Transition Like an Egyptian: Investigating Transgender Experiences with Violence in Egypt

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Abstract

Transgender individuals in Egypt belong to marginalised communities that operate within a sensitive security context. This context is shaped by a complex interplay of legal, social, religious, and medical structures that perpetuate anti-transgender violence, threatening their existence in both public and private spheres. Despite the intricacies of their experiences within these violent frameworks, transgender issues remain largely invisible in academic literature, with only two studies employing participatory empirical methods to shed light on transgender experiences in Egypt. The experiences of transgender individuals in the country are notably complex and resist singular characterisation; even the term "transgender" lacks a generally accepted definition, with experiences varying significantly based on factors such as socio-economic class and family acceptance. Nonetheless, there are commonalities among these diverse experiences which contribute to a broader understanding of transgender issues in Egypt. This study adopts qualitative interdisciplinary approaches to address existing limitations by conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 transgender Egyptians. This methodology contextualises their experiences and analyses their interactions with the anti-transgender violent structures that shape their lives within the Arabic-speaking Middle East and North Africa (MENA) context, specifically in Egypt.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Gender Minorities, Participatory Research, Egypt, Intersectionality

Introduction

In the 1980s, Egyptian society, state institutions, and medical and religious establishments were introduced to the modern medical concept of "transsexualism" through the case of Sally Abdullah. Sally was a transgender woman and a medical student at the Islamic Al-Azhar University whose transition journey garnered significant debate among various stakeholders in Egypt. Often referred to as the "first transsexual woman in Egypt," Sally's case is likely not the first instance of a transgender individual in the country; however, it is the first to be extensively documented in the modern age of mass media (Skovguard-Peterson 1995). Before Sally's case, Egyptian society engaged with various non-conforming social identities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, predominantly within sex work spaces that were legalised until 1949. These identities included the *Khawal,* individuals assigned male at birth who assumed traditional female roles as dancers, and the *Hasangya* and *Aranb,* terms often used to describe individuals assigned male at birth who adopted effeminate social roles and engaged in sex work with other men (Hatata 2001; Nieuwkerk 2008).

Social identities categorised as *Khawal, Hasangya,* and *Aranb* were largely confined to sex work, which is perceived as immoral. They existed prior to the emergence of modern gender-affirming healthcare,[1] which assists individuals in both social and medical transitioning, and before the age of mass media. Therefore, these identities did not provoke the same level of discussion or debate regarding sex or gender identity that Sally's case did (Noralla 2021b). With Sally, the debate primarily centred on the medical and religious considerations of the possibility of transitioning from one sex to another. One faction, comprising Sally's doctors and the prosecution office tasked with investigating her transition, coined the term "psychological hermaphrodite" to explain what is now recognised as gender dysphoria. They argued that Sally's transition was justified because her brain rejected her body and that without medical intervention, she would be at increased risk of suicide (Velayati 2016; Uddin 2017; Usep et al. 2020). Sally herself defended her position in various media appearances by employing this medicalisation narrative, asserting that

she was born with a deficit and did not violate any laws or ethical standards, whether they pertain to religion, the state, or the medical syndicate (Ghanem 2013).

Conversely, another faction, led by Al-Azhar University and the Medical Syndicate, vehemently opposed Sally's transition and sought to delegitimise the idea of the "psychological hermaphrodite" as a valid rationale for medical transition. They ultimately succeeded in obtaining a fatwa from the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar,[2] Sheikh Tantawi,[3] in 1986, reaffirming that only individuals born with a "biological deficit," i.e., intersex[4] individuals, could medically transition. In contrast, those who experience mental distress and wish to transition for psychological reasons should seek therapy rather than surgical interventions. This ruling therefore excluded transgender individuals from access to gender-affirming medical care (Noralla 2023b).

Sally's narrative and the surrounding reactions foreshadowed the socio-religious and state-sanctioned violence that would be directed against transgender individuals in Egypt. Following her transition, Al-Azhar embarked on a campaign to delineate who was deemed deserving of access to gender-affirming healthcare. This effort culminated in the establishment by the Medical Syndicate, in 2003, of the first policy of violence against transgender individuals. The policy prohibited doctors from providing any medical treatments that would lead to "sex change," permitting only "sex correction" after conducting tests, including chromosomal assessments, to validate intersex status (Medical Syndicate 2003). Al-Azhar ensured that it was represented on the committee responsible for approving individuals for these medical treatments, effectively gatekeeping to prevent transgender individuals from accessing any official government-sponsored medical services (Noralla 2023b).

In addition to this policy of medical violence, Egyptian authorities have employed arbitrary interpretations of morality laws, such as Law 10/1961 and Law 175/2018,[5] to arrest and prosecute transgender individuals, subjecting them to mistreatment tantamount to torture while in detention, including forced anal examinations (Hamid 2017). Similarly, Egyptian authorities have enforced Al-Azhar's interpretations regarding legal gender recognition, which primarily pertain to intersex individuals, with the judiciary and the Ministry

of Interior acting as gatekeepers in determining who qualifies (Chahine 2023). The existence of legal documents that do not align with transgender individuals' gender identity renders them more vulnerable to social violence, including denial of access to housing, employment, education, and healthcare (Noralla, 2022). It is evident that the current status of transgender individuals in Egypt is characterised by multilayered, intersectional structures of violence that perpetuate a vicious cycle, confining them to a status akin to second-class citizens.

