



WOMEN IN EGYPT AT WORK



Diversity in Equality

العمل نظرة أمل - women in egypt at work

gtz



Programme Management Unit
وحدة إدارة البرنامج
PMU

MKI-vetEP

The overall objective of the Mubarak Kohl Initiative for Vocational Education, Training and Employment Promotion (MKI-vetEP) is to support i.a. young people in the transition between school or unemployment to gainful and acceptable employment using locally integrated employment service mechanisms. Here the capacity for interaction and dialogue between job seekers and employers is at the forefront.

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The overall challenge: Egypt's dysfunctional labour market

About two thirds of Egypt's population is under 29 years of age. Between 2005 and 2010, 790 000 individuals entered the labour market annually. It is these young people – particularly young women – who are most affected by unemployment and increasingly informal employment. An estimated 32% of young men and 59% of young women have no jobs.

On the other hand, there is an increase in the number of vacancies which cannot adequately be filled. Across all sectors, the private economy is complaining about the qualification level, especially of young job seekers.

This situation is mainly due to Egypt's vocational education system which is not oriented towards the requirements of the economy or the needs of young job seekers. Additionally, the information on labour markets and the support provided to job seekers is insufficient at all levels – local, regional and national.

Many young people lack information on what jobs exist. They often cannot judge the kind of work they are likely to succeed in – not only because they do not know the labour market needs but also because they

have no perception of their own talents and capabilities.

Young people in Egypt often have preconceived ideas of occupations that make them exclude certain career options – often based on unfavourable public opinion. Traditional cultural aspects, family expectations, and stereotypes projected by the media add pressure to this already complex decision making process.

As a result, young people in Egypt end up working – if at all – in different jobs for short periods of time, often switching between low-skilled tasks and from one occupation to another.

Employers, managers and employees are often locked in a circle of dysfunctional communication where self management and reflective thinking are not encouraged; there is no long term vision, scarce readiness for innovation and low labour productivity.

This situation is frustrating for employers and employees – it endangers the competitiveness of enterprises and leaves a vast young population without prospects for gainful and acceptable employment and long term career development.





Specific challenges for women: While many Egyptian women contribute to the family income by working in the ready-made garment sector, they are still expected to work in the household and take care of their male family members.

Photo: R. Bäcker

Specific challenges for women

While the situation described holds true for job seekers in Egypt as a whole, young women are disproportionately affected by the compound pressure of a dysfunctional labour market and conflicting expectations from themselves, their peers and extended families.

Partly due to the current economic recession, it is becoming increasingly acceptable for women of all social spheres to work in order to contribute to their family's income. However, they are still expected to shoulder the responsibility of parenting, taking care of elderly or sick family members, and running the household.

In the work sphere they are exposed to discrimination based on gender-biased perceptions: quite often, women are not deemed capable of undertaking complex management tasks or strenuous physical work. As in most countries across the world, their work is often per se regarded as less valuable, resulting in unequal salaries for women and men.

Additionally, women are expected to

avoid occupations which might expose them to work situations regarded a risk to their moral and physical integrity. This can apply to a variety of occupations that may seem striking for outsiders. For instance, the fact that nurses have to work night shifts (outside the protection and control of the family home) and physically take care of male patients makes this occupation dishonourable in the view of people holding on to traditional values and role models.

In the private sphere, the gender role expected from them is based on respect for the elderly, submission to the overall family interests, and obedience to their parents, husband and in-laws. None of these are likely to foster the degree of assertiveness they will need to negotiate satisfactory employment conditions, let alone counter gender-biased discrimination at the work place.

Young women are left alone to figure out how to integrate these conflicting role expectations and multiple demands on their time, energy and personal resources.

The overall approach of MKI-vetEP

The primary objective of the Mubarak-Kohl Initiative for Vocational Education, Training, and Employment Promotion (MKI-vetEP) is an increasing interactive employability of youth to foster their employment.

