students, who are Christians and were taking a religion class. There was only one room, which is the principal's room, that teachers used to rest or prepare their lessons for the

next class. I was introduced as a doctor, so I walked with Morsi and asked students if anyone had health issues. Additionally, there was another man, who I assumed was a teacher, that followed us informally throughout the entire visit.

Based on my fieldwork, the reasons for dropping out are related to the quality of education, the financial problems and the surrounding high rates of unemployment which together end up pushing students and their families to consider leaving school for another useful option. During an interview with the primary school principal, he explained that the community environment has an influence on the educational decision making.

Currently, education becomes costly. In other words, it requires for example educational material, books and uniform. In Tamana, families depend on agriculture and most of them are '*ujārī*' "جاري" (a person who is hired to plant). Their financial situation depends on the planting seasons and their daily payment during the harvest seasons is 100 Egyptian pounds for men and 50 pounds for women. The 100 pounds is not enough to guarantee food, clothes, rent and education. And education consumes half of the payment. Thus, not everyone can have the capacity and ability to provide this. Life conditions are massively difficult now. And on the other hand, the return from education after graduation doesn't exist. There aren't jobs. Young graduates are unemployed (نائمين) "*nāīmīn*" (literally means sleeping). Youth say, there is no problem to continue education, but there are no jobs so what is the point? In addition, the quality of education and the system are problematic in the public school, especially at primary level. Ministries of education talk on improving and developing education. However, nothing happens".<sup>7</sup>

For individuals and families unwilling to continue education, some argue that the reasons behind their unwillingness is that many children and families do not see the value of the Egyptian education and do not see the potential outcomes or benefits from it on their lives. Thus they decide not to complete their education. Similarly, parents of children report that the quality of education is worthless and they do not see their children benefiting from attending schools. Regarding the unsatisfactory outputs, how far could the inputs to the public education be worthless; and if so, does this mean that public education is not a route anymore to obtain and reproduce privilege? To further answer these questions, the following sections will explore the logic behind the (un)worthy of education and how families react to it in order to produce advantages.

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with primary school principle in Tamana, Akhmim, field notes, (February, 2018).

## **How Worthless is Public Education?**

I had an opportunity to conduct an interview with Dr. S. Sheta who is an educator and holds a postgraduate degree in psychology and education. He has worked in the educational sector in Suhag since the 1990s under a joint project between Ministry of Education and international organizations such as USAID. His input explains the scale of the worthless reality of our public education:

Educational spending is extremely poor in Egypt. I can tell you that if there is no financial support and pilots of new techniques to improve education, which are supported from international organizations such as the World Bank and USAID, education in Egypt will only be limited to the physical aspect which is classrooms and the bodies of teachers and students. There is a lack of serious planning by the government for education, especially in rural Egypt. It is underdeveloped and 90% of the marginalized regions are not only marginalized because of the socio-economic situation of its residents, but also because of the social services are extremely poor. Most of the girls in villages are dropping out because there are no elementary schools in the village and the nearest one is kilometers away.

The lack of spending that Mr. Sheta reflects on mostly affects marginalized groups, especially girls, and further reproduces marginalization. On the other hand, it undermines the decision of finishing education in the first place. Put differently, the burden to send children to schools in rural Upper Egypt is a decision that needs to take into consideration multiple factors, including the type of the school, single or multiple shifts, and accessibility to schools in terms of distance and security. Such considerations cannot always be justified or adapted to by every family, on which they can foreground their privilege. An evaluation of the current privileged or socioeconomic status will be tested. In other words, if a family accepted to send their children to a school, transportation expenses will be added on their household expenditure list. Otherwise, the decision of children's education will be seen as a worthless, especially if there are other additional elements that can make families insecure to support their children's education. These additional elements for example include teacher's qualification and job stability, both of which can be regarded as core measures in the dilemma of being able to (re)produce privilege from education.

## The Teacher: The Active Element in The Educational Decision

During a focus group discussion with teachers in one of the two primary schools in Tamana, the discussion was intensively about teachers economic, social and culture privilege they win or loss in the current moment. Because of the lack of attention from the government, they are describing themselves as marginalized, especially in rural Upper Egypt.

This is not only for the lack of resources related to teacher salaries, equipment, and other educational materials and needs; it is also because of the lack of spending on the human capital in the education system: the teachers. In fact, this problem plays a role in widening the distance between children and school. Teachers become useless as *ālbīt ālwqf* (البيت الوقف). They are deprived of social, emotional and financial support. Teachers have no more dignity. A teacher once hit a girl, her father came to school with a gun. The administration informed him that this is unacceptable. However, after a long series of negotiations, the father was content with tying the teacher to a donkey for a half an hour. What education are we talking about here?

School Social Specialist

Teachers here in Upper Egypt and rural areas are the worst in terms of job security and wages. Workers who work in electricity-related jobs have better status than teachers. They have double the salary that we have. This is as a result of the poor investments on education by the government. Moreover, what makes the situation more dramatic and crucial is that teacher's rights are lost.

Science Teacher

To analyze these assumptions, it is important to clarify that there are clear discrepancies between rural and urban teachers. First , teachers in the Egyptian public schools are suffering from inadequate teaching abilities, mainly relying on forcing students to memorize lessons and stopping at that (Mohamed, 2015, p.411). Secondly, globally, teachers in rural areas are confined to lower salaries, deprived from benefits and bonuses, and subjected to poorer job conditions in terms of job security and social prestige (Aghavni, 2018). Finally, rural Egyptian education suffers from a “chronic teacher shortage” that makes the workload for employed rural teachers unbearable (Allard & McKay, 2000). Most of these factors influence the quality of the teaching process inside the Egyptian public schools. In other words, teaching is considered as an input resource in the education structure. If a teacher is highly qualified and supported with job security

and adequate work environment, student outcomes regarding enjoying the educational environment and being equipped with the learning abilities and skills will be boosted. Meanwhile, untrained and underpaid teacher, who works in a challenging environment, is contributing in making the situation in the Egyptian education trickier for producing students who cannot read or write while they are physically enrolled and do attend school lessons and classes.

On the subject of illiterate students, I conducted another interview with a female employer in an international non-governmental organization called Plan. She works in the education program that focuses on disadvantaged children. She shared her experience of working with children registered in the preparatory stage but who still cannot read or write.

I have worked with 3,000 children. All of them go to school except for one child who works as a seller and needs to be at the market in the morning. However, all of these children cannot read or write except for 3% of them. Instead, when we work with them, children inform us to show them the text so they can copy instead of writing it. The 3% of them who can barely read or write are able to do this as their families care about their education.

Raghda, Social researcher, Plan NGO

These insights from the fieldwork are further supported by official data covering this issue. In 2015, UNDP and the Ministry of Planning launched a report at the end of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Egyptian government proudly announced the progress of the net enrollment rates in the primary education that reached 95% in 2015 (UNDP and Ministry of Planning, 2015, p. 16). Within the report's following page, it stated that more than 35% of students in the preparatory level are not familiar with the basic skills of reading and writing skills (UNDP and Ministry of Planning, 2015, p.17). Put differently, while the Egyptian educational system witnessed high enrollment rates, it still produced unqualified students, who spent more than 6 years in the primary stage but could not learn basic skills such as reading and writing, a situation which could not be fully described as worthless as much as corrupted (Ille and Peacy, 2019). In other words, despite the fact that there is lack of public spending on education on one hand, there are still financial resources being allocated that are being wasted and not serving the basic aims of education to its citizens (Elbadrawy, 2014, p.2). While on the other hand, there are students who managed to reach preparatory level without being skilled in literacy

basics. As a matter of fact, cheating, which is done with the full knowledge of teachers and administration, might be the reason that there are students holding official certificates from basic education and who still cannot read or write (Sobhy, 2012, p. 85). If it is sufficient and cover the educational pillars with equity - for example teaching, educational equipment, schools infrastructures and curriculum designing – the decision of aspiring education would be smoothly managed and made. Otherwise, it would be confined to certain groups that can escape the hassle of public education through opting to the private sector. Indeed, a previously existing privilege needs to be present in order to enjoy the private venues in the Egyptian education sector (Assaad & Krafft, 2014, p.17).

### **Privatization in Education: A Better Route for Privileged Status?**

Families are enrolling their children in private schools. Their children will learn and, ultimately, better outlook will await them.

Teacher, public primary school

Despite the fact that the public education is poor, it is still serving a high portion of the Egyptian population. In fact, the public education system is higher in numbers of schools, classes, teachers and students than the private education system in all phases. Public education, which represents 85.5% of the total number of schools, serves more than 19 million students (90%), while private education serves approximately 2 million (10%) students (Ministry of Education, 2018).

However, the fact that 90% of students are in the public schools does not mean that they are solely depending on the public educational services. In fact, students and their families are seeking other routes of help to guarantee their ability to perform well in the score testing exams (Elbadawy, Ahlburg, Assaad, & Levison, 2009). One such route is private tutoring, which is crucial step toward finishing education and has higher significant between families and student than going to school and attending classes (Assaad & Krafft, 2014, p.18). Owing to the reality of the distorted public education, families are consciously aware of the truth that depending on the private sector is not a luxury as much as a necessity in the process of securing better life opportunities. However, the socioeconomic level of the family is still a significant factor in one's ability

to reach university-level education. Regarding the family's investment on education and the reasons behind this, the Helal and Salem families represent privilege in terms of economic and socio-cultural capital in Akhmim. Thus, the next section will explore how the private sector structures the educational decision in respect to their understanding of reproducing their privilege.