Research that addresses the experiences of transgender individuals with violence through empirical participatory methods has emerged over the past two decades. Initially, these studies focused on Western experiences of violence before expanding to regions such as Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia, among others (Shamrock et al. 2024; Veras de Sousa Mascena et al. 2024; Hiner, Garrido and Walters 2019; Stotzer 2009). While Egypt is unequivocally recognised as an African nation, its cultural, religious, and social evolution has fostered a closer alignment with its Arabic-speaking neighbours than with other countries on the continent. This alignment frequently results in Egypt being categorised within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, owing to its substantial geopolitical, cultural, and religious significance in this specific area. However, in Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region, such studies have been limited; only a few have appeared in recent years, primarily on migration studies, specifically concerning the experiences of transgender asylum seekers and refugees (Hale 2009). Notable contributions include Fadi Saleh's "Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender-Variant Refugees in Turkey" (2020), and Nisrine Chaer's "*Fadh, Sharaf* and Respectable Passing as New Frameworks for Understanding Transmasculinity in the MENA Region: Case Studies of Transmasculine Refugees in Lebanon" (2023). Another study that examines migration from an employment perspective is Kausar Yasmeen et al.'s article titled "GCC Transgender Labor Market Outcomes in GCC" (2024).

Lebanon represents an anomaly within the region, with its growing body of work on transgender experiences, particularly about healthcare and HIV. This includes Rachel L. Kaplan et al.'s studies on HIV prevalence and the demographic determinants of condomless receptive anal intercourse

among trans feminine individuals in Beirut (Kaplan, Veerina and El Khoury 2019; Kaplan, McGowan and Wagner 2016), as well as Wael Abdallah et al.'s "The Gender Affirming Surgery in a Conservative Religious Country: The Lebanese Experience" (2023). All these studies engage with the subject of violence against transgender individuals, whether through the lens of migration, asylum, conflict, or healthcare.

Unlike Lebanon, Egypt, the focus of this study, has only two studies that use empirical participatory research to explore the experiences of transgender individuals: Nora Noralla's (2024) "Access Denied: A Qualitative Study on Transgender Health Policy in Egypt" and Sophia Sherif's (2020) "Transgender Visibility/Invisibility: Navigating Cisnormative Structures and Discourses." Both studies are qualitative; the former addresses health-related violence against transgender individuals and the latter examines social violence and lived experiences.

Beyond these examples of empirical research, literature on transgender issues has largely been dominated by legal analyses of Islamic law and judicial decisions pertaining to transgender individuals. This body of literature primarily examines how contemporary Sharia interacts with the concept of "transgenderism" as an illness and often lacks an analysis of transgender identity or experience beyond this framework (Dabash 2023; Alipour 2017; Skovgaard-Peterson 1995). This literature exists in both Arabic and English, with findings that differ according to language. The Arabic literature tends to promote conversion therapy as the sole method for addressing transgender individuals' mental disorders, effectively advocating for interpretations of Sharia that prohibit gender-affirming healthcare (Helely 2019; Salah Almanaa et al. 2020). In contrast, the English-language literature is generally more accepting of transgender individuals, suggesting that Islam can accommodate everyone, including transgender individuals (Alipour 2017; Jean Veneuse 2019; Saqer 2018; Zaharin and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2020).

While there has been a slow expansion of transgender literature in Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region, empirical participatory research remains limited; it is either geographically restricted to Lebanon or thematically centred on migration and health. The present study aims to address this gap by employing qualitative participatory research methods to

examine transgender individuals' experiences with violence from an intersectional perspective. It seeks to elucidate how anti-transgender structures operate within the Egyptian context to perpetrate multilayered forms of violence against transgender individuals. This study seeks to answer two primary questions: How do transgender individuals perceive their identities? Additionally, how do violent anti-transgender structures operate and shape the experiences of transgender individuals as they navigate these challenges?

I use Egypt as a case study for Arabic-speaking MENA countries, given its unique position as a reflection of transgender experiences within the region. Egypt is home to some of the most prominent Sunni Islamic institutions globally, and its scholars are considered authoritative references for many Muslims.[6] Additionally, Egypt boasts the largest population among MENA countries, and its media content, including films, television series, and newspapers, has significantly shaped cultural narratives in the region over recent decades. Consequently, Egypt can provide valuable insights into the realities of transgender experiences within the region. However, it is crucial to recognise that each context is distinct, and this paper should serve only as an initial exploration of the issue.

Engaging a Marginalised Community in a Sensitive Security Context

For an extended period, the academic community regarded insider research with scepticism, operating under the assumption that only outsider research could ensure academic objectivity (Fleming 2018). However, this perspective has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, particularly in contexts where insider research constitutes the sole viable method for conducting investigations (Dwyer and Buckle 2009). This transformation is particularly evident in studies involving transgender individuals, who come together and form unique communities that are marginalised. Transgender persons frequently encounter stigma and criminalisation which impels their invisibility in public spaces and complicates their accessibility to external researchers. These circumstances have generated suspicion among Egyptian

transgender individuals towards outsiders seeking to conduct interviews, as extensive questioning may be perceived as intrusive or even interrogative.