Good quality technical and vocational education and training can provide young women and men with the skills, knowledge and attitudes required to perform a job. However, experience has shown that this is not enough to get them into gainful and acceptable employment.

Therefore MKI-vetEP has developed a multi-pronged approach to support un-

employed, underemployed or precariously employed youth – with or without formal education – to improve their chances in the labour market.

The programme has made learning – by and among all actors involved and affected by the labour market – the core of its approach. It is implemented through a combination of action learning, facilitation of regional networks, facilitation of dialogue among different actors, and the capacity building of *employment facilitators* (for more details on the role of the employment facilitators, please see Box 1).

Box 1:

The concept and role of Employment Facilitators in MKI-vetEP

Employment Facilitators (EF) play an important role in MKI-vetEP's conceptual approach to promote interactive employability especially of Egyptian youth: So far, a small group of EFs are already actively supporting effective and efficient matching mechanisms, thus, contributing to a better functioning labour market.

The longer-term intention is to develop a comprehensive concept for the development and training of EFs. This will allow multiplying out and scaling up beyond the pilot regions of MKI-vetEP.

MKI-vetEP is using a series of action learning in different regions in Egypt with the combined aim of providing:

- information on different aspects of the Egyptian labour market (for example of cultural perception of work and work ethics; the behaviour of job-seekers with and without formal technical and vocational education and training; or the conceptual understanding of "job quality");
- tangible results towards achieving interactive employability at the local and regional level (for instance employment for a group of jobseekers, hands-on experience for potential EFs, involvement of a network of stakeholders including government, employer associations and other NGOs);
- as well as a collaborative testing ground where ideas on how to best train and develop the Employment Facilitators and their networks are put into practice and reflected jointly among the actors involved in the action learning process.

The basic learning programme "camera at work – exploring the meaning of work-that-brings satisfaction" is an example of this kind of approach for simultaneously identifying and training suitable Employment Facilitators; exploring the Egyptian labour market; understanding and how its different actors think, feel and function; as well as triggering reflection, understanding and social change.

For more information on this training programme, please see further ahead in this document and also visit <http://www.egypt-at-work.org/en/topic/6.workshops.html>



MKI-vetEP Employment Facilitator talking to an apprentice at his workplace in 6th of October City

Photo: R. Bäcker

This multi-stakeholder learning process is guided by the concepts of “interactive employability” and “gainful and acceptable employment” (for more details on these two concepts of MKI-vetEP, please see Box 2).

Achieving gainful and acceptable employment for Egypt’s youth means that all actors involved and affected by the labour market not only have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to fulfil their role (i.e. perform a job or be an employer) but

also the necessary competences to interact with each other in a meaningful way in order to see their interests met.

This means that fostering youth employment in Egypt needs to address issues of job quality, take into account locally specific socio-cultural issues, create windows of opportunity for open multi-stakeholder dialogue, avoid cultural “shock”, build trust, strengthen negotiation skills, foster and facilitate experiential learning, and support the development of local structures.

One stepping stone has been to foster a culture of learning within the MKI-vetEP team itself. This not only serves as an example and as encouragement for other actors to view “learning” as a strength and not a weakness. It also provides practical insights on how a spirit of learning can be enhanced in Egyptian society.

Box 2:

Interactive employability and gainful and acceptable employment

On the one hand, job seekers and their potential employers need to fulfil certain pre-conditions: job seekers need to have the job related skills, knowledge and attitudes expected by employers; employers need to have the competence to recruit, employ and develop staff (passive employability).

On the other hand, job seekers and potential employers need to take the initiative to seek and share relevant information about the labour market and act upon it (initiative employability).

Finally, interactive employability goes beyond this and calls for competences and mechanisms whereby both sides can express their expectations and negotiate their fulfilment appropriately.

It is important to bear in mind that this will require both sides to reflect on their own views of what “gainful and acceptable” employment is. MKI-vetEP stresses that “job quality” should not be understood as an imposed and universal standard but may combine standard-related factors with individual perceptions and expectations.

