

# Still the Employer of Choice: Evolution of Public Sector Employment in Egypt

Ghada Barsoum and Dina Abdalla



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### **Abstract**

The public sector in Egypt provides relatively generous benefits, particularly when compared to the working conditions in informal private sector employment. For this reason, it has been described as the employer of choice among youth in Egypt. This paper updates the analysis on this issue by exploring the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) 2018 data. Focusing on those employed in the public sector, the paper compares three age groups. The analysis over time shows that the public sector is becoming more educated, slightly more feminized, and is aging. Women, however, have not reached gender parity in public sector employment, despite a slight increase in their proportion among more recent cohorts.

**Keywords:** Public sector employment, Egypt, gender.

**JEL Classifications:** J45; J48.

## **1. Introduction**

The public sector<sup>3</sup> has been described as the employer of choice among youth in Egypt (Barsoum, 2016). Conditions of shorter working hours, job security, a stable income, and access to paid leaves all contribute to this preference, particularly in comparison to the predominantly informal private sector. Public sector hiring has been, historically, a part of the social contract in Egypt (Assaad, 2014; Desai et al., 2009). The educated (operationalized in this paper as those with secondary education and above) have been offered guaranteed employment by legal stipulations dating back to 1962. Assaad (1997) argues that this created incentives to queue for public sector jobs among the educated. Fiscal pressures and a bloated public service led to retrenchment in public sector hiring (World Bank, 2016). The evolution of public sector employment in Egypt reflects tensions between a continued preference for public sector jobs on the labor supply side, and fiscal pressures pushing for right-sizing the sector on the state side.

This paper investigates the evolution of public sector employment in Egypt using the Egypt Labor Market Panel Survey (ELMPS) 2018 data.<sup>4</sup> The paper starts by exploring the continuation of preferences for the public sector, by looking at job preferences among the unemployed, which show that public sector jobs are highly favored. Differences in employment conditions between the public and private sectors are investigated as part of this discussion in an attempt to explain this continued preference. In the second section of the paper, we look at the evolution of the share of public sector employment in Egypt, comparing data from different waves. In the third section of the paper, we take a look inside the public sector and compare the characteristics of public sector workers.

The analysis in this paper shows that the public sector continues to be a preferred sector of employment. The role of the sector in hiring graduates, which was stipulated as a legal right in the 1960, is declining. Inside the public sector, we show that the sector is becoming more educated as it consistently hires more workers with university and post-graduate education. Despite the growing share of working women in the public sector, women have not yet reached gender parity within the public sector. The public sector in Egypt, however, is also aging, with one third of its employees in the age category of 48-60 as of 2018. In the final section, we discuss the policy implications of these patterns.

## **2. The Public Sector as the Employer of Choice in Egypt**

Unemployed respondents were asked about the minimum acceptable wage (reservation wage) by sector of employment: public sector, formal private, and informal private. Consistently, those who were unemployed had lower reservation wages for being hired in the public sector compared to both the formal and informal private sector. Figure 1 shows the distribution of reservation wages by sector of employment and sex. The figure shows that the minimum