Moreover, academic freedom in Egypt has experienced a notable decline in recent decades due to the increasingly authoritarian characteristics of the current military regime (Zain-Al-Dien 2016; Lindsey 2012; Fathy 2018). This regime has intensified its control over research institutions, thereby creating barriers for researchers interested in exploring subjects deemed taboo or illicit within the Egyptian context. Documented instances of legal harassment, arrest, conviction, and extrajudicial killings of both Egyptian and foreign researchers underscore the perilous environment for academic inquiry. A salient example is the case of Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old PhD student from Italy affiliated with Cambridge University, who was conducting field research on labour unions in Egypt at the time of his abduction and murder by state agents in 2019 (Saliba 2022). Other similar cases include those of Walid Salim, who was researching the Egyptian judiciary; Ahamed Samir, who focused on sexual and reproductive rights; and Patrick Zaki, who studied Christian minorities. All three were arrested and forcibly disappeared before reappearing at the National Security Public Prosecutor's Office charged with joining a terrorist group, among other accusations. They each spent time in prison without ever standing trial before being released, only to be confronted with travel bans. These cases represent just a few of the numerous incidents in which academics and researchers have encountered backlash for investigating topics that would reveal the country's severe human rights violations and the decline of the rule of law. The range of research topics that may lead to imprisonment or harm in Egypt is extensive (Abramson 2019).

Transgender issues are among the sensitive topics expressly frowned upon as a research focus, which effectively criminalises transgender identities. The Egyptian regime has faced substantial criticism for its persecution of this population. In light of these contextual challenges, I undertook two critical tasks: mitigating the risks associated with conducting gender research in Egypt and ensuring the safety of study participants. Engaging with transgender communities in Egypt and similar contexts necessitates extensive trust-building, often over several years, before community members are willing to participate. Establishing trust involves identifying the locations of

transgender individuals in Egypt, a task that often demands insider connections which many researchers lack. Many transgender Egyptians communicate solely in Arabic, which presents further challenges for Western researchers who lack proficiency in the local language (Sheblaq et al. 2019).

These conditions likely account for the limited participation of Egyptian transgender individuals in research, with the exception of the two already cited participatory empirical studies conducted by insiders. In my case, I occupy a position of privilege, having dedicated the past decade to transgender issues in the region and being a member of the Egyptian transgender community. Consequently, I drew upon pre-existing access to the transgender community and extended invitations to individual members to participate in this study. I used personal and professional networks to facilitate this engagement and employed secure social media platforms for direct communication. Furthermore, I relied on secure telecommunications to discuss sensitive topics related to the research and to conduct interviews (Brayda and Boyce 2014).

My relocation from Egypt to a Western country provides an added layer of security, allowing me to conduct and publish this research without fear of state persecution. While I recognise the privilege associated with my current situation, it is crucial to acknowledge that I began from a position of disadvantage, akin to that of the interviewed participants. Therefore, I endeavour to leverage my current privilege to amplify the voices of fellow transgender activists, community members, and scholars who may still find themselves in the disadvantaged positions I once experienced (Aburn, Gott and Hoare 2023).

Throughout the research process, I engaged in critical reflection regarding my privilege and positionality both within and outside academia (Adam 2013). My ability to be publicly identified with the research as well as to be known for carrying out this type of research is a consequence of a forced choice. As perceived by the study participants, this is a privilege which allows me to reside abroad, express my gender identity freely, and carry out my work without harassment from the state or society. While some may view exile as a form of disadvantage, many transgender individuals consider it aspirational, provided it facilitates their ability to express themselves without

constraint. Consequently, during interviews or focus groups, discussions often diverged from predetermined questions to explore potential avenues for immigration. These topics were familiar to me; as an activist, I recognised that many participants were beneficiaries of my grassroots programmes. Thus, a sense of solidarity developed between the study participants and me, fostering an environment conducive to open discussion on matters pertinent to this research and transgender issues more broadly.

A total of 15 participants from diverse backgrounds took part in this research, with seven identifying as trans women, two as trans men, three as non-binary, and two as having identities outside the Western spectrum. All participants provided oral informed consent, and their involvement was entirely voluntary. The interview questions were qualitative and open-ended, allowing participants to respond to and elaborate on topics of personal significance. Responding to me as an insider, participants expressed greater comfort in sharing additional information, believing that my familiarity and understanding of their context encouraged openness.

At the same time, as an insider, I risk allowing my own experiences and pre-existing beliefs to influence the interviews or research findings. Therefore, reflexive thinking was integral to my research endeavour. The primary objective of this study was to elaborate on the perspectives of marginalised and understudied communities rather than merely reflect on my personal experiences. To facilitate open and unrestricted dialogue, I adopted a minimally interventionist approach during interviews and focus group sessions, assuming the role of a listening observer. The insights derived from these interactions serve as the foundation for this research, with the literature review providing a contextual framework that highlights the various challenges faced by transgender individuals in Egypt. Thus, this research project represents a concerted effort to comprehend the complexities of transgender experiences of violence as elucidated through the narratives shared during interviews and focus groups, with a view to amplifying the voices of those who are frequently silenced by the state and society or rendered invisible by ongoing academic research.

Voices from the Community: What Is Transgender?

Establishing a definitive definition of the term "transgender" in Egypt poses significant challenges. This study aims to highlight perspectives from the Egyptian transgender community, which may employ terminology that differs from that used in Western societies or apply similar terms with distinct meanings, thereby enabling individuals to perceive themselves from alternative vantage points. Throughout the course of interviews, participants actively engaged in discussions regarding their understanding of transgender identity in Egypt and its broader implications for the transgender community at large. It is essential to acknowledge that the term "community" is used loosely here, as transgender individuals in Egypt belong to diverse social, economic, religious, and political groups, leading to varying experiences contingent upon group affiliation. Consequently, transgender experiences in Egypt are not monolithic; however, they do exhibit considerable intersectionality. Participants recognised that their experiences are unique to their specific contexts and differ significantly from those of individuals who identify as transgender in Western nations or countries with more extensive transgender rights. Ultimately, participants articulated three distinct definitions of the term "transgender."