I will do the impossible to enroll my kids in a private language school. It is better for them and for their future. They will be surrounded with better students, receive good education and learn real English. Don't you see how my nephew tells her son to blow his "nose" أمسح النوز in English? Her boys are back home watching Mickey channel that broadcasts educational English songs of the numbers and Alphabet. There is neither education nor prestige in public schools; there is humiliation and lack of prestige مش واجهه. There were no private schools nearby at the time of our education, that is why all the family members graduated from public schools.

Female member of Helal's family.

As I was living in Helal's household during the fieldwork, caring about education was a key interest for all of the family towards their children. One of the granddaughters is a first primary student, and takes private lessons on a daily basis after finishing school. Another granddaughter is in the last year of the elementary stage and takes more than one private lesson in subjects like mathematics and English. The fees of the private tutoring were charged per lesson, not month, and cost 6 pounds for English and 5 for the other subjects in Tamana, which increases to double this amount in urban regions in Akhmim. In fact, the main focus for the family and especially Ahmed was Fayrouz, who is in the final year in general secondary, awaiting her exam scores which will decide whether she can join the Faculty of Pharmacy. Fayrouz did not have to perform her usual household chores, like cleaning, baking or feeding the livestock. In addition, during her final exams, she had to cancel her exam in chemistry and physics. During the exam, Fayrouz calculated her grades after finishing the answers and discovered that she will lose a lot of marks. Thus, she crossed off her answering paper and reported to the exam committee. This calculated decision gave her the chance to retake the exam again next year and by that, she will finish general secondary in four years not two. That said, however, this decision is one which cannot be easily made by everyone, since retaking the exam next year also means another year of private tutoring. Families who can do so are those who can afford such a burden.

Salem family's experience significantly intersects with that of Helal's. However, the former's ability to invest in their children's education is higher as they send them to private university in Cairo in order to obtain the certificate that would later enable them to produce social and economic advantages. Salem's family consists of four children; three girls and a young boy. The oldest girl is a graduate of the Faculty of Archaeology, at Suhag University. The second is a student in the Faculty of Medicine in Suhag, while the third girl is in her first year at the Faculty of Pharmacy in Badr University in Cairo (BUC), which is a private university. In order to afford the tuition fees, the wife sold her gold to literally buy her daughter an education. I had visited them and was able to have a warm discussion with the household women and men separately.

We appreciate education in our family. We have a girl that we sent to one of the private universities in Cairo and are paying 36,000 pounds per year for her education. My husband and I are aware that the girl's education is more important than the boys'. What will she do if she is illiterate and has poor life conditions? For boys, they can work in anything such as constructors. However, girls can't. Thus, the certificate that they will hold might give them chances to acquire jobs, any job. We see girls as a treasure that we invest a lot in. For my girls, we gave them all private tutoring for all the subjects. We live 60 kilos away from Suhag, but the girls used to take lessons there as it has better teachers than her in Sawama. Actually, for English, Arabic and Chemistry subjects for example, they used to take two lessons, one with the teacher here in Sawama and another one in Suhag the city. For Marwa, who is now a medical student, she is in her final level in general secondary that is duration is one year, but she took it in two years instead. She divided the subjects on two years in order to be able to study well. This has paid off as she will be a medical student now.

Salem's wife

Beside the family financial ability to support their children education, the time and space factors form another layer to privilege that not all families can hold. In order to be able to finish her final year in the general secondary *thānwīa ‘āma* with the highest score to enroll in the faculty of medicine, Marwa split the year into two. By doing this, they will be able to double the amount of time to study for her lessons. However, it will put more of a financial burden on the family by doubling the year expenses. The family's material ability supported her to move from one city to another in order to take private tutoring with better teachers. Based on these facts the family mentioned, the decision of enrolling in medical school is directly linked to the family ability to provide the material,

space and time. In addition, these strategies that might only be for the privilege, as I am trying to argue, follow to enroll their children among the small percentage of youth who can finish their university college degree. Clarifying, only 12% of the Egyptian population managed to finish their education path and hold a college degree (CAPMAS, 2018, p.17), and only 8% of Akhmim residents had the opportunity to graduate from universities (CAPMAS, 2018, p.38).

As a matter of fact, both families invest in their children in the hope of a better future and securing better life conditions. Still, education is being propagated as the space and institution where these hopes might come true (Zaalouk, 2006, p.11). As Helal and Salem's families relate, not only does receiving an education certificate indicate the acquisition of knowledge and culture, but it also has a significant role in providing opportunities for social mobility and job acquisition, which shall improve the socioeconomic positions and are the main outcomes of the educational journey. This assumption is what makes them seize any chances and overcome obstacles that might hold their way towards completing university education for their children.

### **Conclusion: The Dilemma of Education Value**



Figure 6 Walls of Fayrouz's room show her written wishes to be a pharmacist, thereby making her deceased father proud.

Above her desk, Fayrouz puts her prayers and wishes to be a pharmacist. “One day, I will be a pharmacist.” “Pharmacist will be the title of my name.” Both statements describe her ambitious dream. Fayrouz sees this as a dream that will make her deceased father happy and proud. From the multiple conversations that I had with her, Fayrouz is

aware of her social status as a girl in a small rural village in Upper Egypt, which is a status that she wants to change through her education. First, by being a college degree holder, and then by being a doctor, which will arguably immediately improve her own cultural position and her family's too. Ultimately, being employed after graduation in one of the public hospitals will ensure more privilege. All of these are the rationales behind her decision to seek a university education.

Attempting to arbitrate whether education in Egypt is useful or worthless for (re)producing privilege obscures the various dynamics that families consider when making educational decisions. It is critical to examine the educational outcomes and the supplementary educational service obtained in the private sector, in order to evaluate the ability of gaining social advantages from the education system. My fieldwork among privileged families shows that parents and their children still relate to and believe in the relationship between educational attainment and job opportunities. The excitement to have an educational degree is linked to the higher chances of securing a sustainable financial income at the end of this educational journey. Surely, the expected outcome is being an employee in the public sector (Saad, 2016, p. 3). However, much of the recent research argue that such a link is currently very weak due to the decreased number in employment in the public sector that shockingly diminished since the mid-70s (El-Ganzuri, 2012, 208: Assaad & Krafft & Isfahani, 2014). On the other hand, in the private labor sector, acquiring a high professional or administrative formal job requires skills that the public education hardly provides for most of its graduates, especially practicing and writing English language (Binzel & Carvalho, 2016, p.2560). The private sector in education therefore represents a solution for obtaining educational skills needed to increase opportunities for better jobs options, which ultimately supports the privileged to attain upward social mobility. The next chapter explores the possibility to answer the question of how privilege is reproduced through exclusion in private education and how the underprivileged relate to this.

## Chapter Four

### Privilege Reproduction Through Exclusion and the Response of the Underprivileged

As the educational private sector appears in most discussions, it was a priority for the research to engage with it. Since ethnography is the voice and the point of view of the field and others (Erickson, 1972, p.51), part of the field and the “other” is the private sector. This sector was mentioned in the discussion as delivering a chance for producing privilege and upward mobility for the middle class and elite. Thus, it was important to see the thoughts and structure of people that operate within that sector. This chapter explores the dynamic reality of private education in Suhag and illustrates the ways in which the reproduction of privilege comes at the expense of the unprivileged. Currently in Egypt, education is a lucrative business which attracts many investors. There are various factors that structure the decision of investing in the education sector, including low taxes and less regulation (Dixon, 2010, p.41). However, the core influence comes from the poor quality of public education and the high demands by the middle class and elite to guarantee access to university education. Thus, both the state and investors profit out of the situation by supporting and investing in the sector. This is a situation that causes unfair competition between the private and public educational sectors, which eventually leads to a process that creates clear winners and losers (Bush, 2012, p.56). The winners will have the ability to receive proper education while the losers will be excluded because of their low socioeconomic level that will force them to enroll in public schools or to drop out. As a matter of fact, exclusion is socially constructed to serve the purpose of reproducing privilege for the dominant groups through the elimination of resources from another group that is vulnerable (Kearny, 2011, p.11). To clarify further, despite the reality of the education market and the stalled venue of social mobility, there are still disadvantaged classes that send their children to public education and are consciousness of the unfortunate results thereof (Elgeziri, 2012, p.204). With respect to this, understanding the reasons behind that attempt is further investigated in the second section of this chapter.

## **Education, privilege, and Profit for the Youngest Investor in Suhag**

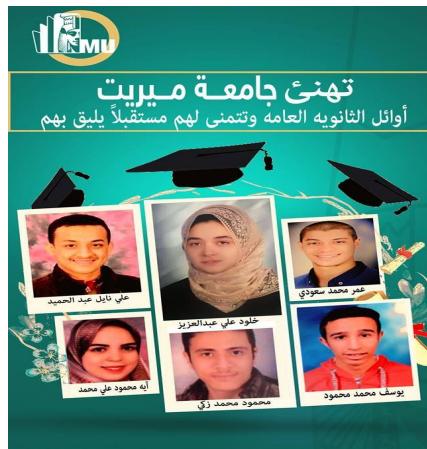


Figure 7 Students with The Highest Scores in General Secondary Stage in Suhag, Academic Year 2018/2017

During the Youth Conference that was organized in Aswan under the current Egyptian President's sponsorship in 2017, the youngest investor in Suhag (I.S) was honored for his efforts in founding the first chain of private pharmacies, a private hospital and a private university, all in Suhag governorate. According to conference announcer, those institutions created 360 job opportunities for youth in Suhag and Upper Egypt. The youngest investor had graduated from the Faculty of Pharmacy and is currently a businessman in his 30s. The private university that he established will start accepting students for the academic year 2019/2020. I was able to meet with (I.S) in January 2018, where I interviewed him on his thoughts about the educational system, and the reasons behind investing in higher education through establishing a private university.

