Early Marriage among Egyptian Students

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LEAD-IN:

An interesting phenomenon has been taking place in Cairo, Egypt. College students appear to be tying the knot earlier than the contemporary age. Mona Tawfik investigates.

STORY:

(MUSIC: “Egyptian national anthem”)

Welcome to Egypt; the home of the pyramids, the land of the pharaoh, and the place where…. people like getting married early.

(MUSIC: Embellir by Lee Maddeford)

It’s no secret that marriage is a requirement in the Egyptian culture. After graduating and finding jobs, couples in their mid or late twenties decide to have their big glorious wedding.

But recently, a new phenomenon has emerged. Couples are choosing to get married while they’re still enrolled in university. Just try browsing through a student’s social media website like facebook and you will see the number of pictures of students tying the knot.

According to Mr Maged Afifi, who teaches sociology to I-G-C-S-E students, this trend was last popular in the 1920’s and diminished in the 1950’s after the Egyptian culture became more modernized and less inclined to get married early.
But what constitutes an early marriage? Is there a specific age that separates an early marriage from a traditional one, or is it more complex than that?

AFIFI: “Early marriage is every marriage which takes place before the partners work - finish their education.” (0:11)

Most of the students I interviewed, including Mr Afifi, agreed that any marriage before the age of 25 is considered early.

Sara El Kady has a different view on the definition of an early marriage. She is twenty two years old, married, and has a daughter. She is currently doing her masters at A-U-C.

EL KADY: “I felt that the society actually gets to define early marriage by age, and I don’t think that early marriage should be defined by age. When you look at decades ago, the early marriage used to be from sixteen. But now things changed and they think that early twenties is an early age. But I think that early marriage has nothing to do with age, but it’s more of your readiness to take responsibility.” (0:30)

The current age of marriage in the United States is 28.3 for men, and 25.8 for women. But in the year 1960, it was 23 for men and 20 for women. This illustrates Sara’s point.

The question is whether or not early marriage is for everyone, and I got diverse opinions regarding the matter.

According to Zeina Asfour, a student at A-U-C who is currently twenty and engaged, there is no specific answer and every situation is different.
ASFOUR: “I’d say it depends. It depends on the kind of relationship the couple has; it depends on how well they know each other. It depends on whether she’s getting forced or he’s getting forced into marriage or not. So it mostly just depends on the couple and whether or not they will be able to manage their lives.” (0:24)

But, like most other things, early marriage has its pros and cons.

ASFOUR: “You’re still developing as a person, so you might be cutting your life short if you’re not making the right decision.”

(0:10)

The most popular concern over early marriage is the risk of divorce. New York Times writer, Tara Parker-Pope, wrote a book on marriage titled “For Better: The Science of a Good Marriage”.

(MUSIC: Undearneath the Leaves by John Vanderslice)

In her book, she cites studies that indicate that the risk of divorce significantly decreases if the marriage is after the age of twenty five. This is because sometimes the relationship is inherently over before the couple even decides to wed.

Ahmed Wagih, who is currently studying medicine at Cairo University, thinks that early marriage has disadvantages that have major consequences on a person’s life. He believed the main problem was the possibility of divorce after the couple grow up and realize they might want different things. He also mentioned another disadvantage.
WAGIH: “Somehow, this student or fresh graduate – he cannot balance or organize the time between establishing a family, or on the other hand continuing with his studies and establishing himself within his career. So he finds himself in the middle of a very long road, that he has to work harder and sacrifice the time with the family in order to make more money and establish himself career wise, or focus on with the family and not get the time to establish himself with his career. So it ends with one of two things: either mediocre parenting or mediocre career. Not something I would like, not something I would support, and it’s not something that the society should support.” (0:45)

Afifi mentioned a similar argument, which he believed is not exclusive to early marriage. He talked about how the most successful women he knew were considered the worst wives, and vice versa.

But Wagih and Afifi’s assumptions are not true for every case. There are exceptions.

El Kady told me about a friend of hers who got pregnant while studying at university.

(NAT SOUND: Children Playing and Laughing)

EL KADY: “I myself wouldn’t have been able to have a baby while studying as an undergraduate. I’m actually doing my masters but, as an undergraduate, the load is really hard for me to be able to take care of a baby and study. However, my friend, she’s about the same age but she got married when she was nineteen. She had a
baby right after she got married so she was studying and she had a baby. She was able to manage it and she was highest honors in A-U-C.” (0:28)

My interviewees also told me the benefits of an early marriage, which are things that might not be present in a later marriage.

**WAGIH:** “If I get married at the age of 30 or 35 I might not witness the marriage of my son or daughter, but if it’s earlier this gives me a better chance or longer life span to witness that, this is mainly the advantage.” (0:17)

Afifi agreed with Wagih’s statement.

**AFIFI:** “The only advantage –I believe- for early marriage, is that you are not old and you have your children grownups beside you. It’s the only advantage; that you are a father at the age of 52 and your daughter is 27. This is lovely.” (0:23)

Asfour and El Kady thought of different benefits.