The first definition aligns with the pathologisation of "transsexualism" that predominated in Western contexts before the emergence of depathologised definitions of transgender as an identity rather than a mental illness (Castro-Peraza et al. 2019). For participants within this framework, being transgender equates to being transsexual; it is perceived merely as a medicalised "journey" or "phase" from one binary to another. Participants expressed the belief that being transgender is a mental illness, or "because something is wrong with you." One participant articulated their rationale for this perspective as follows:

> It is not an identity or a choice; it was forced on me. I do not know about others, but I doubt anyone in Egypt would choose to have such a miserable life where you are outside the binary and everyone considers you immoral. This identity talk works for people in the West, where they have fundamental human rights, not here.[7]

The sentiment that it was "forced on me" was frequently articulated by participants to describe gender identity disorder as an inherent condition, one that they perceived to be beyond their control, rather than a choice. They often expressed this notion by stating that it was something they "were born with." This sentiment was echoed by the majority of participants, who agreed that being transgender is perceived more as a curse from which they cannot escape, rendering them immoral outcasts in society.

The second definition, which represented a minority viewpoint, originated from individuals who self-identified as activists or belonged to the upper class, which affords them greater exposure to Western culture. This group conceptualises being transgender as "the ability to identify and express oneself in any gender identity one wishes to adopt." However, even this group acknowledges the limitations of applying this definition within the Egyptian context, as prevailing conditions do not permit non-binary gender expressions. They also recognise that this definition is not widely accepted within the Egyptian transgender community, where the majority maintain that they are binary and transitioning due to mental illness. One participant from this group stated:

> Look, for me, being transgender is just feeling a certain gender expression, but I know there are many limitations on that in Egypt. Although I identify as trans-non-binary myself, I must maintain a binary expression most of the time because the conditions do not allow me to do otherwise. I also know that most transgender people in Egypt are transsexual and believe in pathologising.[8]

The third group consisted of two individuals and provided the most intriguing discussion. They were sex workers who identified themselves as "ladyboy" and "shemale." When asked whether they consider themselves trans women, they stated that they do not, asserting that they are simply men who take hormones and dress femininely for work:

> I would not say I am a trans woman, a woman, or whatever label. I am a man who is feminine for work. I prefer being called a ladyboy because I am a lady and a boy.[9]

This group may be regarded as the most gender-nonconforming among the three, as its members identified as men while simultaneously embracing a feminine gender expression. Notably, one individual even pursued hormone replacement therapy. While participants claimed to adopt a feminine

appearance solely for professional reasons, the potential influence of their social class and limited exposure to Western or medical terminologies cannot be overlooked. Nevertheless, when questioned about their use of terms such as "ladyboy" and "shemale," participants explained that these labels best encapsulate their identity and are familiar to their clientele, who perceive them as "women with male genitalia." Consequently, the use of such terminology aids them in attracting a broader client base.

The dynamics among the three groups are noteworthy. For instance, the first group perceived itself as the most legitimate representation of transgender identity. Some members were protective of this label and did not think it should be extended to those who do not undergo gender-affirming healthcare because this devalues their experiences:

> Do you want to tell me anyone can be transgender? I refuse to believe that. You cannot just wake up and decide to be transgender. It is a journey that involves changing your sex with medical means. Otherwise, you are not truly transgender.[10]

The second group acknowledged that their narrative on gender identity is often dismissed, as most members of the community prioritise more pressing concerns such as finding employment, accessing gender-affirming healthcare, and facing familial violence, rather than engaging with perspectives on gender. Thus, despite increasing awareness within the transgender community, discussions surrounding gender identity remain limited in scope. Additionally, a notable dynamic exists between individuals assigned male at birth (AMAB) and those assigned female at birth (AFAB). Most participants, 13 out of 15, were AMAB, which reflects the conservative nature of Egyptian society. Greater restrictions on mobility and independence are imposed on individuals AFAB since they are often perceived as potential sources of family dishonour. Consequently, they are closely monitored, which complicates their ability to transition if they wish. In contrast, AMAB individuals generally enjoy greater freedom of movement and independence due to their privileged status as perceived "males" within the patriarchal framework of Egyptian society. Nonetheless, the predominance of AMAB individuals in this sample does not imply that trans AFAB individuals are not a significant part of transgender communities; rather, it reflects a limitation in the sample's representation. Furthermore, AFAB individuals may experience a higher

likelihood of familial and societal acceptance if they transition to male, given the patriarchal values that tend to favour males over females in Egyptian society (Hajjaj 2020).

Finally, the third group felt the most marginalised due to their profession, as members of the other two groups, particularly the first, viewed them with suspicion:

> Other transgender people like to blame us for everything. You cannot see Dr. X anymore? It must be because of us. Are the police harassing you? It must be because of us. The idea is that we are giving a bad name to transgender people because now society thinks that all trans women are sex workers. However, you know what? From my experience, many transgender people are secretly sex workers but too ashamed to tell anyone.[11]

This critique of the moral high ground by transgender sex workers can be interpreted as their reproach to non-sex worker transgender individuals who seek socio-religious validation by distancing themselves from members of society perceived as the most deviant and immoral. Nonetheless, all groups concurred that pathologising represents the only viable approach for survival as a transgender person in Egypt, given that the State, religion, and society do not recognise any identities beyond the binary, including intersex individuals who are often coerced into undergoing surgeries to conform to binary norms. For transgender individuals, existing outside the binary within the Egyptian context could be perceived as suicidal, as it leads to consistent social, familial, and state violence against them. Individuals who are perceived as queer in their public expressions are particularly vulnerable to the multilayered forms of violence. The groups also agreed that society exclusively acknowledges one definition – transsexuality – rather than transgender identity. Society recognises only transsexual individuals who pursue gender-affirming healthcare "due to illness."

