

# Adapting to absence: Understanding the impacts of male migration on wives and children in Egyptian households

## CASE STUDY



### SUMMARY

This case study summarises the findings of MIDEQ's research into the impacts of male migration to Jordan on Egyptian households, focusing on wives and children in Upper Egypt. It reveals challenges such as emotional strains, as well as opportunities for resilience and agency. Through qualitative interviews, the research highlights families' capacity to adapt and thrive amidst adversity, underscoring the importance of supportive environments and collective networks for migrant families to navigate migration experiences.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

The absence of husbands and fathers due to migration has complex effects on Egyptian households, influencing family dynamics and individual experiences.

Despite challenges, families exhibit resilience and agency, with wives taking on expanded roles and children demonstrating maturity and adaptability.

Maintaining communication channels is crucial in mitigating the challenges of migration and for fostering positive experiences for families.

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This photo was taken by Ali Zaraq and Farah Hallabeh in Delga village, Upper Egypt.

## Introduction

This case study summarises the findings of MIDEQ's research into the multifaceted effects of male migrant absence on wives and children within Egyptian households. It highlights various impacts, both positive and negative, on family dynamics and individual experiences. The absence of husbands and fathers creates a unique liminal space in which migrant's wives find themselves navigating between traditional gender roles and opportunities for empowerment. The perceptions of women, their families, and the community intricately shape the expected behaviours and roles of a migrant's wife. Consequently, husbands are paradoxically both 'absent' and 'present' in their influence on women's bodily autonomy, influencing choices related to dress and appearance, among other aspects of their lives.

Furthermore, this case study highlights the role of children within this dynamic and the ripple effects of male migrant absence on their lives. It shows how children are impacted by the absence or presence of their fathers, examining changes in familial interactions, and assessing the implications for their future prospects and choices. By examining the experiences of both wives and children, this case study illustrates the complex dynamics at play within Egyptian families affected by male migration.

## Background on Egyptian migration

Migration has been a significant phenomenon in Egyptian society since the early 1970s, spurred by a confluence of factors including the oil boom in Gulf countries and the implementation of liberal policies and structural adjustment programs. Encouraged by Egyptian authorities, many men sought job opportunities abroad, with Jordan emerging as a prominent destination alongside Saudi Arabia. Over four decades, Jordan has hosted a substantial number of Egyptian labour migrants, primarily in [service, agriculture, and construction sectors](#).

Only Egyptian male workers are permitted to travel to Jordan to seek employment. Usually, these migrants are young, moderately skilled individuals who are unable to bring their families along due to administrative limitations imposed by the Jordanian authorities. Despite migrating alone, these young men serve as crucial breadwinners for their families left behind in Egypt, supporting not only spouses and children but also parents, siblings, and other relatives through remittances sent back home.

## Methodology

This case study is based on the insights obtained through interviews conducted with children and wives of Egyptian migrants. The interviews took place in Dalga village in the Minya Governorate and El Quseyya in the Assiut Governorate in Upper Egypt (Şa'īd Mişr), which is the main source of Egyptian labourers in Jordan.

Participants were selected through two methods: recruitment by fixers with access to families in a specific location in Upper Egypt and the snowballing technique. The fixers played a key role in identifying potential participants and facilitating their inclusion in the study.

### Sample:

A total of 20 interviews were conducted, distributed among three specific participant groups: returnee migrants, children, and women. The breakdown of interviews within each group is as follows:

- Children
  - » 10 interviews (including one with two siblings) were conducted with children using three participatory interactive tools: "A day in the life of," "Flower map," and "Migrant map." These tools aimed to create an engaging and age-appropriate environment for children to express their thoughts and experiences related to their father's migration.

- Women
  - » 10 interviews were conducted with wives of male migrants, focusing on capturing the perspectives of women who remained in Upper Egypt while their husbands worked abroad.

The average number of offspring per women is approximately six, with the majority falling within the age range of children and adolescents. Half of the women respondents reported being members of extended families residing in the same household, while the remaining half have relocated and now reside in separate residences.

## Deciding to remain in Egypt

The decision of Egyptian families to remain in Egypt when husbands or fathers migrate to Jordan is influenced by a complex array of socioeconomic, policy-related, and emotional factors.

*Policy factors:* Jordanian policies impose strict restrictions on Egyptian workers bringing their families to Jordan or visiting them. These regulations include requirements such as registration with the Social Security Corporation, a minimum monthly income threshold, or holding an investor card. Moreover, workers in certain sectors, such as agriculture, cleaning, loading, and unloading, are excluded from allowing their families to visit. Even if these conditions are met, Jordanian authorities retain discretionary power to deny entry to the worker's family, adding another layer of uncertainty to the migration decision.