There is no education at all in Upper Egypt or all over Egypt. Simply, we educate and invest in everybody. Why do we educate the poor? Actually, the individual who doesn't own money shouldn't receive education<sup>8</sup>. It is ridiculous to spend, as the state does, thousands on the poor during their entire educational years and the end product in terms of the qualifications and skills is low. In order to improve education, we need to limit the poor education and excluded from university level. However, I see that both poor and rich children should attain education, supported by the state until the end of the preparatory stage. Then, only the bright student الشاطر ((الشاطر النظيم)), even if he is poor, should proceed to general secondary and university education. The student who is not qualified and unskilled, yet has the economic ability to invest on his education, can proceed with his university education. Being bright has a relation to his

<sup>8</sup> اللي مش معاه فلوس مش المفروض يتعلم

good genes that allow him to understand better and produce fine outcomes. For example, it is normal to find the doctors sons following the same professional occupation as their fathers and eventually they are doctors too. On the other hand, there is the hard worker who is not genetically eligible but can work on himself to improve his performance<sup>9</sup>. This is unfair to the poor. Yet, it is unfair too to have such a failed educational system. If I proceeded to provide access to education for everyone, no one will learn!<sup>10</sup>. We have to be selective, because the state doesn't own enough resources. The selection process can be realistic through evaluation tests. We could examine everyone and whoever can pass this evaluation can learn. And those who fail but have money to proceed can learn, I don't care.

Given his disdain of the educational services in Upper Egypt, and his starting a business in higher education in Suhag, I had to ask my interlocutor how he plans to deal with the fact that the students who will enroll in his university next year will be the low-skilled products of the failed system he criticizes. He replies in a business manner and as a conscious investor, who knows how to see an opportunity and make it profitable:

“As I mentioned before, education is a commodity and it is in high demand nowadays. There will be an enormous number of students who will want to enroll. Thus, we are planning to establish a rehabilitation Academy *akadimiyyat ta'hil* for students who plan to join the university in order to provide them with the necessary qualifications and skills. Of course they would have to pay fees. And if some of them couldn't pass the academy rehabilitation stage, we will figure out a solution, but they won't be refused as students in the stage of application and enrollment.”

Dr. I.S. acknowledges that obtaining education should be related to good performance. However, he gives precedence to social origin as a determining factor in this respect. Most importantly, he believes that those with financial abilities can proceed to attain higher levels of education even if they do not possess the necessary gifts or skills. To further explain, if the student is not brilliant enough to attain public university education, he will still have a chance to enroll in his private university. In fact, such

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<sup>9</sup> When the conversation started to take this path, I responded by pointing out to the injustices towards the poor, and the fact that they are being made victims of a failed educational system. In addition, his words and tone suggested that he regards educating the poor as a form of charity rather than a right they share with other groups. I clarified to him that, just like the rich, the poor pay taxes, both direct and indirect, which means that the government has to provide them with good education because this is their right. However, he responded saying this is true but it needs to be based on requirements and terms, which again, the underprivileged are vulnerable to secure any of these conditions.

<sup>10</sup> احنا بنعلم الناس عمال على بطال

student does not only have the possibility to be accepted, but he also has the ability to gain the qualification from another private entity I.S will establish. Elaborating further, as a solution to resolve the problem of the unskilled students, I.S thought about establishing a pre-university academy to equip those students with the required skills in order to nominate them for university education.

As soon as the meeting ended, I asked Ashraf if Dr. I.S has children in schools; he answered positively and stated that they used to go with his own children to the first private school in Suhag, Generation Language School. Interestingly, the owner of this private school turned out to be Ashraf's cousin who is an important member in the Mowafi family, and the deputy of the constitutional and legislative committee in the Egyptian parliament. In other words, a member of parliament who discusses, designs, and drafts each year's budget for public education, is the owner of the private school in Suhag that secures substantial profit each year. Not only that, he also has shares in the first international school in Suhag and Upper Egypt that, during the fieldwork, opened its administration for the academic year 2018/2019. In order to understand the private sector and its relation to the educational market further, I was able to meet the founder and principal of the Elite International School. He is an English inspector in the Ministry of Education and supervisor on the Formal (Language) Public Schools المدارس الرسمية للغات over Suhag district. In addition, he is one of the most famous English teachers in Suhag with the highest fees (50 pounds per class in 2018) for student groups. He managed to establish the school through partnering with his brothers and family members. Private schools in Egypt are known as a family business (Dixon, 2010, p.43).

## International Education in Suhag for The Family Reunion!



Figure 8 Elite International School Building, Swimming Pool and Classroom, New Suhag City, Suhag.

After waiting for 20 minutes in the reception, Mr. Sayed, the Director and principle of Elite Schools, had time to meet with me and Ashraf. I introduced myself as a student at the American University in Cairo. He welcomed us and asked if I will conduct the interview in English or Arabic. I told him that I preferred to conduct it in Arabic. However, as soon as I started formulating the questions in Arabic, his replies were in English with an American accent that shows his *seidi* roots. In addition, his answers were limited and directed, which did not give space for open discussion or improvisation in the

questions. His opinion about the current educational system was not different from the replies of other interviews, in the sense that it lacks investments and produces low qualified students for the future and labor market. However, an interesting response emerged as I asked him about the difference between public and private schools, as he has roles in the two sectors as a teacher and school director. His reply was:

Indeed, there is a difference between public and private schools mainly in terms of how parents are different in terms of following up on their children's education. Most of the parents in private schools come from a good socioeconomic background that qualified them to do such a task. They have a continuous and sustainable relation with the school administration. Checking on and complaining about the quality of teachers are among other matters they are always concerned with. Truly, this comes from the reality of the parents' awareness of the fees they pay each term. Consequently, and as a business, the schools deal with parents as customers who have complains and needs seriously taking care of. Otherwise, the private school shall have an inappropriate reputation and lose students, which means wasting profits.

One of the most famous education systems that currently is operating in Egypt under the umbrella of the private sector is “international education”, specifically the British education that is a leader in selling to other countries overseas (Waters & Brooks, 2010, p. 219). That type of education is popular among the elite and privileged classes all over Egypt. Interestingly, international education is a global matter that is being promoted as a better educational path than national and local education (Olsson, 2018, 98). As a matter of fact, it is known for being a profitable market for investors too (Olsson, 2018, 98). Actually, seeking international education for the most privileged can be articulated as an “aesthetic disposition”, so that a select few get labeled as being educated from an overseas system (Waters & Brooks, 2010, p. 222). To put it differently, it distinguishes new classes and enables social hierarchy that propagates for “a hidden marker for class,” which strongly produces another layer of inequalities (Olsson, 2018, 99). The importance that the privileged place on distinctive education, and the lengths they are willing to go to in order to provide superior educational opportunities for their children became clear to me when I asked the founder of Elite School why he decided to establish an international school instead of a national one.

We have a national school, as well as the first international school in Suhag. There are many families in Suhag who travel during the academic year to Cairo, Hurghada or other governorates in order to

enroll their children in international schools there. Consequently, the families are separated at these times. Fathers return to their jobs in Suhag and mothers remain with the children. Therefore, instituting an international school in Suhag is significant to reunite families. The school teaches the British system. We have the certificate and license from the British Council and Ministry of Education. It has highly equipped labs, an Olympic swimming pool, as well as basketball, volleyball, and football playgrounds. The class density will not exceed 20 students in order to focus on individual efforts and each class will have a teacher and co-teacher.

One of the main characteristics of the upper middle class and elite is their readiness to go further in order to secure an adequate education for their children. According to Mr. Sayed, the spatial and demographic elements are added to the cultural and socio-economic factors in attaining this type of exclusive education. Meaning, moving to another city temporarily is a privilege not even the middle class can afford. In fact, it is not about moving permanently to a new city, which is a recognizable act for some families (Waters & Brooks, 2010, 218). It is about moving for a certain period of time to a new house in a more expensive city and adding extra financial burdens. In addition, and apart from the aesthetic layer of having an Olympic swimming pool or many playgrounds that some parents admire, there is another important factor in the attempt of obtaining an international certificate. In fact, as Waters and Brooks state, "International credentials are the embodiment of both 'human capital' and 'cultural capital', which can subsequently be exchanged for economic capital in the labour market" (2010, p. 219). In other words, international schooling enables the accumulation of key qualifications, such as fluency in speaking and writing English, which augment the value of the human and cultural capital that an international certificate provides, and allows the students to compete for the best paying jobs in the labour market.

As teaching advanced English is vital to the success of this enterprise, finding qualified teachers becomes a major concern for the school owners. Throughout my fieldwork experience, I have been able to examine the issue of teachers' qualification, and have noted that there is a general lack of qualified teachers, especially when it comes to teaching English. I asked Mr. Sayed how he plans to deal with this issue.