All groups agreed that to garner acceptance within Egyptian society, one must identify solely as transsexual. This entails acquiring the physical and social characteristics of the opposite sex and effectively fulfilling the newly acquired binary gender role. Ultimately, all groups concurred that despite this rigid social circumscription, defining what it means to be transgender in Egypt is not straightforward, as experiences vary considerably from person to person based on their individual circumstances. Some factors identified by

the groups as influencing the transgender experience include biological sex (male or female), social class, familial acceptance, economic empowerment, level of education, and social connections.

Violent Experiences

In discussions regarding the definition of "transgender," it became apparent that most participants associated this term with experiences of suffering and violence. They underscored the social and legal harassment encountered by individuals who deviate from the heteronormative binary. As previously outlined, transgender individuals face multilayered forms of violence that intersect to shape their experiences. Participants highlighted violence arising from the denial of fundamental human rights pertaining to employment, healthcare, housing and legal gender recognition, as well as subjection to state and social violence. They identified three primary phases during which transgender individuals are particularly vulnerable to violence:

> A. The coming-out phase, during which individuals risk familial violence and bullying in educational settings due to their desire to transition. They often encounter significant challenges in persuading family members that gender-affirming healthcare constitutes the most appropriate course of action. If rejected by their families, they must seek alternative sources of support.
>
> B. The in-between phase, characterised by the initiation of therapy and gender-affirming healthcare even though individuals are still far from achieving their desired gender presentation. This phase renders individuals particularly susceptible to social and state harassment due to their visible non-conformity.
>
> C. The final phase, in which individuals have completed their medical transition but must await the outcome of their legal gender recognition application.

While not all transgender persons may experience these three phases, there was a consensus among participants that these phases are typically encountered by "transsexuals" in Egypt. All participants reported navigating at least the initial phase of coming out to their families, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Some individuals were outed due to familial pressure and surveillance rather than by their own volition. A common experience cited by all was the social and legal harassment associated with their non-binary gender expression. They emphasised that those who do not conform to the

binary gender model are the most vulnerable throughout the transitioning process. Furthermore, transgender individuals who can pass as cisgender generally face fewer challenges compared to those who cannot. There is a lack of precise data regarding legal violence against transgender individuals; however, several local organisations have compiled information on the prosecution of LGBT+ individuals in Egypt. The primary legal instrument used in these cases is the anti-sex work law, number 10/1961. Additional laws invoked include public morality clauses found within the penal code and the new cybercrime law, number 175/2018 (Noralla 2021c).[12]

The majority of those arrested are queer AMABs, with trans women and cisgender queer men being the primary targets. According to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Freedoms, between 2013 and 2017, at least 232 individuals were arrested based on their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity; they faced prison sentences that ranged from six months to three years (Hamid 2017). In 2018, a significant crackdown was initiated following the display of a rainbow flag by activists at a rock concert in Cairo. This resulted in the arrest of 85 individuals within three months, which marked the most severe security crackdown against LGBT+ individuals in the nation's history (Ghoshal 2018).

In 2019, local organisations documented 92 arrests, while in 2022, the number decreased to 43, according to the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Freedoms (ElShekh 2023). In a context where NGOs' access to cases varies, the apparent decrease does not conclusively indicate a decline in the actual number of arrests. Items used by trans women to conform to societal gender norms, such as wigs and dresses, are often presented as evidence against them; potential sentences ranged from several months to multiple years, if convicted. During detention, transgender individuals frequently endure mistreatment that amounts to torture, including verbal abuse, sexual violence, and physical assaults. Additionally, transgender individuals may be subjected to prolonged solitary confinement due to discrepancies between their gender expression and legal identification documents. The perpetrators of such violence often include law enforcement officers and other inmates who are frequently encouraged by officers (Noralla 2021c). One participant recounted being arbitrarily detained for several days due to the mismatch between his legal identification and gender expression.

> In late 2019, I was returning home from work when a [police patrol] detained me. My heart sank; I anticipated a request for my identification. Upon presenting my ID to the officer, he verbally assaulted me, exclaiming, "Do you think I am stupid?" He subsequently ordered my arrest. At the police station, I endured physical abuse before being confined to an officer's office, where I was interrogated and informed that I would be required to spend several nights in a male detention facility to learn to conform to my assigned sex. I was placed in a cell with thirty men, and the officers instructed them to "have fun" at my expense. I was subjected to physical violence, sexual assault, and humiliation, including being urinated on. Four days later, I was released after a lawyer from a non-governmental organization presented documentation to the public prosecution office that validated my gender identity disorder.[13]

Medical violence represents a significant concern for transgender individuals in Egypt. Participants identified two predominant responses from parents of transgender children: the application of corporal punishment to enforce adherence to traditional gender roles and the imposition of conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a widespread and accepted practice among medical professionals in Egypt, with numerous physicians claiming they can "cure" transgender individuals and revert them to their biological sex (Schapiro and Gebeily 2021). One participant recounted:

> My parents observed that I exhibited behaviours typical of girls and engaged primarily with female peers during my childhood. Consequently, they sought the opinions of a neurologist and a psychiatrist to ascertain the underlying issues. Both professionals concluded that I exhibited certain character developmental issues that rendered me more effeminate. They determined that this condition could be treated with a combination of male hormones and extensive therapy sessions to restore my masculinity.[14]

