



# Shifting from Path Dependence Towards Gender-Equitable and Transformative Social Policies in Egypt

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## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare longstanding vulnerabilities in social policy frameworks across the globe, with varying degrees of impact shaped by socio-economic and political contexts. In Egypt, the crisis underscored the limitations of entrenched policy paradigms and opened a window for reimagining the future of social policymaking. Within the framework of the Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy for Post-COVID-19 Africa project (GETSPA), this policy brief explores the trajectory of social policy in Egypt from independence to the present. It critically examines the conceptual foundations and institutional legacies that have shaped policy decisions over time, with a particular focus on the persistence of path dependence, where past priorities and ideologies continue to shape present-day policymaking. Our research demonstrates that Egypt's century-long history of social policy has been deeply marked by

path dependence, where past priorities, ideologies, and institutional choices continue to shape present decisions. While this continuity has offered stability, it has also constrained innovation, often sidelining transformative and gender-equitable approaches. In light of post-COVID challenges, this entrenched path dependence poses a serious obstacle to reimagining social policy. To build an inclusive, gender-equitable, and transformational future, Egypt must move beyond inherited frameworks and reorient priorities. Policymakers committed to progress should embrace bold reforms that challenge outdated paradigms, center gender equity. Only by breaking free from the confines of path dependence can Egypt unlock its full potential for transformative and equitable social development.

## Introduction

A defining feature of path-dependent policymaking is the misalignment between historical priorities and contemporary needs. Under this approach, contemporary practices are often shaped by the logic of earlier policies even when those logics have lost relevance or become counterproductive over time. In Egypt, a lower-middle-income country, the challenges of social policy are particularly complex. Historically, policymaking has treated society and the economy as separate domains, with priority given to

economic agendas. Social policy was frequently positioned as a corrective tool to mitigate the negative consequences of short-term economic measures, resulting in an ad-hoc, reactive approach. This orientation has anchored social policy in traditional frameworks that emphasise protection of the vulnerable rather than proactive strategies for transformation.

Today, Egypt's social policymaking continues to reflect significant gaps: inconsistencies between law

and practice, reactive policy responses rooted in an authoritarian social contract, and entrenched gender hierarchies reinforced by the state's centralised nature. While Egypt remains far from achieving gender equity or embracing transformative mindsets, the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the urgency of change. It demonstrated the need to recognise the inseparability of the social and the economic, as well as the primacy of the social in driving sustainable economic outcomes.

This policy brief critically examines the weaknesses of social policy across successive presidential eras in Egypt, highlighting the necessity of a more democratic and inclusive social contract in the post-COVID context. It traces gendered assumptions embedded in Egypt's policymaking history and underscores the importance of institutional reform to address structural inequalities through an intersectional lens. Only by confronting these legacies can Egypt move towards genuinely transformative and gender-equitable social policies.

## Methodological Approach

The research informing this policy brief employed a mixed qualitative approach, combining desk research with semi-structured interviews to conduct a historical analysis of social policymaking in Egypt. The desk research involved a comprehensive review of both primary and secondary sources, including newspaper archives, legislative texts, various iterations of the Egyptian Constitution, the website and official publications from the State Information Service, policy documents and scholarly literature such as journal articles, books and academic reports.

To complement the documentary analysis, seven semi-structured interviews were carried out with social and economic researchers, experts, and historians. Field visits were also conducted to socioeconomic research centres in Cairo, allowing for deeper engagement with local knowledge and perspectives. Throughout the process, the research team applied a gender-equitable lens, ensuring that historical analysis and policy interpretation were attentive to gendered dimensions of social policy and their implications for equity and transformation.

## Past Promises vs. Present Conditions

In the early post-independence period, the state guaranteed public employment for all graduates of secondary schools and universities. This commit-

ment, formalised through a law and supported by the nationalisation of numerous foreign, medium, and large enterprises, was framed as a socialist, nation-building measure to address colonial-era injustices.