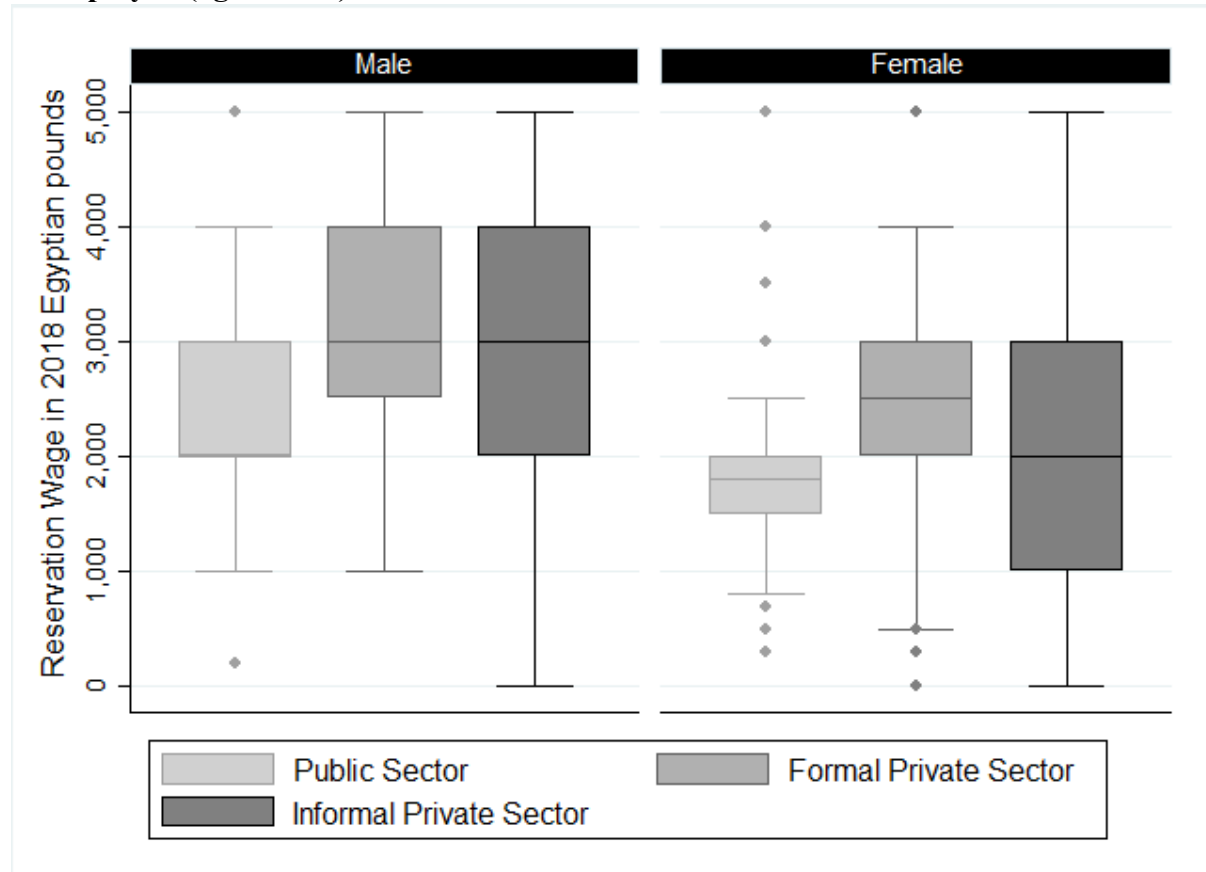
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<sup>3</sup> We limit the analysis of public sector to civil service employees, due to the specificity and small share of employees in state-owned enterprises in Egypt.

<sup>4</sup> See Krafft et al. (2019) for further details on ELMPS 2018. Data are publicly available through the Open Access Microdata Initiative, [www.erfdataportal.com](http://www.erfdataportal.com).

acceptable wage in the public sector is consistently lower than the private sector for both unemployed men and women.

**Figure 1. Reservation wage (in 2018 Egyptian pounds) by sector and sex among the unemployed (ages 15-64)**



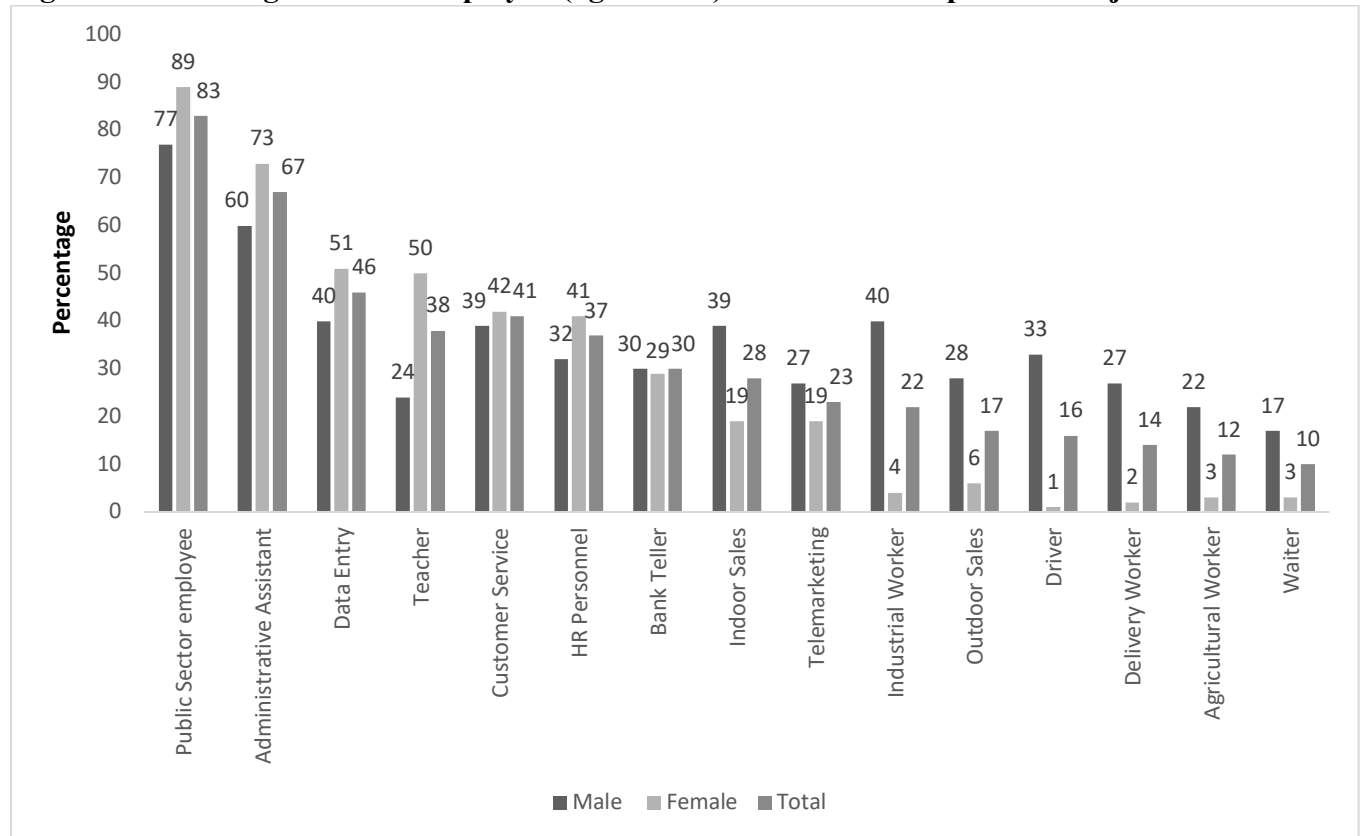
Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS (2018)