*High cost of living and healthcare:* Jordan's higher cost of living and healthcare expenses pose significant financial challenges for migrant families. Sustaining themselves in Jordan becomes particularly difficult if the primary breadwinner's income is insufficient to cover these expenses. It is considered more advantageous for the family of migrant workers to remain in Egypt rather than relocating to Jordan. One Jordanian Dinar (equivalent to approximately 1.4 USD) can be exchanged for 43.58 Egyptian pounds (as of February 2024), and the exchange rate is often more favourable on the black market. Therefore, migrant workers can potentially support their families more effectively by sending remittances back home.

*Challenges in working conditions and housing:* Migrant workers, including those from Egypt, often encounter poor working conditions in Jordan. Many reside in shared and often substandard housing arrangements with other migrant workers, making migration less appealing to families due to concerns about living standards.

*Emotional and social factors:* Moving to a new country can be emotionally challenging, especially if families feel isolated from their extended family and community back in Egypt. The sense of alienation experienced by some families can lead to feelings of loneliness and disconnection, further complicating the decision to migrate.

## Research findings on women who stay back

### Gender roles and household management

The qualitative data obtained from shared narratives sheds light on the multifaceted nature of gender roles within Egyptian households affected by male migration. These accounts reveal the adjustments and expansions in responsibilities experienced by women when their husbands are absent, reflecting both the challenges and complexities inherent in their roles within the family structure.

Wives of Egyptian migrant workers find themselves navigating a delicate balance between societal expectations and the practical constraints of their communities. Limited work opportunities and educational options often confine them to traditional roles as primary caregivers and homemakers. While some may derive a sense of fulfilment or duty from these roles, adherence to traditional gender norms can also constrain their agency and reinforce societal expectations.

Despite their primary roles as caregivers and homemakers, wives of migrant workers often shoulder additional responsibilities, such as caring for elderly relatives and managing household finances. These expanded roles reflect the evolving dynamics within extended families, where women serve as the linchpin holding the family together in the absence of male support.

*"I consider myself both, the kids' mother and father at the same time. I mean, for example, as the father, I might scold, argue, or even hit them, but if their father was here, only a look from him might solve the matter. The issue is like this with the matter of raising the children; he takes his responsibility, and of course, he has other roles as well, and he spends as he pleases. I mean, he takes care of everything. When he spends two or three months here, I feel psychologically relieved."*

- Egyptian wife, 29 years.

The absence of male figures due to migration prompts women to assume roles traditionally associated with men, fostering a sense of self-reliance and adaptation in gender roles. However, the emotional and communicative presence of husbands, despite their physical absence, adds layers of complexity to their experiences.

Extended family members play a crucial role in providing support to these women, with the cultural structure facilitating collective responsibility and easing some of their burdens. Despite the challenges they face, the narratives of these women highlight their resilience and adaptability as they navigate the intricate web of gender roles and household management in the context of male migration.

### Agency

The influence of a husband's migration on the agency and empowerment of wives who remain in Egypt is multifaceted and reveals various dimensions of decision-making and resource management within

households. One notable aspect is the responsibility assumed by wives in managing the funds transferred by their husbands. While the exact proportion of income transferred is unclear, wives often play a central role in decision-making regarding the distribution and use of remittances, collaborating with their husbands in a process characterized by mutual consensus and efficient communication. Despite societal stereotypes about women's spending habits, wives demonstrate autonomy and adaptability in financial management, prioritizing family needs and adapting to evolving circumstances.

Moreover, wives exhibit agency in major financial decisions, such as investments in land or housing. While husbands may take the lead in some cases, wives actively participate in decision-making processes, alongside other family members, reflecting a collaborative approach to financial planning. Additionally, women engage in communal savings initiatives like "Gum'ieh," demonstrating proactive resource allocation and a commitment to improving decision-making abilities within their communities. Their involvement extends beyond financial matters to include decisions about migration, where wives express preferences to remain in Egypt to avoid unfamiliarity and maintain connections with local communities and extended families.

Despite facing restrictions on joining their husbands abroad, wives assert their preferences and participate in determining migration timelines, highlighting their role in shaping family decisions. While they may express reluctance to oppose their husbands' desires, wives play a significant role in negotiating the timing of returns and the migration of their children, considering economic circumstances and future prospects. Overall, the data underscores the agency and flexibility of wives in managing financial affairs and family dynamics in the absence of their migrant husbands, challenging traditional gender roles and assumptions about women's roles within households.