The lack of skilled teachers is the main problem we struggle with. The school needs teachers who have fluent English if we want to build a reputation as an international school. In fact, the administration isn't concerned with the teacher's qualification in education as much as their linguistic abilities. To solve the problem, we are going to hire teachers

outside Suhag, from Cairo for example, and provide them with accommodation in Suhag during the semester. In addition, the salaries will start at 3,000 for teachers and 1,500 for co-teachers, and could be higher according to each teacher's qualifications. In addition, there are conditions that shall applied on all teachers in the school, which include that no teacher is allowed to give any private tutorials to the school students.

The issue of teachers' salaries represents one of the main problems facing pre-university education in Egypt. In fact, a teacher's salary in both public and private Egyptian schools is considered to be the lowest among other sectors, while they are the highest in terms of the number of employment (Dixon, 2010, p.41-47). In addition, it is not possible to separate the problem of teacher's low salaries from the other main problem of private tutoring. Mr. Sayed, who was himself a teacher, would not have been able to partner with his family and build the first international school in Upper Egypt without the private tutoring that he gave and was well-known for in Suhag. Ironically, it is a situation he is now facing while trying to recruit qualified teachers for his school. Due to the rareness of high qualified teachers and the market demands for it in Suhag, Mr. Sayed is aware of the supply he needs. Providing relatively higher payments in comparison with the public and private national schools and also a willingness to negotiate higher payments are his ways of addressing this problem. It is important to note that the private sector's demand for qualified teachers, and the incentives provided to attract them necessarily means that the underfunded public schools suffer, as they are not able to compete in this market. What, then, are the implications of this unfair competition on the disadvantaged children who do not have a choice other than enrolling in public schools?

### **Why do the underprivileged invest in public education?**

Education was once the single channel of achieving upward mobility for poor families (Albadrawy, 2015, p.1). However, this channel has transformed to a medium for producing and reproducing inequality and class hierarchy, to the benefit of the privileged. As mentioned earlier, the family's social origin and financial circumstances are important determinants in attaining education. Still, we find children from deprived families in schools, despite their parents' awareness that their children will probably never reach the university, or even the secondary-level stage (Elgeziri, 2012, p.401). Nevertheless, they send their children to school knowing the return would be valueless. What are the motivations of the underprivileged in sending their children to school, and what lies

behind their educational decisions, given that education is no longer a guaranteed path for social mobility? I explore this question in more depth in the following section.

I first have to say that my association with elite members of the community placed a certain limitation on my ability to establish rapport with poorer members of the community. During the entire fieldwork, my stay was in Helal's household and my movements were always with Ashraf. Fortunately, the visits to Ahmed Allaam's (Ashraf's uncle) agricultural lands facilitated the chance to meet and build a rapport with working boys and girls who were collecting the potato crops. In addition, I managed to visit one of the girls in her house in Tamana. When I asked them about how they thought their education would benefit them, their responses surprised me and did not match the assumptions that I previously held. It is important to note that the benefit of education for the underprivileged had a clear gender dimension, which becomes clearer in the following section.

### **ID card, Passport and Shorter time in Military**

I dropped out of elementary level. I didn't like the school. However, I wanted to be labeled as educated (متعلم). And when I have the chance to go anywhere, I won't ask for help to read a sign.

Ahmed, a teenager and an agricultural worker

"In my father's ID, he is labeled as illiterate in the education situation section. I don't want to have this in my ID. It is better to be labeled as holding a primary or preparatory certificate. If I am stopped in a police checkpoint, the treatment would be a little better if they knew that I am educated."

Mohamed, a teenager agricultural worker

My cousin didn't go to school. And when we went to issue his passport, they told him he needs to hold a literacy certificate, otherwise he won't be able to have a passport and travel to Saudi Arabia to work. I want to travel to Kuwait after finishing my military duty. In order to do so, I need to have a passport. So, I am going to school to have a passport later.

Mohamed, agricultural worker, Teenager

It is better to hold a vocational secondary certificate. It shrinks the time that needs to be spent in the military. If I am going to finish my education at the secondary level, I will spend one and half years in the military instead of three. In addition, those who didn't enroll in schools at all will

spend their obligation in central security which is not as good as spending it in military”.

Mahmoud, agricultural worker and vocational secondary student

The boys discussed the social prestige associated with the option of travel and the relatively better job opportunities as the main aims behind going to school. An added incentive to pursue formal education, and especially to learn basic reading skills, was the confidence and independence needed to understand a new environment and know its landscape without help from others. The sense of vulnerability that the uneducated might face in certain situations is a fear that is best avoided. In fact, all of these factors related to vulnerability are interpreted as the social dimension that happens during experiencing various mobilities (Ghannam, 2011, 791). Encounters with security forces, such as being stopped at checkpoints, present another instance where holding an educational degree matters to the underprivileged. Holding a valid ID card, and the type of information it holds, including the level of education, can either provide protection during such moments of vulnerability or it can be the reason to experience precariousness. (Ebeid, 2018, 12). Checkpoint encounters illustrate, as well as reinforce, inequalities and class stratification (Ghannam, 2011, 794). An educational degree can minimize the insecurities of these moments.

On the other hand, the drive to travel abroad to one of the Gulf countries is a common aim among privileged and underprivileged youth, despite their educational qualification and degree. With the increase of unemployment in Suhag, the job opportunities that are most available to the disadvantaged group are largely restricted to farming or construction work, both of which are low-paying and insecure. Therefore, performing the same type of jobs that depend on physical abilities in Gulf countries, is preferred and pursued by most of young men in rural Egypt (Haneih, 2013, p.350). It is important to note here that labour migration of this type is rarely an individual matter, but one that is managed at the level of the household, whose members benefit from the remittances and are often involved in supporting and enabling the travel in the first place. For example, if Helal’s brothers had not travelled to Kuwait, they would not have been able to secure the capital needed to maintain and reproduce the family status.

Another reason for the keenness on formal schooling, and especially pursuing a high-level certificate is related to the conscription service, whereby the term of service is partly determined according to the educational level. In fact, it is identified as one of the

main reasons for raising unemployment (Feldmann, 2009, p. 85). Furthermore, young men, regardless of their social background, regard compulsory military conscription as a “waste of time” as they do not acquire any experience or skills of relevance to the labour market needs.<sup>11</sup> Education, however, plays a role in the ability to avoid or shorten the conscription time (Maurin & Xenogiani, 2007, p.796). To further clarify, the age for the eligibility of compulsory conscription in Egypt is called for at the age of 19 until 30. If the young man is enrolled in school or university, the conscription date is postponed until he gets his degree. Furthermore, the educational degree has an effect in decreasing the time spent during conscription according to the Military Manpower Administration, Ministry of Defense. The official standard duration of the conscription is three years for all youth, but this duration can be shorter in accordance with the type and level of educational degree. Therefore, conscripts who hold a university degree spend one year, those with an upper middle qualification (5 years of vocational secondary education) spend a year and a half, while those with a secondary school certificate spend two years. Lastly, those who are illiterate but possess a craft that is required by the military are conscripted for three years. (Central Security Forces, 2019). The time that military service takes away from the conscript’s work translates into an economic burden. This point becomes clear when we compare the 100- Egyptian pound daily wage of an agricultural worker with the 350 Egyptian pounds per month that he receives as a CSF conscript. Investing in education for this purpose has less to do with seeking social mobility and symbolic capita. It could, rather, be regarded as a strategy that the underprivileged adopt in order to protect themselves from further shocks of marginalization and precariousness.

### **For Girls: Going to School is an Escape**

Generally speaking, girls are often the most disadvantaged group rather than boys when it comes to having the opportunity to access schools. According to the official statistics from the Egyptian state, 34% of illiterate are females while 23% are males on the national level. Meanwhile, the dropout rates from school are almost the same between both genders with 45% for males and 55% for females (CAPMAS, 2017). Furthermore, the situation is more extreme in the case of underprivileged families, especially in rural Upper Egypt. In other words, due to the deprived socioeconomic level, early marriage

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<sup>11</sup> This feature of the military conscription service has been widely noted. See, for example, Hashem, 2011, p.108

and childbearing, girls in rural Upper Egypt have a higher risk of leaving school at an early age (Sieverding & Elbadawy, 2016, p.130). Based on the field work, the low economic class and the demands to cover marriage preparations costs are the two main reasons for girls to leave school and work. However, school was still an escape for some of girls.

Manal, Rasha and Dounia are the girls I was able to chat with while they were packing potatoes. All of them had left school during the primary stage. Actually, Rasha was a schoolmate of one of Ahmed Helal's daughters. As I explained in Chapter Two, marriage represents the ultimate goal for girls, as well as their families. This costly enterprise is a primary site for testing, as well as enhancing a family's social image, and where families hope that the economic capital they invest would transform into social capital. Families, therefore, face a choice and have to decide between investing in the girl's education on the one hand, or having her drop out of the school in order to work and "prepare" herself for marriage (تجهز نفسها للجواز). While the norm in rural Upper Egypt is that marriage represents the only destination for girls, there are exceptions. Dina, who belongs to a poor family that consist of a father who is a daily worker in a ceramic factory and housewife mother, managed to convince her parents to let her attend school and work as a laborer in farming at the same time. When I asked her why she wanted to proceed with her education, she stated that going to school is a chance for her to escape from her household chores. In addition, she can meet her friends, laugh, and socialize with them. The idea of escaping one's confining social milieu, especially the rural areas, applies to both genders in various societies. Education was shown to be a main escaping mechanism, and a primary motive for village to city migration (Porter & Hampshir & Mashiri, etc, 2010, p.1094). Girls in general have less access to such a privilege, partly due to their culturally defined gender roles that burden them with household chores (Porter & Hampshir & Mashiri, etc, 2010, p.1099). Dina, however, could still manage to enjoy a temporary escape through going to school.