**ASFOUR:** “The advantage is that you get to grow together; you get to build a life together.” (0:06)

**EL KADY:** “Well, I think that the earlier we get married, the more time we have to adjust our personalities with each other, we’re more compatible. When we’re still growing up our personalities are still shaping, so with your partner, so when you start shaping
your personality with your partner and try to aim to be the best
that you can be and definitely your partner will help you to be the
best you can be. So you’ll find support to be a better
person.”(0:28)

But the mystery is why this trend has increased in recent years. There are so many factors that
might be the cause. Society, religion, family, media, the culture. It could even be a mix of all
those factors at once.

WAGIH: “One of the biggest factors is parents. Parents insisting,
or parents manipulating them into the marriage. The other thing is
that maybe, religious wise, this person does not want to expose
himself to premarital relationships so they decide to cut it short
and take on with the road of marriage earlier. Maybe some people
take it for support or for the emotional side of it, that they need
someone to be with them, being attached to, being supportive to
them in whatever they’re doing.”(0:32)

Wagih just pointed out the elephant in the room. In the Egyptian culture, premarital sex is
forbidden. The possibility that this might be becoming a trend because of students who don’t
want to engage in forbidden activities is very high. Afifi also mentions this issue.

AFIFI: “They need to have an adult life, they can’t have it. You
know the problem here in the Islamic countries, is that every girl,
when she gets married, she should be a virgin. In the outside
world, this is not a condition, this is not a must. According to
religion and traditions and social trends, this is a must. This is 100% a problem if she is not a virgin when she gets married." (0:30)

(MUSIC: Instrumental by The Library Anns)

Afifi added that the concept of social pressure is more dominant in the ultra Islamic segments in Egypt, as well as the uneducated parts. He didn’t believe that the more liberal segments suffered from as much social pressure as others.

AFIFI: “Egyptian society -as a whole- believe that pushing girls away of home, by giving them off to husbands is a blessing.” (0:10)

Asfour mentioned the same theory, except she was talking about students.

ASFOUR: “Some people are getting forced into marriage or they think they have to get married early because they have to fit some sort of expectations out of society. And also, like, because of limitations of society itself, if you want to move up in a relationship, there is a step that has to be skipped in order to get there." (0:23)

El Kady mentioned a whole new factor; the media.

EL KADY: “Part of it maybe they found the right partner and they feel that they’re ready to actually become committed, and others might have been influenced by the issue of marriage, about women not finding husbands and they’re getting in their thirties. I think
the media definitely affected some peoples’ perception. In this case, some girls might be worried.... (trails off).”(0:29)

While she and I were talking, El Kady mentioned the show “Ayza Atgawez”. “Ayza Atgawez” in English means “I want to get married”. It was a comedy sitcom about a girl who desperately wanted to get married and kept receiving proposals from unfit men. It was very popular in Ramadan in the year 2011.

But Afifi disagreed and didn’t think that the media was the cause.

AFIFI: “Even the show “Ayza Atgawez” was showing a girl who was working. So she was at the right age. Because the concept is never created by the media; the concept is created at home.”(0:13)

And every home really does create its own concepts and values. When El Kady mentioned peoples’ reactions to her early marriage, one particularly interesting response stood out.

EL KADY: “My colleague in class when she knew I was engaged she told me ‘Really? You’re getting married? I don’t, I don’t get the idea of you getting married, I mean, it’s much better to have a boyfriend and enjoy your life and you’re not committed and..

*laughs* It was just so funny and that was the only funny comment (trails off).”(0:20)

This made us laugh, because it showed us the diversity of opinions regarding such a fluid topic like early marriage. Every case is unique and every person has a different way to perceive it.

I asked Afifi to predict where this trend will be in five years.
“It will increase! Unless the religious power vanished.” (0:06)

Even though the issue of marriage has never been related to politics, this time the two might be linked together.

(NAT SOUND: Islamic Call to Prayer)

Because of the new Islamic president in Egypt, the country is showing signs of turning into Islamic rule.

So the theory is that the number of early marriages in the future will be directly proportional to the power of the Islamic ruling. This is merely because if the Muslim Brotherhood achieve their wanted results, women might not be able to work. They would then have to focus on their own homes and perhaps resort to an early marriage.

But at the end of the day, these are all speculations and predictions. Who knows what is in store for Egypt tomorrow?

(NAT SOUND: Egyptian wedding music)

And despite these different opinions, the facts stay the same. What we do know is that the trend has returned, and that the sounds of festivities will still echo along the corners of Egypt’s capital.

(MUSIC fades out)

Interviewees, in order, are:

Mr. Maged Afifi
Sara El Kady
Zeina Asfour
And Ahmed Wagih
Additional information taken from foryourmarriage.org

The music used, in order, was:
Embrellir by Lee Maddeford
Undearneath the Leaves by John Vanderslice
And Instrumental by The Library Anns

I’m Mona Bassel Tawfik, and thank you for listening.