Medical practitioners who endorse conversion therapy frequently exacerbate familial violence against transgender children by convincing parents that their child is "curable," and attributing any lack of progress to the child's alleged non-compliance. One participant articulated:

> My doctor's approach did not persuade me, prompting me to conduct an online search, which led me to discover that I have a Gender Identity Disorder. When I communicated to my parents my decision to discontinue seeing that psychiatrist, they reacted with panic; my mother was in tears, and my father was shouting, all praying for me to regain my senses. Ultimately, I felt compelled to leave home, as they were convinced that I was rejecting treatment.[15]

Survivors of conversion therapy who seek access to gender-affirming healthcare and appropriate therapeutic support encounter significant barriers. As previously noted, Al-Azhar has obstructed transgender individuals from obtaining gender-affirming healthcare through the sole official avenue, the sex correction committee. Consequently, transgender individuals are forced to turn to the underground market for essential healthcare services. An underground market consisting of private clinics, physicians, and psychiatrists has emerged to exploit this void, driven not by genuine concern for transgender individuals but by profit motives (Noralla 2021a).

Due to the limited number of medical professionals willing to accept transgender patients, these providers are not regulated by standardised pricing. Fees fluctuate based on patients' appearance or mannerisms; individuals perceived as more affluent may be charged higher fees. A physician's consultation can range from 400 to 1,500 EGP (approximately US$7,92–US$29,70). Monthly hormone therapy may cost 300 EGP (around US$5,94), while surgical procedures can vary from 50,000 to 100,000 EGP (approximately US$991,00–US$1,979.75).[16, 17]

Even those who have the privilege of accessing gender-affirming healthcare are not free from risk. The underground clinics providing such services frequently lack adequately trained personnel and are ill-equipped to deliver appropriate medical care. In 2021, a 26-year-old man named Ezz died due to medical complications following an early discharge from surgery. Given the "illegal" nature of the treatment, there was no documentation, which made it difficult to pursue justice for Ezz (Noralla 2021a).

For individuals who successfully navigate their transition, a significant challenge persists: the acquisition of legal gender recognition. In Egypt, the process for obtaining legal gender recognition is predominantly arbitrary and devoid of a formal legal framework. The quest to amend one's identification documents can engender considerable distress and anxiety for transgender individuals, as the state enforces conditions that spell precarity for their livelihoods. To apply for legal gender recognition, individuals are required to have fully transitioned, yet there is no guarantee that their documents will accurately represent their identity. While some individuals obtain approval from the civil registry and can amend their documentation with relative ease,

others face protracted judicial processes involving forensic examinations and extensive investigations by authorities. As one interviewee articulated:

> It is akin to Russian roulette, highly dependent on one's connections or ability to pass convincingly. Officials are unlikely to deny an application from a muscular man or an attractive woman. Conversely, if one lacks connections, obtaining document amendments can prove exceedingly challenging, resulting in a life spent in legal limbo, which is profoundly detrimental.[18]

Should the civil registry deny an application, the transgender individual may seek a judicial appeal in the administrative courts. However, these courts have consistently made unfavourable rulings, often based on narrow interpretations of Sharia as it pertains to transgender individuals. For instance, in 2016, Cairo's administrative court dismissed a legal gender recognition application filed by a trans man, asserting that he was classified as transgender rather than intersex; thus, his transition was deemed invalid under Sharia law:

> An examination of the fatwas related to this topic reveals that scholars have clearly prohibited individuals from undergoing sex change operations, allowing sex correction procedures only in cases of biological necessity. The plaintiff violated Sharia by undergoing sex change surgery, as she was born a healthy female and did not require surgical intervention. Even in cases of gender identity disorder, it is argued that treatment should focus on mental health support rather than physical alterations (Noralla 2023b).

Without the ability to change one's gender identification, individuals who have visibly socially or medically transitioned to the opposite sex confront interconnected forms of violence. Housing is a significant issue discussed by the participants, the majority of whom had already transitioned or were socially living outside the gender expectations associated with their sex assigned at birth and did not reside with their families. Being denied the basic right to housing is perceived by the participants as a fundamental factor contributing to the violence they experience. Participants reported being denied housing once landlords discovered their transgender status, often through the examination of their identification. One strategy used by participants to circumvent this discrimination is to ask a friend to lease a property on their behalf using their identification or to attempt to present

themselves to landlords as their sex assigned at birth. As one participant articulated:

> You simply cannot rent a place as a transgender person. The moment landlords discover that you are transgender, they start praying to Allah for forgiveness for even interacting with you. Your only hope is to ask someone to rent a place for you or to find a room in a supportive apartment.[19]

Regarding housing, some of the challenges that confront trans women are similar to those encountered by other women in the country. One of these relates to violence associated with living independently. In Egypt, women generally experience greater difficulty in renting accommodation for themselves, as well as harassment from neighbours and suspicion of being sex workers. Trans women encounter similar issues, with an increased risk of exposure due to being automatically labelled as "criminals." Trans women participants discussed how neighbours monitored them to ensure their "decency" and to ascertain that they are not sex workers. One participant recounted an incident where a neighbour reported her to the police solely because she lived alone and, according to the neighbour, dressed "provocatively."