## Mobility

The mobility of wives in the absence of their husbands is restricted and guided by societal norms and practical considerations. Most wives refrain from moving around without their husbands, reserving solo outings for essential needs only. When necessary, they prefer to be accompanied by a male family member, such as a husband's sister, for support and companionship, particularly in situations like attending to a child's illness or dealing with external tasks. This reliance on male companionship reflects traditional gender norms and the expectation for women to prioritize domestic responsibilities over external engagements.

The presence of women within extended family networks provides some support in managing external tasks, as other male family members can handle responsibilities outside the home while wives focus on domestic duties. However, this arrangement also limits the autonomy and mobility of women, reinforcing their dependence on male relatives for assistance. Social conventions further dictate the places frequented by women, with certain establishments like beauty salons being off-limits in the absence of their husbands. The emphasis on modesty and discretion contributes to the creation of

a conservative image, aligning with societal expectations of women's behaviour during their husbands' absence.

Practical constraints, such as the lack of public services and transportation in rural areas, further restrict women's mobility. The absence of social centres and amenities in villages discourages women from venturing beyond their immediate surroundings, as accessing urban areas requires transportation that is often unavailable. Concerns about harassment or inconvenience in public transportation serve as additional deterrents, highlighting the complex interplay of societal norms and practical challenges in shaping women's mobility patterns.

## Research findings on the children who stay back

### Roles in the household

The migration of fathers for work significantly reshapes family dynamics, leading children to assume substantial roles within the household structure. Both boys and girls step into responsibilities traditionally reserved for adults, extending beyond mere chores to encompass emotional support, financial contributions, and social engagement.

*Household chores and family support:* Older sons become pivotal figures in supporting their families during their fathers' absence. They take charge of caring for younger siblings, assisting with household tasks, and offering emotional assistance to their mothers. This includes resolving conflicts among siblings and aiding in tasks delegated by their mothers.

*"If my sisters and brothers are ever quarreling with each other, I resolve the issue between them. Also, sometimes I help them with tasks like washing and bringing the water bucket, and I assist them in cleaning the floor as my mom instructs me, and my sisters help me too."*

- Boy, 13 years old

Girls also play crucial roles in assisting their mothers with household chores, including cooking, cleaning, and looking after younger siblings. Additionally, they may undertake responsibilities such as caring for elderly family members, ensuring their comfort and meeting their daily needs.



Daily life exercise with girl, 11 years

**Social contribution:** Social events hold significant importance in Egyptian culture, and in the absence of their fathers, older sons often represent the family at such gatherings. They attend weddings and other social functions on behalf of their fathers, maintaining the family's social presence and connections.

**Financial contributions:** As they mature, boys begin to shoulder financial responsibilities to support the family. This may involve working in family businesses or seeking employment opportunities in urban areas. Many boys start work as early as 16 years old, contributing to the household income and alleviating the financial strain on their mothers.

*"All I do is wake up in the morning and go to work. When I come back, I don't do anything; I just go to sleep at around one o'clock whenever I feel sleepy. You just help with the household expenses: I help. I couldn't tell my mother to give me money or anything. I got used to working."*

- Egyptian boy, 17 years old

Some girls also contribute to the family income, especially during harvest seasons or when additional labour is needed for agricultural activities. They work alongside their brothers, aiding in financially sustaining the family. Both boys and girls participate in agricultural tasks, assisting with watering the land, tending to crops, and caring for livestock, instilling a sense of responsibility and work ethic from a young age.

*"Sometimes when there's a harvest, I work for hours, for example, with beans and clover. Yes, we earn money, meaning from six in the morning until before sunset, about an hour or half an hour, fifty Egyptian pounds per day."*

- Two sisters, 12 and 13 years old

**Emotional support and coping mechanisms:** In the absence of their fathers, children also become primary sources of emotional support for their mothers and siblings. They offer reassurance, companionship, and empathy, helping to mitigate the emotional toll of separation and fostering a sense of solidarity within the family unit. Older siblings, in particular, often take on the role of confidants and mentors to their younger brothers and sisters, providing guidance and encouragement during challenging times. Through their emotional resilience and empathy, children demonstrate remarkable adaptability in navigating the complexities of familial separation, contributing to the overall cohesion and well-being of the household.