## Conclusion

Private education provides higher modes of social mobility to certain groups through a dynamic relation that is performed by excluding another group. In Suhag, those who dominate the private education market are closely connected to the dominant circles in business as well as political decision making. The Mowafi family has a wide range of private businesses, one of the oldest of which is a private school. In addition, they are

also known for their family history in the parliament. In every parliamentary election, there is a reserved seat for one of Mowafi members to occupy. Ahmed Alam had once occupied it, and now it is occupied by Salah Mowafi, the private school owner. This situation, in which businessmen with personal interests are also the makers, illustrates how conflict of interest is practiced, and how it creates and perpetuates inequalities. If law-makers where to do their jobs properly, they would be working towards public schooling that offers high quality educational services. However, this would mean less demand on private education. Being owners of private schools themselves, those people with political decision-making powers will tend to prevent any tangible improvement of public education. This is a situation that applies to the case of Salah Mowafi, but there are other situations where we see a conflict of interest. Mr. Sayed is a teacher who profits greatly from the poor school infrastructure and inadequate teacher qualifications. First, he profits through his work as a private tutor, a type of work that rests on the poor quality of education of the public system. Second, he profits as an owner of the international school that provides the most elitist education: an education that caters for the needs of privileged families, and enables their children to access the best job opportunities. This is an education that cannot compare with the public education that the underprivileged seek for different reasons; most of which have to do with their attempts to mitigate their conditions of vulnerability and marginalization. As a matter of fact, the current neoliberal educational structure in Egypt is pushing to increase inequalities and support the selectivity process that happens due to class difference and exclusion. As long as the educational route for social mobility is determined based on the degree of privileging, the gap between people who seek to reproduce their privilege and people who live to survive their surrounding insecurities shall grow.

## **Chapter five**

### **Social Network: The key to finding a job *wazīfa***

In the previous chapter, I examined the strategies used by members of the elite to secure better educational opportunities for their children, and I showed how the market of private schooling was the site wherein economic and cultural capital interacted to produce favorable conditions for the reproduction of a privileged status. In this chapter, I focus on the job market and how the strategies for attaining a ‘good job’ are related to the notion of privilege. I describe how the job market has become a medium through which social hierarchies are reproduced, and why families prefer the public sector over the private sector, despite the low salaries. More than any other factor, social capital plays the most important role in the process of seeking, and hopefully attaining, a *awzīfa* (job), which means a permanent contract job with social benefits as most of the youth understand it.

I first present an overview of the key indicators relating to the labor market in Egypt. This macro-level picture is also the official one, as I refer mainly to the population census as well as CAPMAS reports. Following that, I address the issue of employment as reflected in the lived experience of my interlocutors in rural Upper Egypt, with a focus on the role of social capital in the reproduction of privilege and inequality.

#### **Increasing of Unemployment Rates and Decreasing of Public Jobs**

In the latest *Labor Power report* issued by CAPMAS in 2016, around 29 million individuals are part of the labor power, while nearly 4 million are unemployed (p.51). Around 25% of employed people work in the agricultural, hunting and fishing sector, followed by 12 percent in the construction sector. The unemployment rate amounted to 12.5 percent, with almost half of the unemployed located in rural Upper Egypt (CAPMAS, 2016, p.7). In terms of the link to education, the highest rate of unemployment (44%) is found amongst individuals with a technical intermediate certificate, followed by 31 percent for individuals holding a university degree (and above) (CAPMAS, 2018, p.59). Regarding Suhag, the estimates of employed individuals is 4.3% from the total percent of the nation; while the unemployment rate is 10%.

According to the literature, there are multiple factors that cause high rates of unemployment, one of which is the decline in jobs opportunities offered in the public sector (Hanieh, 2013, p.179 ). In 2017, the number of public sector jobs decreased by 13

percent, compared to the year before (CAPMAS, 2017, p.8). Another factor suggested by Binzel and Carvalho to interpret the high rates of unemployment has to do with the expansion of the private sector with its demands for specific skill sets, including knowledge of the English language (2016, p.2553). The majority of youth, especially graduates of public schools, lack those requirements, which partly explains the high unemployment rate amongst vocational and university graduates.

Aside from the above mentioned factors, a key factor that influences one's chance of getting a job, is social networks. Despite the importance of this factor, it is never officially acknowledged, and is not adequately addressed in academic literature. Caroline Krafft and Ragui Assad are among the few analysts who considered this point more directly; they stated that "personal, kinship, and social networks play a particularly important role in accessing employment in the MENA" (2014, p.6). In fact, the educational degree and level of skills are often less relevant in getting a job, than a superior social network that has the power to put an individual on the first page of the employment list. This condition was highly observed on my part during fieldwork, considering that my host family belonged to the powerful elite. On different occasions, people were mainly calling and visiting the Mowafi family with the hope of getting a recommendation from them, in order to get a job. With regard to this, the next section discusses the degree of networking that is needed in order to have the highest potential to get a job.

### **Classification of job types and sectors**

Before discussing the relationship between social networks and getting a job, I would like to unpack the types of jobs in the Egyptian labor market, whether in the public or private sector. A job or *wazīfa* is usually connected to working in the public sector as the historical section in the introduction refers and the fieldwork too. The *wazīfa* also implies that the employee is an educated person who graduated from official academic institutions and enjoys a stable permanent occupation. On the other hand, *shughlāna* is another term most of the interlocutors use to describe a part-time job that lacks mostly benefits especially in the private sector. Normally, most of the jobs in this category are divided between the private and public sector. However, within these two sectors there is another differentiation that strongly relates to the ability to secure or sustain a privileged status, which is the (in)formality of the job. In other words, a formal job is an employment position that is based on a formal contractual arrangement that also

provides job benefits, such as social insurance coverage (Barsoum, 2015, p. 341&343). In contrast, the informal job lacks the benefits and guarantees of the formal job. While both formal and informal jobs exist in both the public and private sectors, most of the informal jobs are located in the private sector where 77% to 93% of the private entities in Egypt are not officially registered (Kolster, 2016, p.7). Additionally, there is another type that exists in between formal and informal, which is semi-formal where employees enjoy either a contract or social protection (Wahba, 2009, p.5). This formality-informality spectrum corresponds to degrees of social mobility as the youth understand it, with the public sector permanent job being the most desirable option. (Kolster, 2016, p.10). Meanwhile, the private sector holds the largest number of informal/semi-formal employment in the Egyptian job market (Kolster, 2016, p.7).

On the other hand, the nature of the work is another classification that is used to differentiate various types of employments into mainly agricultural and non-agricultural employment. Elaborating more, agricultural employment refers to farmers and peasants or any jobs relevant to agriculture. Meanwhile, non-agriculture employment (NAG) includes the industry and services sectors, such as banking and tourism (Wahba, 2009, p. 2). As a matter of fact, much of the research on labor focuses on non-agricultural employment and the state of formality and job security they obtain in both public and private sectors (Wahba, 2009, p. 2). Interestingly, a recent report by CAPMAS states that the private sector holds the highest rates of poverty among its employers compared to the public sector (2019, p. 80). Again, this might explain why 62% of graduated youth seek public jobs over private (Kloster 2016, p.19). This is also supported by data from my fieldwork where the youth and their families are knocking all the doors and making full use of their social networks in the hope of attaining a job opportunity in the public sector.

Luckily, Ashraf was the main interlocutor in the fieldwork and he comes from a powerful family that has substantial social capital. In all of the meetings with him, I had witnessed families and individuals searching for jobs for their children. Most of the jobs they looked for were in the service sector. All of them preferred the public over private especially if the job seeker was a new graduate. Only one request for *wasta* (favoritism) in the private sector was done by Ashraf's director in his public official work. The job opportunity was for the director's daughter in a Gulf private bank. In a nutshell, to apply for a job, a person needs a resume and strong social network that facilitate the employment process.



## **Social Capital and *Wazīfa***

After finishing her household chores, Radwa Helal got dressed and we both took public transportation to go for a job interview at a private pharmaceutical company. She entered the building and I waited for her outside in the street until she finished. After fifteen minutes we were on our way back home. I asked her how the interview went. She said the first question they asked was: ‘How do you know Ashraf Mowafi?’ The second question was related to her college degree. At the end of the interview, they advised her to do an internship at a pharmacy and to get back to them after one month. Radwa paused for a moment and said: “If this pharmaceutical company doesn’t have a job opening, then why did they ask me for an interview? I think they called because Ashraf Mowafi arranged the meeting and no one can turn down a request from Ashraf Mowafi.” The possibility of getting a job increases with a stronger social network and more social capital accumulation (Binzel & Carvalho, 2016, p.2555: Krafft & Assaad, 2015, p. 6). Radwa was aware of the opportunity given to her by Ashraf. However, she also knew that the chance to get the job was small as she is not a relative of the Mowafi family. She is only connected to the family through her uncle who passed away. At the end of our talk she said: “If my uncle was still alive, surely I would have landed a public job, not even a private job.”