Among unemployed men, the reported median reservation wage was EGP 2,500 in the public sector and EGP 3,000 in the formal private sector. Corresponding with earlier trends (Barsoum, 2016) the reservation wage was lower for women. Among unemployed women, the reported median reservation wage was EGP 1,500 in the public sector; EGP 2,500 in the formal private sector and EGP 2,000 for the informal private sector.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, when asked about preferred occupations, 83% of the unemployed reported that they would accept a job as an employee in the public sector. More women (89%) reported this preference than men (77%), signifying the continued preference of this sector among women (Barsoum, 2019). This was the highest rate among all other jobs asked about in the survey as illustrated in figure 2. The figure also captures the desirability of certain occupations, namely administrative jobs, among the unemployed. Jobs in hospitality (waiter) showed the lowest level of desirability among the unemployed. This pattern was also stronger among women than men.

<sup>5</sup> Outliers were removed, restricting to reservation wages to less than 5000.

**Figure 2. Percentage of the unemployed (ages 15-64) who would accept different jobs**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

The preference for public sector employment can be explained by the difference in job quality between the public sector and the private sector. We limit the analysis in this table to those with secondary education and above to make sure that we are comparing workers in the public and private sectors with comparable educational characteristics. As Table 1 shows, the public sector offered favourable conditions in terms of paid leaves, social insurance, health insurance, and the average number of working hours per day. Moreover, workers in the public sector were more likely to report being satisfied (rather or fully) about their work and their wages than workers in the private sector.

**Table 1. Job characteristics among the employed (ages 15-64) with secondary education and above, by sector**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Public</b>	<b>Private inside est.</b>	<b>Private outside est.</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Social insurance (%)</b>	84	38	13	59
<b>Health insurance (%)</b>	96	36	11	69
<b>Paid sick leave (%)</b>	95	40	11	70
<b>Paid leaves (%)</b>	95	48	11	72
<b>Average number of working hours/week (hrs)</b>	39	52	46	45
<b>Level of satisfaction (rather or fully satisfied) about wage level (%)</b>	79	70	58	74
<b>Reported being satisfied (rather or fully satisfied) about their work (%)</b>	98	88	67	74
<b>N</b>	1,786	1,314	434	3,534

Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

Table 1 shows that while access to work benefits was almost universal among public sector workers, private sector employment inside establishments provided social insurance to only 38% of its workers and less than half of its workers had paid leaves (40%). Those in the private sector outside establishments, who are primarily in the informal economy, had much worse working conditions, despite their level of education. Paid leaves were only accessible to 11% of workers outside establishments; and only 13% had social insurance. Workers in the public sector also worked shorter work weeks, averaging 39 hours. This figure increases to 52 hours for those working in the private sector inside establishments, and to 46 hours for those working outside establishments. All these conditions explain the level of reported work satisfaction, where workers in the public sector were more likely to report being rather or fully satisfied about their wages (79%) and their work in general (98%), than those working outside establishments (reporting 58% for work and 67% for wages).

