

FIELD REPORT FROM EGYPT

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Six young women and three young men are gathered in a stuffy performance space in Cairo where an army of ceiling fans is battling the summer heat.

Sandos Gamel is 24 years old and the co-director of Bussy, a student-run organization based at the American University in Cairo whose mission is to call attention to women's issues in Egypt. One of their initiatives is an annual play loosely based on an American play.

"The project was founded around five years ago as a reaction to the performance of *The Vagina Monologues* which was performed in the American University in Cairo. Although a lot of people really liked it and triggered positive feedback, a lot of women said they did not relate to it. They were really wishing that there was something on stage that they have been through."

Bussy began soliciting submissions. Young women from all across Egypt sent in personal stories and the producers selected an assortment for each year's play.

They received stories about sexual double standards, the relentless pressure to get married, secret relationships and the internal struggles of being young women. The actors say it's all too easy to relate to these stories. Dina Wahba is 23 years old and started with Bussy last year.

"I think it's very hard for the young generation, both women and men, trying to make it in Egypt. I think it's double as hard for women because of a lot of societal factors. You are fighting every day trying to prove to your parents that you can do a lot of things that they think that you should not or cannot do or they are not expecting from you, and then to your coworkers and your boss and your professors. There is always this societal pressure that intervenes in every single person's private detail of their life."

Dina says that pressure is even more pronounced when it comes to marriage and the challenge of trying to date in a society where it's frowned upon for unwed couples to even hold hands in public. It's common to see young couples in parks sitting awkwardly and trying to get as intimate as possible without touching.

But for many young women, the whole process of getting to the big day can be frustrating or even humiliating.

Ghada Abdel Aal is a pharmacist and author of the book *I Want To Get Married*. She has spent the last decade or so turning down arranged marriages.

"Well, the traditional way is a young man in his late 20s or in his 30s will look for a wife because it's about time that he settles down. The people in his family, especially the women, look around and they will find a suitable girl from their point of view. She has to be beautiful and white and she doesn't have to talk back or have an opinion or anything. That will be perfect girl for him."

The man and his family would show up at the girl's house and start making small talk with her family. Gradually, it would evolve into a proposal and then a negotiation over the amount of dowry – what the groom and his family were willing to pledge in exchange for her. This does not sit right with Ghada.

"This business deal is really irritating! I mean is this really right way for two people to spend the rest of their lives together? Everyone around you says, 'Yeah, that is the right way,' and they always feel like there is something wrong with you. That really feels humiliating in a way."

Engy Ghozlan who does civil society work on women's rights and feminism explains that there is a pragmatic economic basis behind the pressure to get married.

"Families focus on these things only to protect the girl. It's not because they don't want to give her the freedom of choice and because she has no say. It's not that. It's more of a protection from the basis of 'I am protecting you. I need to know that you will have financial stability. I need to know that one day, if he decided to throw you away, that you have your rights granted – that after you have a baby, he will be able to support this baby even if he got divorced.'"

Another young woman in Cairo who has rebelled against religion and tradition is Marwa Rakha. She is a relationship/dating writer and blogger – sort of the Carrie Bradshaw of Cairo. Sitting in a café in the

upscale Zamalek neighborhood and puffing on a shisha pipe, she describes how customs in Egypt prevent the normal socialization that helps people develop their gender identities and relationship skills.

“What happens here is that when you are a kid, they tell you, ‘Stay away from one another. Girls are bad; boys are bad.’ You go into teenagehood. You have the Haram element and the religion element. It’s like, ‘No, you should not mix. You should not sit together. You should not talk. You should not do this or that.’ And this taboo thing, because once you put something in the dark, all the mistakes happen. If those two people date in front of their parents, nothing would happen. But when you put them in the dark, all the mistakes would happen. They would take advantage of one another. They would lie. They would hide. They will cheat. They would be emotionally blackmailed. Problems would happen, and they wouldn’t go to an adult for help.”

Professor Barbara Ibrahim is Director of the Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo. She has conducted extensive research on gender attitudes in Egypt.

“It’s very true that if you have never been allowed to date, or go out with members of the other sex, or if you haven’t had opportunities to interact in classrooms or at the workplace, then you are not going to have the skills that it takes to weather a fight or a disagreement or a misunderstanding because you haven’t practiced. That’s where the problems of segregated societies often lie. These kids are thrown into marriage. They didn’t know each other very well and they didn’t have social opportunities before they get in there.”

No one is advocating for a summer-of-love type approach in Egypt. Many in the religious and conservative community are fine the way things are. But there is a strong sense in society that the strict segregation in customs around dating and marriage add to the growing stress on young people.

The actors at *Bussy* and co-director Sandos Gamel hope they can start a dialogue and make people aware of how young women in Egypt feel.

– *Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad*