

STORY OF AN EGYPTIAN MAN

Humanizing Muslims and Debunking Gender Stereotypes

By Farha Ghannam

Violent. Aggressive. Brutal. Misogynist. Anti-Western. Anti-modern. Fundamentalist. Terrorist. Oppressor. Abuser.

Such are the stereotypes of Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim men (obviously distinct categories yet often conflated) perpetuated by the Western media. The stereotypes not only stigmatize and marginalize but they also re-inscribe the division between “us and them” and recreate associations that contrast “our” enlightened ways with “their” backwardness. At the same time, such depictions deny Arab/Muslim men the status of human beings who deserve compassion, protection, and recognition.

Lost both in the popular discourse as well as in most existing literature on gender are the daily struggles and realities of Muslim men and the affective connections and ethics of care that tie them to their families, including female relatives. My ethnographic research over the past ten years in a low-income neighborhood in northern Cairo has been geared toward challenging simplistic and reductionist assumptions by focusing on the daily life of men and how they work (in collaboration with others, particularly female relatives) to materialize social values that define them as gendered subjects. My research seeks to highlight the importance of class, which, over the past two decades has been largely sidelined in analyses of gender in the Middle East.

Looking at the intersection between gender and class allows us to see the category “men” as a diversified group of agents who are positioned differently in the socio-economic and political landscape. It helps us appreciate how one’s material, cultural, and social capital are deeply linked to the ability to materialize gender norms that define a proper man.

Here I would like to share the story of Samer,* an auto shop worker now approaching his late forties, whose “masculine trajectory” I have had the opportunity to follow over the past two decades. A masculine trajectory is the process of becoming a

▷ A couple strolls through a market, Cairo, Dec. 15, 2012. *Khaled Abdullah/Reuters*



man. It aims to capture the contextual and shifting nature of masculinity and how men are expected to materialize different norms over their lifespan. Gender and class intersect in powerful ways in shaping this trajectory and how a man's standing is evaluated, affirmed, and redefined by various social agents, including female relatives. Rather than a linear sequence of predetermined and fixed roles, the notion of masculine trajectory aims to account for the ups and downs, the successes and failures, and the expected and emerging discourses and challenges that shape a man's standing in society.

Countering stereotypes and elaborating the humanness of men is not to present them as perfect and flawless creatures who transcend the limitations of their bodies and class positions. Rather, it is to capture men's continuous struggle with patriarchal norms, market forces, and broader political systems that shape their access to economic and cultural resources. It is to account for the strengths, vulnerabilities, and intimacies that are key to the daily life of men and how these are shaped by broader forces and other actors. In Samer's case, I noticed that as a young man he was recognized for his bravery, generosity, and decency. But over the past six years I have observed a shift in his masculine trajectory. His attempts to be a good husband and father have encountered the changing and challenging economic and political conditions that profoundly shape daily life in Cairo. Such factors affect the ability of men like Samer to live up to the social norms that define them as proper men.

Finding a Spouse

When Samer got married in 2010, everybody who knew him was delighted. A likable man, who was known for his courage, kindness, and helpfulness, Samer wedded at the age of 40, later than most of his close friends and relatives, who tended to marry in their late twenties or early thirties. Samer worked in an auto shop for several years in Libya. He had been engaged twice before, but broke the first engagement (when he was in his late twenties) because his fiancé insisted on continuing to work as a nurse in a nearby hospital and the second engagement (in his early thirties) ended due to the increasing financial demands of the young woman and her family. In 2010, Samer was introduced to Karima,* a delightful 38-year-old nurse who worked in a private hospital in another neighborhood. As a career woman, Karima had accumulated all the household goods newlyweds would need for a new home; the couple quickly became engaged and married within a few months. Karima was considered lucky by many people around her. In her neighborhood, an unmarried woman in her thirties is often considered a spinster and her marriage opportunities become limited. She might have to accept undesirable marriage proposals from much older men who are widowed or divorced. Samer was also happy with the match because he was eager to get married as quickly as possible and Karima's readiness made the process quick and smooth.

Due to the limited housing options within their financial reach, they had to move out of the neighborhood where they had both grown up to a small apartment Samer had purchased while working in Libya in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Cairo. At first, they both kept in close contact with relatives, neighbors, and friends in their original neighborhood but they also started cultivating connections with their new neighbors. Samer became known in his new quarter as a caring and brave man, especially after helping a female neighbor, who screamed for help because her son was “kidnapped.” Without thinking about it, Samer chased the abductor for a while before the man and the child got into a car that was waiting in a side street. (It turned out that the “kidnapper” was the father of the child.) The neighbors were impressed by Samer’s courage and his reputation was bolstered.

At a younger age, the compliments Samer received from others about his daring and gallantry pleased him and his family and constituted him as a proper man. While both Samer and his wife were proud of his standing in their new neighborhood, achieved in part by his courage in chasing the “kidnapper,” other social norms had begun to exert pressure on the couple: at Samer’s age, values and desires such as providing and fatherhood had become even more important. Fatherhood in particular became central to his masculine trajectory and his personal desire and social expectation to have a child became salient in his life. Most men in his neighborhood, including his close friends, usually become fathers during their late twenties or early thirties. Having children for Egyptians is very important not only because like people everywhere they love children, but also because bearing children consolidates the status of the married couple and transforms their social standing. Many couples aspire for a first pregnancy as soon as they get married because having a child during the first year of marriage is expected and highly celebrated.

Becoming a Parent

Samer and Karima were a good match. By the time they got married, they were clearly in love and were eager to see each other happy. Their lives, however, changed in unexpected ways in the ensuing years. The first complication was their inability to get pregnant as quickly as they hoped. They so much desired to have a baby and took it for granted that pregnancy would occur immediately after their marriage. Because of their advancing ages and because Samer was famous for being so caring and gentle with his nephews and nieces, Samer’s family felt for him when his wife did not get pregnant within a few months of their wedding. They encouraged Karima not to wait for long before seeing a doctor. Faced with frustration, Samer and Karima began a long process of medical consultations, tests, and treatment. Finally in 2015, Karima gave birth to their baby girl after almost five years of marriage. The baby was born prematurely,

and the parents had to draw on different economic and social resources to ensure the baby got the care she needed. First, the hospital where the delivery took place did not have an incubator and Samer had to shuttle between different hospitals until he found a functioning incubator to rent. Second, because Karima had a cesarean section and a complicated insurance plan, she had to be hospitalized in a different hospital, away from her baby. So she called on her nursing colleagues in the hospital where her daughter was staying to be sure the baby was receiving proper attention. Both she and Samer described the agonizing days they spent before knowing if their baby was going to make it or not. They were both thrilled the day the little girl left the hospital but with a hefty bill for the parents to pay. Karima had to pull strings within her professional and social networks to have the huge hospital bill reduced to a more affordable amount.

During their journey to parenthood, Samer and Karima experienced financial and emotional challenges that caused great suffering. They had to endure several setbacks, including a miscarriage and the great expense of several rounds of treatment. In addition to the financial worries, they also felt the pressure of time. When Samer was looking for a suitable wife, he often compared himself to some of his close friends, whose children were teenagers, and worried about living in good health long enough to raise his own children. As an auto body worker who relied heavily on his physical strength, he was mindful of how his stamina and ability to work for long hours under difficult conditions was becoming weaker. These anxieties intensified when his wife did not become pregnant immediately and he found it difficult to face disappointments and setbacks. During this period, his wife and family were a major source of support and they all were delighted when Karima became pregnant and it was clear that she would carry the baby to term.

In anticipation of the arrival of their baby, the couple decided to take an important step to improve Samer's work conditions. At the age of 45 and having developed several health problems (mainly linked to his digestive system and injuries sustained during work), it was becoming difficult for him to work long and hard hours in an auto body repair shop. Leveraging her salary, Karima took the brave step of taking a bank loan of 100,000 Egyptian pounds (about \$14,000 at the time) to buy a new minivan for Samer. This was a substantial amount of money but the couple thought it would be a wise investment that would enable Samer to transition to a less exhausting and better-paying occupation. The plan was that Samer would become a driver, using his new minivan to deliver material for shop owners in different parts of the city. With the baby on the way, and a new job for Samer set in motion, all seemed perfect in their lives.

A few days after Karima gave birth, disaster struck. It is the norm in Egypt that after giving birth new mothers take their babies and spend the first week or so being cared for at the homes of their own mothers. Although Karima's mother was ailing she nonetheless decided to follow the custom. The mother had recently moved into an area

on the outskirts of Cairo to be near another married but stay-at-home daughter who could look after her. Arriving one evening to spend the night with his wife and baby, Samer parked his minivan on the street and unwittingly fell into an extortion scheme.

Samer was awakened by a dreadful call. "Are you the owner of such and such a car?" the voice on the other side of the line asked. When Samer answered yes, he heard what many car owners in Cairo have come to dread since the 2011 revolution brought a surge in crime. The male voice declared that his gang had the minivan and demanded 20,000 Egyptian pounds (about \$3,000 at the time) to return it. The shocking development filled Samer with rage. How could someone do such a thing to him, a man known for his courage and strength? But then, this was not his neighborhood. He was unknown here. He did not have the reputation that, in his own neighborhood, would have ensured the protection of his property. None of these neighbors knew him or would intervene to prevent the theft of his vehicle.

Fearful that Samer's rage might lead to precipitous action and tragic results, Karima's family suggested that her brother negotiate with the carjackers. Samer's brother-in-law pleaded with the caller and managed to reduce the ransom to 5,000 pounds, which they strained to gather quickly as demanded. The brother-in-law was instructed to go to a certain place and drop off the 5,000 pounds in a designated spot, and to then find the minivan parked at a nearby gas station. He left the money as ordered, but then spent hours searching unsuccessfully for the minivan. When he arrived back home, Samer knew even before the man spoke that they had been deceived.

The loss was financially crippling. Samer and Karima lost the minivan and had very little disposable income left as most of Karima's salary was paying the monthly installments to the bank for the minivan. Plus they had the additional expense of caring for a new baby.

The couple's families recognized the enormity of the loss and fully sympathized with their plight. They offered material and emotional support whenever possible. But it was Karima who shouldered most of the burden. In addition to caring for their baby and home, she was now forced to resume fulltime work just a few weeks after giving birth. She considered herself lucky because the hospital where she worked had a daycare center, so she could take the infant with her and take breaks to nurse during the day. Despite the long hours it took her to get to and from work and the many hours she had to work, Karima was thrilled to be a mother and wanted her husband to fully enjoy the experience of being a father.

The blow to Samer's standing as a man, however, was too great. The carjacking was materially and morally devastating, and deeply wounded his pride and dignity. He could not shake his anger, and spent many days checking with various police stations hoping to learn any positive news about the minivan. Samer's fury over the stolen

vehicle was compounded by his despair over the bank debt and his crushed dream of the better job he needed for his role as provider to ensure a bright future for his child. He was left with little that could help him be the type of father he had hoped to be. He sunk into a state of mourning and could not shake the terrible sense of loss he felt. Day after day he sat at home chain-smoking, lacking energy or motivation to work.

Karima sought the help of her husband's family and, with their joint efforts—encouraging, comforting, pressuring, scolding, supporting—they managed after a few months to lift Samer out of his funk and back into the job market. He found work in an auto body shop located just across the street from his apartment. Initially, he was content; he was working on his own and did not have anyone to report to. Yet, shortly afterwards his employer let him go because of the downturn in the Egyptian economy. He found another job, but at a distant location demanding several modes of transportation and more than an hour of commuting time each way. He also had to accept the fact that, in this new job, younger men exercised authority over him. This signaled a sort of demotion for a man of his age who should be managing his own workshop, supervising several younger men and boys who are working for him and training to become *ustas*, masters of the profession.

Samer had indeed tried to establish his own workshop a few years before he met Karima, but the project failed. While everybody raved about the high quality of Samer's work, he was frequently admonished by his siblings and coworkers for not following business practices that quantified time and turned hours into money. The more time he spent on a car to ensure the high quality he believed in, the less money he earned for himself and for the workshop. After several months of not being able to earn enough to pay the bills, he had to close that workshop and go back to working for a daily wage.

Dreams and Struggles

When I visited him in 2015, Samer seemed on the way to being a broken man who, at the age of 45, was feeling old and worn out. The glory of his youth, focused largely on his strength, bravery, and generosity, which were key to his standing as a man, became a distant memory that was not enough to offer him and others the type of validation that would make him a respected man. As a husband and father, it was his ability not only to protect and aid but to also provide and show care that became central to his standing as a man. His limited options and the family's increasing reliance on his wife's salary had placed him in an awkward situation and subjected him to explicit and implicit criticisms by family members and friends. A "proper" man would usually ask his wife to stop working after marriage or, if she is keen on continuing to work, would show clear disinterest in her salary and make a point of covering all the household expenses. In fact, Samer himself broke a previous engagement because he did not want his future

wife to work and often stated that he did not want a working wife. So, for Samer to be unemployed or underemployed and sometimes needing pocket money from his wife changed the gender dynamics that define the relationship between men and women, and husbands and wives. His lack of financial resources have also undermined his relationship with his family in general, and his sisters and mother in particular. He is not able, even when one of them is sick, to offer the expected material support. Thus, he has resorted to distancing himself from his family and rarely visits them.

Such shifts are particularly problematic in a neoliberal Cairo, where men are responsible for securing good education for their children, providing adequate housing, paying for health services, and supplying daily foods and expenses. These social expectations and the ability to meet them are central to the standing of men and the recognition they garner from others. Men like Samer are often held responsible for what in reality are the failings of the state and the forces of the market. Samer clearly wanted to continue to materialize the social norms that expect him to be a good provider; the broader political and economic conditions as well as his aging body and deteriorating health limited this possibility. Samer and his wife planned, borrowed money, and tried hard to secure new opportunities that could help their family flourish. Yet, their efforts were frustrated by forces beyond their control.

The struggles of men like Samer are lost in media coverage of the lives of Muslim/Middle Eastern/Arab men. Stories like his don't make news, which focuses on violence. Even when the Islamic State terrorist group slaughters Egyptian expatriate workers like Samer in Libya, we hear more about the killers than the victims and their aspirations and sacrifices. Yet it is important to learn stories like Samer's to appreciate masculinity as a process of becoming and how a man's standing changes over his life span and is strongly linked to his ability to negotiate different (and sometimes competing) economic and social demands and expectations. Such stories also help show how men in the Middle East are a differentiated group. They belong to different classes, religions, places of origin, and age groups. They might be single and working to find a spouse. They might be sons who take care of their older parents or parents who work for long hours under difficult conditions to secure the future of their children. They might be unemployed (or underemployed) or they might have to work in several jobs to secure enough money to provide for their loved ones.

To overcome dominant stereotypes and simplifications, we need to be mindful of the diversity of positions of men in the socioeconomic and political landscape of a country like Egypt. We need to humanize them by accounting for their dreams, struggles, successes, and vulnerabilities.

**The names used in this essay are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.*