The next day on my way to my first meeting with Ahmed Alaam, the head of the Mowafi family, Ashraf received a phone call from his manager at the tax department. The first reason for the call that popped into my mind was that Ashraf’s manager wanted to discipline him because he very frequently left work before the end of the official hours. It turned out, however, that the manager called to ask Ashraf for his help in recommending his daughter for a job in one of the investment banks. As soon as we arrived in the Ahmed Alaam’s Mandara, the space where guests sit and drink tea, several men with their sons came asking for support in recommending their sons for a job opening at the Ministry of Agriculture. One of the applicants for the job was a young man with decent language and computer skills, who graduated with the highest score from the Agricultural College in Suhag. In addition, he had passed the exams that the Ministry conducted for the applicants to test their skills. However, the young man and his father knew that these accomplishments were not enough, and that they needed the help of someone with the power to influence the decision making process. That is why they sought the help of the Mowafi family. Ahmed Alaam assigned the task of recommending the young man to his

nephew, who is a high ranking police officer in the Public Funds Investigation. The nephew was participating in the conversation, and his facial expression suggested that the task involved a heavy workload. He started talking to the young man, explaining to him the process of hiring.

“Hiring in the public sector has become a difficult issue. Whether or not you will get the job depends on the scores in college, the written and oral exam and the interview during the application process. Then, the Ministry’s department here in Suhag sends a report to the main, centralized ministries in Cairo. They decide who will be hired, based on the results of the above mentioned requirements. We can only give you a recommendation, which is a process that various departments of the Ministry of Interior do. For example, Public Money Inquiries and State Security. Until now, around 65 people applied for a job for which eventually only four people will be chosen.”

However, the young man was clever enough to understand the meaning of these words regarding that the Mowafi family would not be able to help him. He explained that social networking does not only affect the process by recommendation; it also has the power to change the results of the exams. “If someone scored 30 out of 70 for the exam, but he has the right social network, the score will be changed to 70.” Everyone who participated in this conversation fell silent for a couple of seconds, until Ahmed Alaam’s nephew started talking again. He was wondering why everyone is seeking jobs in the public sector, instead of the private sector in which there are more job opportunities. He mentioned that “the public sector has no budget to pay for the salaries of newly hired individuals. Here in Suhag, there was an advertisement for 25 jobs in the private sector. Everyone, ranging from university graduates to workers, could apply but nobody did.” The young man was further disappointed, and then he and his father thanked everyone for welcoming them and excused themselves to leave.

Several significant points can be drawn from these conversations. First, youth and their families are aware that social capital is an important key factor in securing a job opportunity. Second, they are especially keen on getting a job in the public sector rather than the private sector. These two points mainly relate to the degree to which families are experiencing and trying to avoid precariousness. To elaborate more, neoliberal policies, which are being applied on a global scope, have created a massive wave of inequality in various markets (Standing, 2011). One of the markets that strongly influences the level of dependence and vulnerability, is the employment field. In fact, Josson (2005) argues that the employment process experiences two patterns of inequality. On the one hand, the

inequality of opportunity is affected by the individual's socioeconomic origin that comes originally from family. In addition, the larger structures shaped by state policies are responsible for differential access to resources and rewards of which the individual's right to employment is an example. (Jansson, 2005, 223). Thus, the process of getting a job relates to the families' strength and capital that would enable it to overcome these inequalities. In other words, if the family has the appropriate socioeconomic background to secure better educational options for their children, the road to getting a job is partially completed. Moreover, the same socioeconomic background, specifically the social aspect, is used to make sure their children have a place in the labor market, in which the means of distribution is controlled by the dominating group, rather than the welfare state.

The bias towards public sector jobs is directly related to the condition of precariousness. Guy Standing explains that the precariat is defined as: "People who have minimal trust relationships with capital or state" (2011, p.8). They are the individuals with uncertain access to the economic capital necessary to secure their material and other needs. They are also the disadvantaged groups who lack the social status needed for the state to take notice of their rights and needs. As a result, seeking a bond or relationship with the state is a goal that would enable them to mitigate various insecurities. One way this can be done is through the public sector, which acts as "the final frontier for the precariat," which has advantages such as "labour standards and stable employment, ... a high social income, with benefits accounting for a large share of compensation, coupled with bureaucratic rules and an ethic of service" (Standing, 2011, p.51). Most of these factors are the main drive for individuals in their search for a job, and in their attempts to preserve and reproduce public jobs in rural Upper Egypt. The deep rooted valorization of a government job is aptly reflected in the Egyptian proverb: 'If you cannot have a *mīrī* job, wallow in its dust' –<sup>12</sup>–, which was intensively repeated and mentioned in all discussions about job seeking during the fieldwork.

### **The *wazīfa* and the attempts to preserve it**

In her work on one of the steel towns in Egypt, Dina Ebeid (2017) sheds light on the concept of permanent jobs in the public sector offered by ESCO steel factory, and how its workers understand it as a property that has the power to be transmitted and

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<sup>12</sup> ان فاتك الميري اتمرمغ في ترابه

inherited to the other family members (p.19). This contribution illustrates how the (re)production of privilege could take the form of mitigating precariousness through securing spots in sustainable jobs. In other words, when the steel factory workers treat *wazīfa* as a property, this gives them the privilege to enjoy an advantaged position in the process of achieving better life conditions, and reduces their vulnerability and dependence on others. During my fieldwork, I observed how job occupiers in the public sector regarded their jobs as property, which was especially apparent in the ways they sought to preserve their jobs. Ahmed Helal, the oldest brother in Helal's family, had the power to secure a permanent job for his youngest brother as a laboratory supervisor in a public primary school in the 90s. After receiving the job, he wanted to travel to Kuwait for work. He, therefore, went through a bureaucratic procedure called 'saving the job' or *hifz wazīfa* (حفظ وظيفة), which meant that he could travel to work abroad without being fired, and allowed him to get back to his job when he returns to Egypt. This meant, however, that he needed to come back to Egypt from time to time to pay the fees for keeping his job status. Five years ago, he was going to lose his job because the time period for which he could 'save' his job had expired. Thus, he left his work in Kuwait to come back to Egypt to work, so that he could keep his position for an extended period of time. When I asked why someone would take the step of leaving his well-paid job for another job with a lower salary, he answered: "If you told me 'would you like to take 50 pounds today or 100 pounds tomorrow?' my answer would be to take the 50 pounds today." In other words, permanent public jobs give better social insurance coverage with regard to compensations, particularly the pension from which the family will benefit after the retirement or death of the breadwinner (Barsoum. 2015, 352). Thus, Helal's brother and other public employees use the procedure of saving a job as a type of security with a long lasting effect. This is why they pay fees to the administration of various public departments. It can be seen as a tactic for decreasing the chances of chronic precariousness. As Standing puts it:

"The precariat lives with anxiety – chronic insecurity associated not only with teetering on the edge, knowing that one mistake or one piece of bad luck could tip the balance between modest dignity and being a bag lady, but also with a fear of losing what they possess even while feeling cheated by not having more" (2011, p. 20). The nature of the job has changed - from an opportunity to a right of property - due to the way people acquire a job, through building and using a social network, and the methods they use to keep the job. A job is now a property that can be obtained through social capital, and

preserved with economic capital. Eventually, this property can be passed on to benefit others for a long period of time. This is what makes public jobs the first and foremost goal in a time during which inequality takes different forms and people are categorized by their ability to avoid or maneuver around vulnerability caused by inequality. If people are not able to avoid or maneuver around vulnerability, they are left with less secure options. In other words, if people cannot get a public job, they will most likely need to find a job in the private sector - whether formal or informal - which is mainly built on insecurities and precariousness (Standing, 2011; Assaad & Wahba, 2017; Barsoum, 2015). In addition, the private sector is also the space for the vulnerable; the people who do not have a social network, nor the required qualifications for a job in the public sector.

Regarding the search for a job in the private sector, I was able to attend an Employment Fair - organised by the NGO established by Ashraf Mowafi, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce in Suhag, Plan International organization and the European Union. The event was publicized through the official Facebook pages of each partner. At this particular date, more than 260 men and women attended the event and had the chance to ask the participating companies about the jobs they offered. Unfortunately, the event turned out to be disappointing for the youth who traveled a long distance, hoping to improve their life conditions and to have their insecurities taken away from them.