Commitment to gender equality at MKI-vetEP

Discussing gender issues in Egypt means clarifying again and again the concept of gender equality. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same. Gender equality entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. It also means that the different behaviour, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally.

In practice, striving for gender equality means learning to recognise gender issues (perceptions, role models, opportunities, discrimination, etc.) and questioning the structures, practices and values that tend to perpetuate problems arising from gender inequality.

We are aware that these changes take time and that it is up to Egyptian society and its individuals to set the pace, scope and outcome of such changes.

Within MKI-vetEP we strive to live gender equality through gender mainstreaming and women empowerment as a guiding principle for our work. We seek to foster respect for diversity (in terms of gender, age, ethnic origin, occupation, religion, etc.) in order to inspire a non-confrontational process of socio-cultural change.

The following are some examples of how we apply these principles of respect, diversity and gender equality to our management culture within the programme team as well as in our interactions with other development partners:

- We engage male and female members of our team in all our programme activities.
- We encourage participation by male and female members from development partners in the implementation of joint activities.
- The data we collect are disaggregated by sex and age.
- In our publications and presentation material we make a point of using pictures of men and women of all ages and of working situations where men and women work together on a level playing field.

- We try to balance out the “space” and “voice” we give to people from both sexes: at a certain point, we realised that in our monthly newsletter Employment Express we tended to interview more men than women. Of course this is related to the fact that in our area of work the majority of senior staff tends to be men. However, we have made a commitment to re-address this imbalance in the next issues of our newsletter.
- Our management structure follows function and does not necessarily reflect gender and seniority. We are in the process of putting in place coaching mechanisms to assist all staff to fulfil their roles. This is particularly important when a young female person is responsible for coordinating the work of several senior male colleagues.
- The international team is composed of a programme manager (woman), a deputy (man), and two experts (one male, one female). One programme component is being implemented by a consultancy company and is managed by a male consultant.
- The Egyptian Programme Management Unit (PMU) is led by a woman, working with a team that consists of male and female team members.

“Engendering” the way we work as described above is a means to serve as role models and inspire dialogue and social transformation. It also provides us with hands-on experience that we can use in our work outside the team.

Beyond this, we specifically target our programme measures to foster respect for diversity (again, in terms of gender, age, ethnic origin, occupation, religion, etc.) and empower disadvantaged groups through participation, representation, affirmation and joint reflection and dialogue.

The following sections explain what this means in practice with respect to using photography to transform the perception of gender roles in the world of work in Egypt.



Visitors at the opening of the exhibition „women in egypt at work“ during the MKI-vetEP Employment Week in Mansoura, May 2009 Photo: J. Neumann

egypt at work – using photography as an interactive experience for cultural change

Photographs are not an “ornamental” add-on to the work of MKI-vetEP. We use visual communication very consciously as a vehicle for social dialogue and social transformation.

The initiative *egypt at work* is one example of this. As most of our programme’s activities and instruments, it serves more than one purpose.

At first glance, it is an informative website (www.egypt-at-work.org) to orient young people in the labour market. Job profiles and information on different occupations are accompanied by photographs of the work place and of different tasks within the job.

Taking a closer look at the photographs teaches us something else: the people in the pictures take pride in what they do and draw satisfaction from a job well done. This is not to be taken for granted in a country like Egypt where “blue collar” jobs are considered lowly and dirty by most job seekers and their families and therefore not regarded as desirable job options.

If we take the time to take a really close look at the individual photographs, we learn something else. We are used to view the photographer as the “subject” and the photographed persons as the “objects”. The photographs of *egypt at work* teach us that respectful and appreciative photographs of

people are a means of communication between the photographer, the person being photographed, and the viewer of the photographs. By looking at the dignity of working men and women young people discover that – irrespective of the specific occupation – work in itself has a value if it is carried out well.