While this policy had a clear rationale in 1964, it lacked forward-looking strategies to absorb the rapidly growing number of graduates. What began as a promise of opportunity gradually became an untenable expectation. Within Egypt's path-dependent policymaking framework, successive presidents maintained the guarantee but extended waiting times: the graduating class of 1979 waited three years for public employment, while the class of 1985 faced a decade-long delay.

By the early 1990s, amid mounting fiscal pressures and broader structural adjustments, President Hosni Mubarak was compelled to formally revoke the employment guarantee. The policy's collapse not only underscored the limits of path dependence but also revealed the high costs of clinging to outdated promises in the face of shifting socio-economic realities.

## Problems with Bureaucracy

A major factor exacerbating the disconnect between past policy promises and present realities is Egypt's sprawling and often inefficient bureaucratic apparatus. Much like the law guaranteeing employment, many social policies, regardless of their merit, exist primarily on paper, with limited practical enforcement. A striking example is the legal requirement for private sector entities employing more than 99 women to establish on-site nurseries. Intended to support female caregivers in balancing work and family responsibilities, this policy is routinely circumvented. Employers often underreport the number of female employees to avoid compliance, thereby denying women not only childcare support but also access to social insurance and pensions, deepening long-term gendered inequalities.

Bureaucracy also acts as a barrier to accessing social support. For many citizens, obtaining official documentation is a lengthy, opaque, and often humiliating process, especially for those without personal connections within the system. Women in particular face compounded challenges. In the 1970s, for example, 55% of women eligible for social assistance lacked the necessary documents to claim it.

Eligibility criteria for certain benefits were also deeply invasive and discriminatory. Widowed women over 50 seeking ‘chastity pensions’ were required to undergo physical examinations and submit medical proof of sexual inactivity. Similar requirements applied to divorced women over 40, reflecting a deeply patriarchal and moralistic approach to social welfare.

Beyond procedural hurdles, documentation requirements have enabled exploitation, especially among populations with high illiteracy rates. In 2017, Egypt’s overall illiteracy rate stood at 25.8%, with 30.8% among women and higher prevalence in rural areas. Programmes like the Takaful cash transfer initiative (launched in 2016 and targeted at female-headed households) have been vulnerable to manipulation. In some rural communities, tech-savvy young men have exploited the system by either falsely claiming to apply on behalf of women or withholding their national ID cards to extort a portion of the cash benefits.

These examples underscore the urgent need for bureaucratic reform and gender-sensitive policy implementation. Without addressing these systemic barriers, even well-intentioned policies risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to resolve.

## Putting a Human Face to Policies

In its efforts to initiate change within a path-dependent policy environment, the Egyptian state has often sought legitimacy by aligning with international agendas and projecting progressive policies. However, these attempts have frequently relied on symbolic gestures rather than substantive reform. Progressive policies have been enacted without adequate cultural contextualisation, public consultation, or structural implementation, thus rendering them vulnerable to backlash and limited in their transformative potential.

A notable example is the personalisation of women’s rights reforms during the 1970s, which became closely associated with the then First Lady, Jehan Sadat. The reforms, popularly known as the “Jehan Laws,” granted women greater autonomy in personal status matters (such as divorce) and political participation (including a quota of 30 parliamentary seats). These changes followed Jehan Sadat’s involvement in UN international women’s conferences and her charitable work.

Yet, the framing of women’s empowerment through the lens of elite, non-political activism subtly reinforced the notion that accomplished women should remain within the bounds of charity and social welfare, rather than engage in political or structural change.

This trend continued under Suzanne Mubarak, who became the emblem of state-led women’s rights advocacy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. As chair of the National Council for Women, she institutionalised a top-down approach to gender policy, one that reflected the state’s vision rather than the priorities of civil society. When the Mubarak regime was overthrown during the January 2011 revolution, this model of state feminism faced a significant setback.

“Many male-dominated groups viewed the advancement of women’s rights under Mubarak as a threat to male privilege, and the regime’s collapse was seen by some as an opportunity to “restore” men’s rights.”