## In the Private Sector: To Get a Job, Work on Yourself

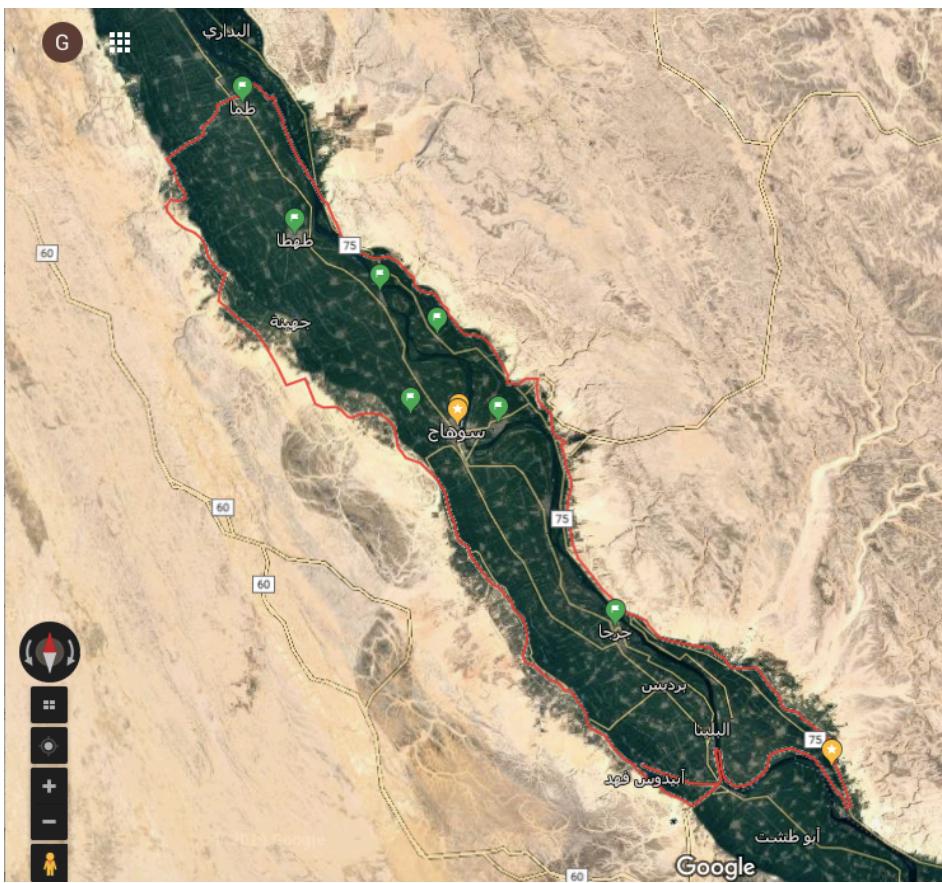


Figure 9, Suhag Governorate, Google Map, The yellow pin stands for the location where the event took place. Meanwhile, the green pins stand for the locations where participants came from.

The moment a person entered the Employment Fair hall, a group of volunteers sitting behind a desk asked the participant to fill out an attendance sheet, which included information such as their name, phone number, address and the purpose of their attendance. The participants came from various cities and villages north and south of Suhag. After filling out the form, the participants were allowed to meet the representatives of the twenty private companies who offered different jobs. Most of the companies that participated in the Employment Fair were in the fast food chain industry. The majority of the offers were a range of service jobs that ranged from cleaners to the higher status job of cashiers. There were only a few NGOs working in development, that were looking for employees. The jobs openings at these NGOs were for project directors, with the English language and minimum two year experience as requirements. The ratio of men and women job seekers, was quite balanced: 54% females, 46% males. After some time, the event organizers, who represent the NGOs and government, arrived to

take part in a panel. The panel started with them welcoming the audience and thanking the organizers, after which they gave advice to job seekers to ease their search for a job and increase their opportunities to be employed. Several examples are:

“You will be exhausted until you reach your goal.”

“The private sector is a partner and will hire employees based on their qualifications.”

“Don’t sit at home waiting for a job, go and take courses to improve your skills and the demand for you will increase.” At the end of the panel, there was a time for the audience to ask questions to the members of the panel. The panel took two questions from men who directly criticized the regulation of the private sector in Egypt. The first question focused on the lack of guarantees and job security for employees of the private sector. The representative of the government in the panel took the lead and addressed the question, explaining that most of the private sector is not obliged to enforce labor laws and rights of the workers. He justified the attitude of the private sector, by saying that these laws are made to regulate only the public sector. He added that the only factors that influence whether someone gets a job and keeps it, are the employees’ qualifications and performance.

“In the private sector, you are the one who is determining how your salary should be. Based on your qualifications, you will be priced! To make it clear, the job market is constructed on the notion of supply and demand. If you have the required criteria for the job, the demands for you will be high regardless what the state policies entail.”

The second question was asked by a young man working for the security department of a private company. The core of his question was about the absence of promotions in the private sector, and in the case that a promotion would happen, that it was only on paper and the salary did not actually increase. This question was answered by a consultant of the Ministry of Trade. He asked the youth whether he held a university degree, who denied holding such a degree. Consecutively, the consultant of the ministry answered by blaming the young man.

“First, let’s agree that the security job is a job for those who don’t have profession. In order to avoid this fate, develop yourself (*nammi nafsak*). At the end, you are working for someone who owns the business and wants to increase his profit from your work. If you don’t add value to him, why would he employ you? We are not in a perfect world, nor in the utopian city!”

What can be understood from these answers is that the lack of skills is used as a reason for unemployment, which, again, is the problem of the individual, not the state



educational and employment policies. Looking at the solutions, in order to get a job in the private sector, youth must invest in self-learning and skill development. Linda Herrera (2017) describes the discourse of governments, when discussing the employment crisis, as “The message to young people is that they should pull themselves together, become more self-reliant and take charge of their individual lives. In other words, they should become effective agents of change irrespective of structural impediments, lack of support by governments or other institutions, and without turning to politics and organizing” (p. 39). In other words, the individual circumstance is the main factor responsible for increasing or decreasing the chances of being hired; not the state policies, nor the decrease of state welfare, or even how the private sector marginalizes the labor regulation laws. Self-empowerment is said to be the golden solution, and your economic situation is the tool for this. This means that, after finishing university, graduates must accept internships that do not offer wages. Also, one must take private courses to cover the lack of educational services during their education. Otherwise, one might risk being limited to jobs that hold no value or future. On the other hand, in case of accepting a job with a lower status, such as a job in security, one needs to address the decline in social mobility. However, for many, accepting a low status job is a life-saving method as it brings them economic value (Standing, 2011, p.9). Taking the security job as an example, it is a job in which one’s skills are reduced to the ability of taking care of a recording book and asking individuals who enter to sign their names, while sitting in a chair for a long period of time. More than that is not required, and no adequate payment will be paid for such qualifications. This is how the realistic world works.

### **The reproduction of privilege through certain occupations**

There are certain jobs that are acquired and inherited by specific members of the elite and powerful families to reproduce their privilege. Among such occupations is the job of a judge or prosecutor in the Egyptian judicial system. These jobs secure an advantageous social position in the public sector and high benefits regarding the economic returns. In his book, *The Rule of Law in The Arab World.*, Nathan Brown discusses the caste-like approach in the process of hiring and promotion between Egyptian judges and their relatives (1997). He describes it as “Largely self-governing in matters of appointment and promotion, proud of an institutional history going back to the late nineteenth century, and very conscious of their prestigious position, Egyptian judges

form a community (at times it seems almost a caste) possessing a strong identity and sense of mission” (Brown, 1997, p.198). In other words, in order to maintain the prestige and power that come as a result of this social status, the right of everyone to become a judge was turned into a communal confinement, which amounts to a process of exclusion. This type of inheritance among members of this community has a long history. In fact, in 2012, the Minister of Justice, Ahmed El-Zend, spoke honestly about this approach to the judiciary system’s heritage and describes it as “the Holy March” *ālzahf al muqaddas* (الزحف المقدس) (Eleisawi , 2012). In 2016, a presidential decree was issued with the names of the individuals who were accepted as General Prosecutors after passing the required exams and fitting the job conditions. Around 33% of the individuals who were accepted for the position were the sons, brothers and grandsons of previous or current judges (Ali, 2016). The cases that I encountered during my fieldwork were in line with these findings. As I had mentioned, the important position of the Mowafi family in their communities in Akhmim and Suhag is mainly due to the type of occupations held by the family members. Most of the males of the family are judges, while all of the working females that I met, , have jobs in administrative positions or are prosecutors for the Ministry of Justice. In fact, the Mowafi family figures in a press report on the issue of certain families’ monopoly over occupations in the judicial system. (Tahrir, 2015). Thus, the kind of privilege one has, depends on what family you belong to and its history of professional occupation. Giving weight to the educational journey or the academic scores might be marginalized at the expense of the family’s socioeconomic background. For example, in order to be a judge or a member in the prosecution system, students do not require scoring high grades in general secondary level. More clearly, attending the Law Faculty is the way to get a job as a lawyer, prosecutor, or judge. The Law faculty is known as a ‘parking college’, *garāj āljāma*, as previously mentioned (Shalakany, 2012). In addition, applying for a job as prosecutor, which is the first step to becoming a judge, requires only a minimum grade of “good” (*gayyid*) (Saeed, 2018). Such a score does not reflect exceptional academic performance, and does not require putting a lot of effort into the college years. At the end, the ultimate deciding factor in attaining such prestigious and secure jobs revolves around the family social status and the ability to transform this status into a privilege to be passed on to family members. As such, the concept of equal educational chances or job opportunities based on the individual’s efforts has become an illusion and a false promise under the neoliberal system (Means, 2017, p.2). When certain families have the upper hand in one of the most significant professions with a sensitive

position within the society, such as the justice system, the chances for fair opportunities in the education or job market are considered to be a dream that is difficult to come true for unprivileged people.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the chapter, the official data and ethnography show the difficulty to obtain a decent and fair job within the Egyptian job market. The reasons for this have to do with the life circumstances of individuals and the withdrawal of the state, regarding the assurance of equal life chances. However, some reasons carry more weight than others. In other words, having social capital and a certain network are key to finding a job and being employed. Educational skills, provided by school and university, can make it easier to find a job, especially in the private sector. Unfortunately, this is limited to privileged students who enrolled in schools that offer these services. As the previous chapters point out, public schools do not have the capacity nor ability to provide these services for their students. There are several sides to being privileged and getting a job. On the one side exists the quality of one's social network. Another side to being privileged is the quality of one's education as it defines the accessibility of the options in the job market. Of significant importance are the efforts of the state in pointing out that the problem of inequality in the job market rests on the shoulders of the youth and their lack of self-empowerment. According to the state, the problem does not lie with the national official education system, nor with the decreasing number of public jobs, or even the lack of labor law regulations mainly for the private sector, which causes the working status of employees to be vulnerable. The problem lies with the youth, who do not acquire the market skills or try to improve their qualifications. In this situation, the idea of giving up a job is very uncommon. In fact, the job itself becomes a property that requires certain strategies to be kept. One of those strategies, that became apparent during the fieldwork, is "saving the job", which public employees use when they travel abroad in order to keep their public job. Another strategy requires social status, where a dominant and privileged family is capable of creating a community on its own, as judges in the Egyptian judicial system do by passing on their job to their children. All of these strategies might prove that on the one hand, people from different socioeconomic backgrounds are trying to avoid precarity. On the other hand, they are trying to keep a certain degree of social power and dominance that will decrease their vulnerability.