But this is not all. The initiative *egypt at work* is more than a web site. It includes training on photography for employment facilitators, photographic exhibitions, interactive games and public discussions related to job profiles and different perceptions of careers and what it means to be a craftsperson.

The first photo stories for the job profiles were shot by professional photographers Ralf Bäcker and Jörn Neumann and used for a series of exhibitions in Egypt and Germany.

Ralf Bäcker and Jörn Neumann then went on to facilitate a series of photography training workshops for employment facilitators. This has by now consolidated into a two-week training programme for employment facilitators, called “*camera at work – exploring the meaning of work-that-brings satisfaction*”.

The course covers basic technical aspects of photography and image editing but above all it stresses the potential of photography as a means to observe, get to know and describe workplaces and work processes visually. The concept of respectful and appreciative photographs is at the core of the training as a means to showing respect for



gainful and acceptable employment from the perspective of both job seekers and employers. Facilitators need to establish and maintain appropriate and respectful communication with their client. Photography supports establishing this empathic interaction. Looking through a lens and focusing on somebody, the photographer learns to communicate.

At the end of the hands-on training the participating employment facilitators organize an exhibition of their own photographs and use this opportunity to exchange views and ideas with invited guests and a wider public.

The idea behind this: As they hone their photographic skills, participants can submit their own photographs to be posted on

Proud to be a craftsman: A metal worker from Sabteyya at a photo exhibition in front of his own photo

Photo: R. Bäcker



egypt at work. The photos of these young Egyptian employment facilitators have the potential to attract fellow Egyptian youth and to create a community.

The actual pictures of *egypt at work* and the history behind them are a means to empower many people: the working men and women who proudly show their place of work and their satisfaction in their jobs (affirmation); the young job seekers who get the opportunity to learn about the real conditions in the world of work (awareness) and who are encouraged to widen their scope of occupational options (motivation); the employment facilitators who receive training on how to use respectful and appreciative photography to explore and visualise the world of work (reflection, empathy, communication).

For the participants, some of the immediate gender relevant effects of the *camera at work* training on photography include:

- The group of participants always includes men and women. This provides the opportunity for both sexes to work together in a collaborative setting where all participants are equally encouraged to form, express and openly discuss their opinions, as well as give and receive feedback.
- For some female participants the camera and their role as facilitators are a unique opportunity to gain access to certain work places, learn about the work process in these enterprises and form their own opinion on the requirements of certain jobs.
- This may lead to young women (and men) realising that certain occupations

previously considered as being reserved to people from the other sex might be interesting and suitable for them, too.

Bearing in mind to which extent Egypt's society, economy and labour market is shaped by perceptions of gender it is easy to imagine that photographs could bear the risk of perpetuating stereotyped roles and prejudices. In the same way, photographs taken from a consciously gender sensitive perspective can be used to visualise other gender roles and relations which already exist but are often overlooked. This can help challenge people's perceptions of work and of the roles of women and men in the world of work.

For instance, during one workshop the participants were asked to go out into the immediate surroundings of the training venue and photograph "people at work". They all came back with photographs of men working in car repairs shops or similar jobs. Asked about why they had not taken any photographs of women at work they said there weren't any in the area. Only after they were sent out again with the specific task of photographing women at work did they discover that they had completely overlooked all the women working as food vendors, sales staff in shops, cooks, bakers, or those women ironing or mending clothes.

In the following section we describe how we have taken this approach of gender sensitive photography further to develop two specific features aimed at the empowerment of women through visualisation and affirmation.



Dina, 27, is a freelance contractor. Dina started working in construction ever since she was 23, when she asked her father to allow her to construct a three floor residential building on a piece of land that he owned, but never had the time to invest. Dina chose to focus on building housing for people with low income, allowing them to pay her in up to one year's time after they buy the flats, and without specifying a fixed amount for installment to be paid each month.

Photo: J. Neumann

women in egypt at work and woman of the month

It all began with an internship at MKI-vetEP by Dörthe Boxberg, a young photographer from Germany (February to May 2009). After assisting the facilitation and documentation of one *camera at work* training, the second part of her internship focussed on producing a series of photographs of working women in Egypt.