### **3. Is the Public Sector Employing Graduates?**

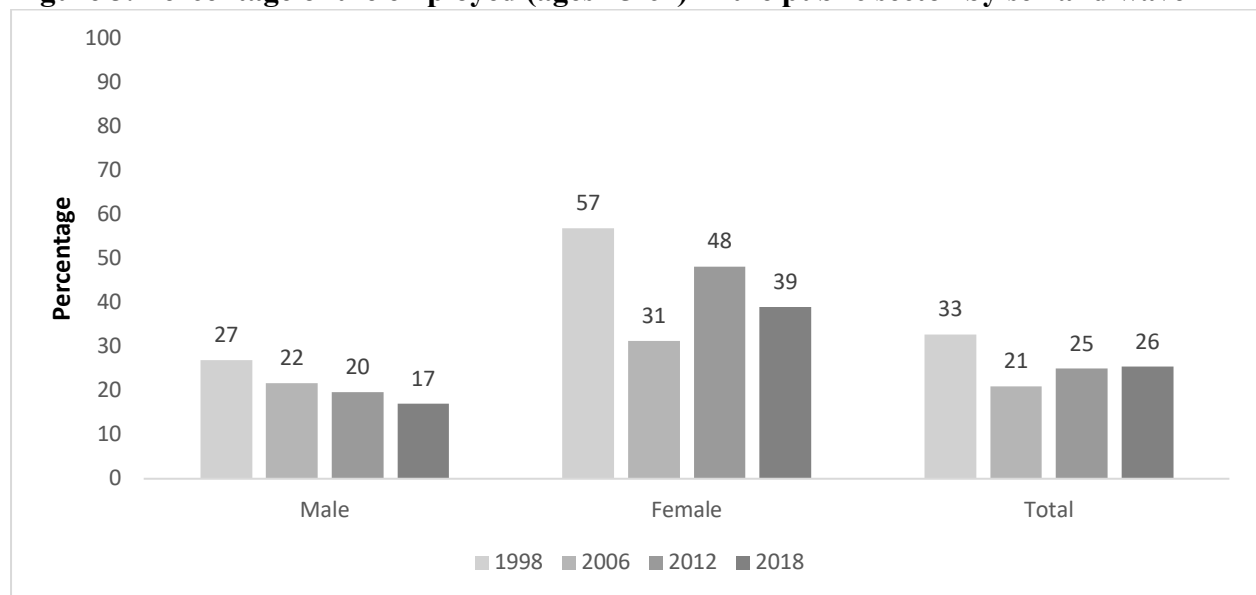
If the public sector is still the employer of choice among the unemployed, particularly the youth, does it offer them the jobs they aspire to? Figure 3. shows the share of public sector employment comparing the different waves of the ELMPS. The figure shows that there has been a decline in the share of public sector in employment for all working men and women from 33% in 1998 to 26% in 2018.



This decline, however, has not been steady. The 2012 data shows a bump in the share of public sector employment during this wave. This was in response to the mass demonstrations in 2011, when the government in Egypt responded to populist demands to increase hiring in the public sector (Beschel and Yousef, 2016). This shows the political significance of public sector hiring as a tool to gain the support of the educated as a politically volatile group (Amin et al., 2012). The pattern of hiring youth into the public sector in response to political unrest has been observed elsewhere in the Arab region (ibid.).

The public sector employed a higher proportion of working women than working men. This does not mean that the majority of workers in the sector were women, since so few women work. This simply shows that when women worked in Egypt, they were more likely to work in the public sector. The decline in employment in the public sector has particularly affected women. The role of the public sector in employing women declined from a high of 57% of working women in 1998 to 39% among working women in 2018. This signified a serious decline in the role of this sector in employing women in Egypt, which resonates with the results by Assaad et al. (2018) in discussing the MENA paradox of rising educational attainment, yet stagnant female labor force participation

**Figure 3. Percentage of the employed (ages 15-64) in the public sector by sex and wave**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 1998, 2006, 2012 and 2018

#### 4. Inside the Public Sector: Worker Characteristics

In this section, we look at the characteristics of workers in the public sector and compare data on workers in the sector in the four waves of 1998, 2006, 2012, and 2018. We also compare workers in the sector in the three age groups of 18-35, 36-47, and 48-60 in 2018. The choice of these age categories and age range is deliberate. Hiring in the public sector has a minimum legal age that was set at 16 in Law 47 (issued in 1978). The same law stipulates that during hiring, preference is given to older age applicants among of those meeting the job requirements, which *de facto* increased the minimum age. The minimum legal age for hiring in the public sector was increased to 18 years in Law 81 (issued in 2016). Given the delay in hiring graduates, we start at 18 as the most realistic lowest age for hiring in the public sector. The

obligatory retirement age for workers in the public sector is set at 60 years old in both regulations, which sets the range for the maximum age covered in this section.<sup>6</sup> The age categories also deliberately differ in length to allow for adequate representation in each category.