When the social protection for citizens is the responsibility of the state, there are greater chances to accomplish social advantages based mostly on the individual efforts. In contrast, changing the system to be controlled based on business interests and market demands is translated into conditions under which each individual's life is his/her own responsibility (Ashurst & Venn, 2014, p. 162). Actually, the former is the expected situation under the welfare state (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p.248), while the latter is indicative of the neoliberal state functioning primarily through the social inequalities and insecurities (Lorey, 2015, p. 2). With each political, economic or social policy change during the history of contemporary Egypt, livelihoods had been influenced in two overarching ways with respect to social mobility and privilege; it either sustains or stabilizes certain groups or class status over the welfare of other classes, or it strengthens or weakens a specific class, causing the social gap to grow wider and fiercer. In other words, the formation or elimination of social inequality between various classes is influenced by the existence of the welfare state and how effectively or passively it performs. In relation to the previous section, the equality of opportunity that various states promote or prevent through their policies can direct the path of mobility for its citizens.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion

#### Reproducing Privilege Through Reproducing Inequalities

During my job as a research assistant in Menya in 2014, there was a male trainer who worked in one of the USAID projects on education. He recounted an interesting story about a child in the third grade of a public school in a governorate in rural Upper Egypt who was asked "What do you want to do when you grow up?" The child immediately and spontaneously replied: "I would like to travel to Kuwait just like my uncle." My initial reaction was that of surprise because it was the first time that I heard a child saying his dream career lies in travelling. It seemed like a bizarre wish for a child to come up with using his imagination. During my work among members of the privileged class, I was mainly surrounded by kids who dreamt of becoming doctors, police officers, painters, or even dancers. However, although this child and I come from different cultures and classes, I could relate to his answer after finishing the ethnography for this research and writing down these words. The child's wish mirrors the desired destination of most of his male community members in their journey towards adulthood. In addition, he might see his uncle as the privileged family member, who travels and has extra money to send gifts to him and his family. Simply, his dreams follow the exact route of social mobility that he has been surrounded with since a young age and that is a realistic way of succeeding to secure various advantages for himself and his family.

Notably, dreams for a better life and a sustainable privileged status are strongly connected to the family origin. In chapter 2, I presented the argument, supported by ethnographic evidence, that the socioeconomic origin of an individual is the main factor in producing and reproducing class privilege. For example, Mowafi's family fits all the criteria and has the capital to be labeled as 'privileged.' However, this varies from one individual to another in the same family. For example, Ashraf Mowafi's financial instability has a negative effect on his privileged position; however, he is still acknowledged as being privileged because of the cultural and social capital he has inherited from his family. Another example that shows that a status of privilege does not necessarily require capital, is Zalta's family. None of the family members that I met hold a university degree or occupy a formal official job. In contrast, Tamana and Akhmim are privileged because of the amount of material capital and land they own and their social networks that accumulated mostly due to the power of the family's human capital that

benefitted them during political elections. For Ashraf, being an employee in a Ministry and belonging to a well-respected family were not enough to satisfy his family needs which forced him to change his children's schools from private language school to private Arabic school. This is a move that might negatively affect his children's chances for upward social mobility. On the other hand, the chances that Zalta's children for upward mobility are higher and realistically achievable. International schools and private universities both accept students based on their family's financial ability. Therefore fulfilling educational and cultural needs to get a university degree or even a high ranking job in a private corporation, is very much possible. The above mentioned examples, and others throughout the thesis, especially in Chapter Two, explain how privilege is extremely layered and is not fixed or static. Thus, the reproduction of privilege needs a full awareness of the various factors and dynamics that affect this process.

The literature reviews also covered the significant effect of the state policies in terms of increasing or eliminating the possibilities of securing a stable life. Again using the comparison between Ashraf and Zalta as an example, the neoliberal policies that liberated the trade were the main reason for the sudden material accumulation for Zalta's family; on the other hand, the same neoliberal policies, which are aggressively applied nowadays, are behind the withdrawal of the financial stability for Ashraf as he mainly depends on his public salary with its decreasing economic value.

Chapter Three focuses on how families now experience most of their privileged strength or vulnerability through the decisions they make regarding their children's education. The question of whether education is becoming worthless or whether it is still a medium for obtaining social advantages depends on the type of educational system we are talking about. As mentioned throughout Chapter Three, education in Egypt and globally transformed into a market with various options. Depending on the class and financial status of the parents these options can be considered. It is important to note that at this moment, more than 80% of Egyptian students are enrolled in public schools. However, not all of them have an equal chance to finish their education and obtain a university degree. Also, completing education is not only valuable in the case one wants to get a university education. It is also necessary for having a prestigious wedding, travelling abroad and seeking better job opportunities. According to some families and youth, these are all valid reasons for education and they expose alternative chances for achieving privilege.



When the state welfare no longer covered social services as education, the nature of the services changed from right into commodity. Yet, that commodity needs to be produced and sold in order to return the surplus value after spending certain capital on its production. In order to be sold, it needs marketing and satisfaction of specific needs of the customers. As Chapter Four illustrates, the private education sector is an important supplier and producer of education as a commodity. In addition, promoting higher modes of social mobility through fulfilling the advanced educational skills and obtaining the required job qualification is the winner's card in the process of marketization. Actually, that process has two overarching effects: it includes those who can afford the price of the commodity and excludes those who cannot.

Chapter Four also argues that a degree of conflict of interest exists when the owner of a private educational institution is at the same time occupying a social position that undoubtedly influences significant matters in the formal education policies. If we assume that a strong campaign is launched to improve financial spending in public schools and increase the quality of the service, what will the response of someone like Salah Mowafi be when he notices that he is possibly losing current or future customers? Will he support this campaign? Or will he fight against it to make sure there is no equal opportunity to compete? The same is with the case of Mr. Sayed, who holds different social positions that are in conflict of interest with each other. Originally, he is an English teacher who got promoted to be the supervisor of the Suhag governorates. However, he is the most popular private English tutor, whose students travel long distances to see him. Now, he occupies a new social position as owner of an international school. The conflict of interest that can be found in this case is the discrepancy of effort and availability he will provide if we hold his job as a supervisor in the ministry of education against his position as school manager and owner. Which school is more in need of his skills and time? The public schools that have high capacities that reach more than 50 students per class? Or his international school that does not allow more than 20 students per class in a well-equipped and supported educational environment? Which one is better for him to put his effort in, regarding the freedom of managing and regulating the educational structure: the public school that constrains teachers through a highly centralized management, or the international private school in which he can easily, and without a superior's approval, set decisions into motion in order to improve the education system inside the school or to eliminate certain obstacles immediately? These questions show the extent of conflict of interest in public sectors, especially in a poorly organized and

informally privatized sector as education, which lack accountability, promote corruption and benefit from the situation that is greatly dependent on the exclusion of the unprivileged from acquiring equal educational opportunities. In other words, the private sector profits from the social injustice that currently exists.

Surprisingly, despite the poor situation of the formal education, it still has the ability to reduce the vulnerability of the underprivileged in rural Upper Egypt. Passing a police checkpoint without being questioned because of being identified as educated through one's identification card, fulfilling the condition of being educated to issue a passport and reducing the military conscription duration in order to be able to have a job or travel abroad are all significant benefits formal education can provide the underprivileged with. From a gender perspective, girls can find school as an escape-zone from their cultural obligation towards their households and farming work. Schools provide a break from such responsibilities and enable girls to temporarily enjoy some privilege.

In the same way the family's economic position influences the opportunity to receive education it is explained in Chapter Five that social capital and networks play an essential role in obtaining a job, *wazifa*, particularly in the public sector. For certain professions, for example in the judicial system, families with powerful social networks are able to sustain a continued recruitment of family members for the position of a judge. On the other hand, the underprivileged who manage to have a university education but do not have adequate social capital, are in a more disadvantaged position. They are more likely to have to accept a low-ranking job in the informal sector which will negatively affect their chances of upward mobility.

The demise of the state's welfare policies has also affected employment. With the erosion of guarantees for employment in the public sector, the private sector has increasingly become the main employer. However, the jobs offered by the private sector mostly lack job benefits and security. In association with this shift, the official discourse tended to put the blame of unemployment on the individual.

In the current political and social context, the reproduction of privilege through education and jobs is undoubtedly attached to the socioeconomic origin of the family. A family that is financially secure would be able to send its children to international or private schools. Being the son or a daughter of a mother or father in a high ranking profession, might be advantageous for someone's professional path. Coming from a powerful family that has strong social networks is similarly a privilege, since these

networks can influence an individual's opportunity of obtaining a stable, permanent job, even if the only qualification is the family name or *wasta*. These privileges are not the product of individual achievements but of policies that create social injustice and precariousness especially for those who cannot cope with the rapid waves of exclusion and marginalization.

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