Between 2011 and 2018, Egypt witnessed a public absence of first ladies and a temporary retreat from the personalisation of gender policy. However, this culture may be re-emerging. Entissar Amer, wife of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, has begun making media appearances that signal state interest in gender equality and women’s roles. While such visibility of the first lady may suggest renewed government commitment, the risk remains that gender policy will once again be shaped by symbolic representation rather than inclusive, consultative, and structurally embedded reform.

## Overcoming the Silent Treatment

Egypt’s policymaking, whether prompted by external pressures such as loan conditionalities or internal unrest like mass dissent, are frequently accompanied by a troubling absence of public communication. This lack of transparency fosters widespread mistrust, not only in the policies themselves but also in the intentions behind them. The consequences are often far-reaching, particularly in times of socio-economic instability.

Failure to communicate policy is especially troubling given Egypt's current economic conditions. Since March 2022, the Egyptian pound has lost over 70% of its value, external debt reached \$154.98 billion in 2022, and inflation soared to almost 34% by March 2023. The underlying structural economic decisions leading to these developments were taken without prior consultation, expert debate, or civil society engagement. Instead, policies were introduced suddenly, leaving citizens in a state of precarity and uncertainty, a situation described by many as a public sense of "impending doom."

Subsidy reform illustrates the problem vividly. For generations, food subsidies have been understood as a citizenship right under Egypt's welfare model. Overnight cuts therefore, provoked intense frustration, particularly among the nearly 30% of Egyptians living below the poverty line in 2019/2020. Currency devaluations have also sharply driven up food prices, disproportionately affecting the poorest households. For example, food and beverage prices increased by 62.7% in 2023, with monthly spikes of 5.3% for basic goods such as meat, poultry, seafood, and dairy. As observed during the COVID-19 crisis, the immediate coping strategy among vulnerable households is often to reduce food consumption, with devastating long-term effects on health and wellbeing. If such sacrifices are to be demanded of citizens, they deserve at least to be informed or, ideally, persuaded beforehand.

These challenges are compounded by a piecemeal, opaque approach to social programmes. For example, the Takaful cash transfer programme was designed to link benefits to conditions in education and health, encouraging school attendance and health monitoring of children. However, conditionalities were not enforced among the 3.11 million beneficiary households, and assistance was distributed without follow-up, reinforcing the perception of social support as an unconditional right rather than a structured pathway out of poverty.

In short, the state's "silent treatment" undermines both trust and effectiveness in policymaking.

## Conclusion

Egypt's social policy landscape has been profoundly shaped by its historical trajectories, with path dependence continuing to influence present-day policymaking. Social service provision has largely

been reactive, shaped by economic imperatives and external conditionalities, rather than proactive, inclusive, or transformative. While path-dependent systems are inherently resistant to change, the COVID-19 pandemic may have opened a critical window for rethinking and reshaping the future of social policy in Egypt.

Moving toward a transformative and gender-equitable policy framework requires more than incremental reform. It demands a fundamental ideological shift from viewing social policy as a safety net for the "deserving poor" to recognising it as a strategic investment in human capital and inclusive development. This shift entails reimagining the relationship between the economic and social sector, acknowledging their interdependence, and designing policies that reflect this reality.

Also, a new social contract is needed to foster participation, transparency, cooperation, and trust as well as to actively dismantle entrenched patriarchal structures. In a predominantly patriarchal society, achieving gender equity will require deliberate efforts that dislodge structural discrimination, particularly in employment and access to services, to make way for a more just and resilient post-COVID future.

## Recommendations

To support a gender-equitable and transformative social policy agenda in Egypt, we recommend the following:

- **Advancing gender equality** by addressing structural discrimination and embedding equity across all policy sectors.
- **Breaking from path dependence** by critically reassessing the unintended consequences of past priorities and adopting forward-looking strategies.
- **Modernising bureaucracy** to reduce inefficiencies, ensuring accessibility, while minimising opportunities for exploitation.
- **Engaging civil society** as a legitimate partner in policy dialogue and reform implementation.
- **Promoting transparency and dialogue** by communicating the ideological foundations of policies, acknowledging alternatives, and having the courage to challenge the status quo.

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