> I suddenly found individuals vigorously knocking on my door. Upon opening it, I was met with the sight of numerous residents from the building and a police officer standing directly before me. He inquired whether I lived alone, and upon my affirmative response, he immediately requested to enter and examine my documentation. When I questioned the rationale behind this request, asking if it was illegal for me to reside alone, he responded that it was illegal to engage in prostitution and forcibly pushed me inside. Consequently, they deduced my transgender identity, and I was subsequently accused of being an imposter who seduces men for immoral purposes. I was taken to a police station while the entire building directed curses at me. I was released later that same day, yet I could not retrieve my belongings for fear of being assaulted.[20]

In addition to housing, another critical aspect of violence stemming from the incongruence between one's identification documents and gender expression pertains to employment. Without stable employment, individuals are unable to secure the financial resources for gender-affirming healthcare, housing, education, or basic living expenses, particularly as the majority of participants lack access to familial financial support. Consequently, economic violence constitutes a significant source of anxiety and instability for transgender

individuals, who often perceive themselves as akin to being on a hamster wheel, striving to earn sufficient funds for daily survival while struggling to save enough for transition-related costs. The economic violence faced by transgender individuals, already pronounced, is exacerbated by the absence of familial support for transition-related expenses. Egypt is currently confronting severe economic challenges which have resulted in a substantial devaluation of its currency. The inflation rate stands at 40%, with the minimum wage for government employees set at 3,500 EGP (US$69,29) per month, while the average wage is 4,480 EGP (US$88,69) per month, ranking among the lowest in the MENA region. Yet such salaries remain unattainable for many transgender individuals in Egypt, who encounter significant barriers in securing employment.

The disparity between one's gender identity and legal identification can lead to automatic disqualification from numerous employment opportunities. Some individuals are fortunate enough to have received adequate education, which enables them to access the international job market and secure well-paying online positions. For others, however, sex work is the sole viable means of financing their transition (Noralla 2023a). One participant stated:

> To be honest, you cannot transition with Egyptian salaries. The costs are enormous; you may have a family who will pay, or you may find an online job. One option many take is sex work. I started doing sex work when I was 20 to support myself after I had to leave home. It is a dangerous profession; you can encounter horrible clients and face the security risk of arrest. However, it was worth it; I managed to complete one surgery, and now I am saving to undergo the others.[21]

Interconnected forms of violence converge to shape the experiences of transgender individuals, creating what appears to be a cycle. This violence begins within the family, which may either disown them or attempt to convert them; it extends to medical violence manifested in the denial of access to gender-affirming healthcare, the exploitation of their needs in underground markets, or the commodification of conversion efforts. Furthermore, it encompasses legal violence, manifested through detentions, torture, and the denial of legal gender recognition. Ultimately, individuals are driven into a state of legal limbo, wherein they are unable to lead a functional daily life due

to the discrepancies between their identification documents and their gender expression. This results in marginalisation and poverty, with individuals unable to access basic necessities, such as housing, and reliant on the informal economy or sex work for survival. While access to education may also be hindered, the majority of participants transitioned after or near the completion of their education and managed to continue their studies at either technical or university levels. Consequently, educational violence was not discussed as extensively as medical, legal, economic, and housing violence.

Among all the conditions discussed, it is not surprising that during the interviews and focus group discussions, conversations frequently turned to immigration, particularly avenues for seeking asylum abroad. None of the participants, including those who continued to live as their sex assigned at birth, expressed a willingness to remain in Egypt. If the opportunity arose, they declared, they would leave to "be able to live the way they want." As holders of Egyptian passports, which are among the least powerful passports globally, and as individuals coming from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, they face limited options for immigration, and they primarily rely on the chance of obtaining a tourist visa or the fortunate ability to acquire the language skills necessary to apply for scholarships to study abroad. Discussions regarding these avenues often revealed the frustrations of most participants, who felt that all opportunities were being closed off to them, rendering even immigration seemingly unattainable. As one participant declared:

> Look, I know Europe isn't perfect, but anything would be better than the life we have here, to be honest. I would say all of us are tired; tired of being outcasts, tired of chasing after a penny, tired of being afraid to go out, just tired of living, you know. We want to live, and any place in Europe would be better than here.[22]

All participants were aware of individuals, aside from me, who had emigrated. While all acknowledged that applying for asylum, for instance, would entail hardships such as living in camps or recounting their emotional narratives to authorities in a host country, they still firmly believed that leaving was the only viable path forward. This highlights how the multilayered anti-transgender structures of violence have driven many transgender individuals in the country to a critical juncture, where the only perceived solution is emigration. While this perception is justified, participants also noted that life

in Egypt could be more manageable under two conditions: i) if they could pass as cisgender, and ii) if they could successfully alter their official documents. Otherwise, it becomes exhausting to continue navigating the forms of violence they face daily.

Conclusion

When I began this research, my goal was to create a platform for Egyptian transgender individuals to share their experiences. However, I quickly realised that such experiences are difficult to capture fully in a single academic paper. The existence of transgender individuals in Egypt is complex and multilayered. While this study highlights the violence that shapes these experiences, it is important to recognise that there are also narratives of innovation, activism, and survival. Additionally, most participants are AMABs, leaving the experiences of AFAB transgender individuals somewhat invisible. Nonetheless, this study lays the groundwork for future research by introducing new aspects of transgender experiences in Egypt and similar contexts across Arabic-speaking countries in the MENA region. It also highlights the lack of empirical participatory research in Egypt, which requires an insider connection to navigate the challenges of engaging with a marginalised community in a sensitive security context.