These photographs have been shown in a series of exhibitions in Egypt and have now become part of the *egypt at work* website (<http://www.egypt-at-work.org/en/topic/88.women-at-work.html>) and illustrate women in their different jobs. The range of occupations covered includes, inter alia: stylist, mechanical engineer, sales woman for clothes, nurse, taxi driver, packaging worker, accountant, lawyer, plumber, car parking attendant, and free lance contractor.

Each woman is introduced by four photographs: one individual portrait and three showing typical tasks during her daily work. This combination draws the viewer right to the core of the gender issue within the concept of gainful and acceptable employment: it not only conveys a very realistic picture of the world of work of certain occupations but places the individual woman with her own interests, biography and dedication at the heart of the story.

Since September 2009, the feature *woman of the month* takes this notion even further by providing a space for further affirmation and recognition. The selection criteria for the *woman of the month* are that she should be outstanding in terms of personality, capability, economic independence, and social engagement.

We use photography and public recognition as a “positive provocation” – by making real women visible who tend to be overlooked because their occupations and attitudes are beyond the stereotyped “female roles”. Here it is important to note how diverse the concept of work and the careers options are that women in Egypt may embrace.

In making this visible, we offer women and men visiting the exhibitions and the website an opportunity to honour this diversity and reflect their own perceptions. For instance, female job seekers may broaden the scope of occupations they consider acceptable or desirable for themselves; employers may come to consider employing women for jobs they would so far have only entrusted to men. Both aspects would mean an increase in the interactive employability of women in Egypt.

Om Bassem is a successful plumber in Cairo. At over 50, she has established an enviable reputation and, in the face of considerable derision from her male counterparts and astonishment from clients, she now runs a successful business.

Photo: D. Boxberg

Impact and outlook

It is too early to expect any structural changes in the gender roles and relations of the world of work in Egypt attributable to the work of MKI-vetEP. The following are some examples of anecdotal evidence of the kind of effects our work already has.

- Young women working within the context of MKI-vetEP use photographs of the first *woman of the month* – Om Bassem, plumber – as screen savers on their computers.
- People outside the programme approach us to suggest candidates for *woman of the month*.
- The number of “hits” to our website increases at the beginning of every month since it includes the page *woman of the month*.
- After visiting the website *women in egypt at work* and *woman of the month* for the

first time, an external consultant wrote to us: “The most striking – and deeply touching – effect of the photographs is the profound sense of dignity they convey, irrespective of the kind of occupation depicted”.

- A gallery in Cologne (Germany) is interested in organising a small exhibition and discussion forum in 2010.

Within the MKI-vetEP team we are already discussing how to further develop processes and mechanisms to identify and select candidates for *woman of the month*; increase its degree of exposure and publicity; foster dialogue and reflection and establish indicators to monitor the effects of our efforts.

Acknowledgements

The concepts and instruments presented in this document are part of a thrilling process. Many individuals have contributed their ideas, expertise, thoughts, feelings and enthusiasm to make sure that “gender” is not an accessory inside a filing cabinet but alive and kicking. Our gratitude and respect to all who have taken the time to be part of this.

We would like to especially thank the photographers Ralf Bäcker, Jörn Neumann and Dörthe Boxberg for their invaluable work in helping us all learn what photography really is about and for generously sharing their wisdom and expertise with all the participants of the photography workshops. Mariette Junk (designer) for being the creative heart and brain behind MKI-vetEP’s entire graphical design. Within the MKI-vetEP team Jan Amos and Marwa Abdelfattah (both GTZ) and Niveen Sakr (Egyptian Programme Management Unit) for making valuable contributions to developing concepts and making information available through different media. Janet Gohlke (GTZ Eschborn) and Eva Castañer (consultant) who used their external views and understanding of our programme to ask many right questions and even provide some of the answers.

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