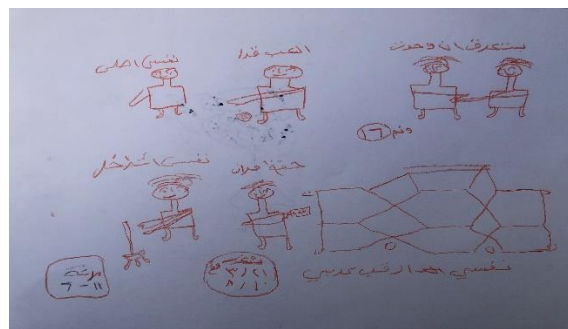
Flower map exercise with children

## Agency and mobility

The absence of a parent due to migration presents diverse challenges for children but also fosters opportunities for them to develop their mobility and agency. During this period, children often turn to family members, such as mothers, uncles, and grandparents, for emotional support and guidance, finding security and stability within familial connections.

In the intricate web of familial dynamics shaped by migration from Egypt to Jordan, both migrant fathers and their children demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the process. Rather than viewing migration as abandonment, fathers departing for Jordan prioritize their children's well-being, with aspirations centred around their children remaining in Egypt.

**Parental aspirations and economic benefits:** Migration journeys to Jordan are deeply intertwined with fathers' aspirations for their children's future. Migration offers economic opportunities, enabling fathers to send remittances that enhance their families' financial stability, affording access to education, nutrition, and healthcare. Their aspirations also extending beyond economic endeavours to include housing and marriage preparations.



Daily life exercise with boy, 11 years

**Distance Parenting:** Long-distance parenting necessitates consistent communication to uphold [parental involvement despite physical separation](#). Fathers utilize various technologies to sustain ongoing contact with their children, thereby nurturing emotional bonds that transcend geographical barriers. Video calls, in particular, replicate presence and intensify emotional connections, mitigating the effects of parental absence. Understanding the dynamic between parental presence and absence underscores the significance of fostering positive experiences and maintaining open communication channels. By embracing technology and cultivating supportive environments, families can effectively navigate the complexities of migration while prioritizing the well-being and empowerment of their children. Ultimately, the experiences of Egyptian children enduring their fathers' migration underscore resilience and agency within familial dynamics shaped by mobility, underscoring the pivotal role of communication and support systems in addressing migration challenges.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this case study provides insights into the findings of MIDEQ's research on the complex and multifaceted impacts of male migration on both wives and children within Egyptian households. Through an examination of interviews and analyses conducted in Upper Egypt, we explored the intricate dynamics shaped by migration to Jordan, uncovering a spectrum of challenges and opportunities for families affected by this phenomenon.

Socially, the absence of fathers can disrupt familial structures and community connections, leading to feelings of isolation and alienation. Emotionally, both wives and children may grapple with feelings of loneliness, longing, and the strain of maintaining relationships across geographical distances. However, amidst these challenges, the absence of migrant fathers also presents opportunities for resilience and agency within families. Wives often demonstrate remarkable strength and adaptability as they navigate the responsibilities of managing households, finances, and familial relationships in their husbands' absence.

Similarly, children emerge as resilient individuals, taking on significant roles within the family structure and showcasing maturity beyond their years as they support their mothers and siblings. Furthermore, the absence of migrant fathers can foster a sense of agency among wives and children, empowering them to make decisions and take actions that contribute to their family's well-being. Whether

through financial contributions, emotional support, or active participation in household responsibilities, wives and children demonstrate their capacity to adapt and thrive in the face of adversity.

Through qualitative interviews and analyses conducted in Upper Egypt, we gained valuable insights into the resilience, agency, and strength exhibited by families affected by migration. The findings highlight the multifaceted nature of migration's impact, illustrating how families navigate and negotiate various socio-economic, cultural, and emotional dynamics in the absence of male figures.

From the renegotiation of gender roles and household management to the pivotal roles assumed by children in supporting their families, the study underscores the diverse ways in which families adapt and thrive amidst adversity. Moreover, the case study sheds light on the importance of collective support networks and community resilience in mitigating the effects of migration. Through mutual assistance, shared responsibilities, and a sense of solidarity, families demonstrate their capacity to overcome challenges.

By acknowledging both the challenges and opportunities presented by migration, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities involved and the strengths inherent within migrant families. Moving forward, it is essential to foster more inclusive and supportive environments for migrant families, empowering them to navigate the migration experience with resilience and agency.

## Partners

Information and Research Centre – King Hussein Foundation

## Funding

MIDEQ is funded by the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) [Grant Reference: ES/S007415/1]. The GCRF is a five-year £1.5 billion fund aimed at addressing the problems faced by developing countries.

(2024) Jordan: MIDEQ  
Case study: Coventry University.

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Coventry University, 2024

Ayman Halaseh, Hala Abu Taleb and Rawan Rbihat (2024) Jordan Adapting to Absence: Understanding the Impacts of Male Migration on Wives and Children in Egyptian Households, MIDEQ Case Study.