Through self-reflection, I question my motivations for this research. Am I driven by guilt from my privileged position compared to other transgender individuals? Am I motivated to amplify unheard voices? Is this engagement a way to better understand my identity through dialogues with participants? Or does my activist background inspire me to conduct research that assists transgender individuals in Egypt in reclaiming their rights? While I may not have clear answers to these questions, the following points are evident: my commitment to human rights, my identity as a transgender person from the MENA region, and my awareness of my privilege compared to my past life in Egypt drive my work as an academic researcher. They influence my research priorities, shaping my focus on issues I see as essential for transgender individuals in Egypt and the broader region. At the same time, these personal connections highlight the need for me to detach myself

from the research and allow participants to guide the study's direction and outcomes.

This study examined how transgender individuals experience their transhood. While the global transgender movement advocates for rights based on self-determination and depathologisation, many participants in Egypt identify as "transsexuals," transitioning from one binary to another, with pathologisation serving as both a medical framework and a survival strategy. Many transgender individuals in Egypt view gender-affirming healthcare as essential for surviving the anti-transgender structures that impede their lives. By transitioning medically and conforming to heteronormative identities, they create a protective barrier against violence. However, gender-affirming healthcare does not protect transgender individuals from legal violence, as medical transitions must be accompanied by legal changes. Thus, the most effective survival strategy for transgender individuals appears to be to fully embrace their desired gender identity and transition both medically and legally. This explains why the term transgender is often equated with transsexuality; even those identifying as non-binary find expressing gender non-conformity nearly impossible in Egypt. Participants identified moments of not passing, or the "in-betweener phase," as times of heightened vulnerability to violence due to their gender non-conformity. However, conforming to heteronormative gender roles does not protect transgender individuals from all violence since such conformity does not erase the prior experience of violence arising from family rejection of a person's transition.

Delineating transgender experiences in Egypt remains complex. For some, transitioning between binary genders defines their journey, while for others the quest is to create identities outside the gender binary. Common elements contribute to a collective experience, including self-discovery, self-acceptance, familial and societal conflicts, anti-transgender violence, and legal harassment. Although these shared elements may depict transgender experiences as marked by victimhood, they ultimately reflect resilience, survival, and resistance.

Transgender individuals persist in existing and occupying both public and private spaces despite pervasive anti-transgender violence that threatens to erase them by enforcing a biological binary. The act of existing is in itself a

significant form of resistance in the Egyptian context. Transgender visibility has grown in recent decades and is expected to continue expanding. While transgender experiences in Egypt remain deeply rooted in a binary framework and are pathologised at multiple levels, opportunities exist for individuals to challenge and subvert cis-heteronormative binaries. Despite the dominance of the binary, which is undeniable, there remains room for coexistence and the exploration of alternative gender identities within the Egyptian transgender landscape.

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Notes

1. Gender-affirming healthcare, as articulated by the World Health Organization, includes a comprehensive array of social, psychological, behavioural, and medical interventions that are specifically intended to support and affirm an individual's gender identity, particularly in instances where it diverges from the gender assigned at birth.
2. Al-Azhar Al-Sharif is the foremost Islamic scholarly authority and the largest religious institution in Egypt. It is considered an important scholarly reference on Sunni Islamic jurisprudence worldwide and has a far-reaching impact beyond Egypt.
3. Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy (referred to as Shaikh Tantawy) was Egypt's Grand Mufti between 1986 and 1996.

4. Intersex people are individuals born with sex characteristics that vary from what is typical for female and male bodies. In contrast, transgender people are individuals whose gender expression/identity differs from the one they were assigned at birth.
5. Law 10/1961 predominantly functions as an anti-sex work statute; however, it has also been employed to target transgender individuals assigned male at birth under the charge of debauchery, as outlined in Article 9(C). Similarly, Law 175/2018, which is categorised as a cybercrime law, has been used to target marginalised groups, including transgender individuals, through the charge of violating family values, as stipulated in Article 25 of the legislation.
6. Egypt, notable for housing the prominent Al-Azhar institution, has played a critical role in influencing contemporary transgender policy and law in the region through its fatwas and scholarly opinions. Furthermore, Egypt is recognised as a pioneer in the codification of Islamic fatwas and opinions into legal frameworks. Such codification first occurred in 2003, when the prohibition of gender-affirming healthcare was incorporated into the Medical Code of Ethics. Additionally, the rulings of the Egyptian judiciary on this issue have been extensively referenced throughout the region, thereby shaping legal interpretations regarding the status of transgender individuals, particularly in the context of legal gender recognition.
7. Interview 10 with a trans woman, 15 July 2023.
8. Interview 13 with a non-binary person, 28 July 2023.
9. Focus group 1 with trans sex workers, 13 March 2022.
10. Interview 3 with a trans woman, 27 February 2022.
11. Focus group 1 with trans sex workers, 13 March 2022.
12. The Egyptian vice police frequently target individuals AMABs who express themselves outside the traditional gender roles associated with males, as well as those engaged in sex work. Officially, to secure a conviction under these laws, it must be demonstrated that the arrested individuals are participating in sex work. Consequently, the police and public prosecution offices use items such as wigs, lingerie,

women's clothing, and other articles typically associated with trans women to construct a narrative suggesting involvement in sex work. This narrative often posits that the individual is a gay man using these items to seduce clients for monetary compensation.

13. Interview 14 with a trans woman, 12 March 2023.
14. Interview 11 with a trans woman, 11 July 2023.
15. Interview 9 with a trans man, 4 April 2023.
16. All conversion rates are according to the rate of 18 March 2025.
17. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.
18. Interview 9 with a trans man, 4 April 2023.
19. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.
20. Interview 10 with a trans woman, 15 July 2023.
21. Interview 12 with a trans woman, 20 July 2023.
22. Focus group 2, 4 September 2022.

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