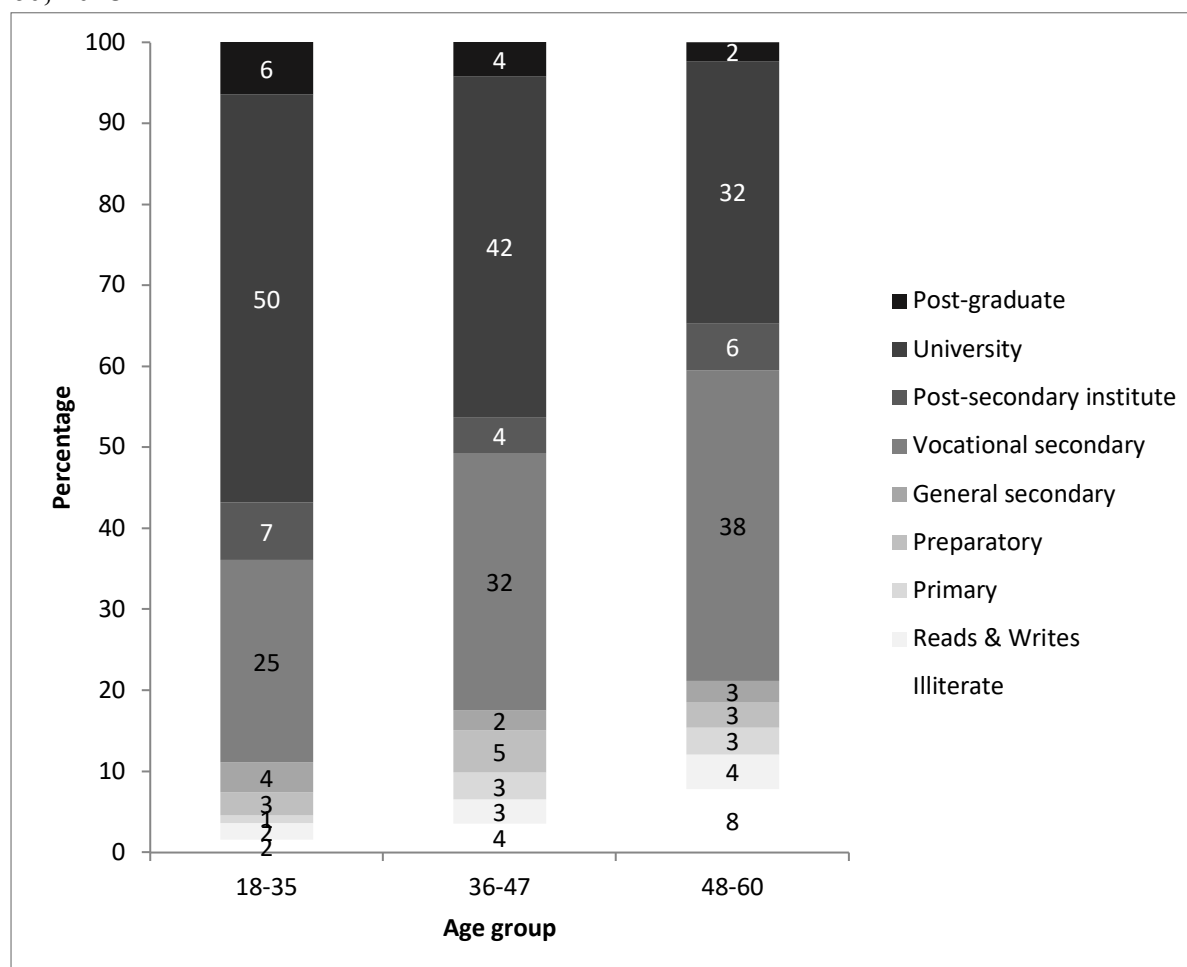
We look in this section at the education, sex composition, economic activities, and education specializations of workers within the sector. We also look at how these workers found their jobs and the type of work contracts they have.

A key observation is that the public sector is getting more educated. compares the three age groups of the public sector in 2018. The figure shows that the share of those with university education among workers aged 18-35 is 50%. This is to be compared to 42% among those aged 36-47, and to 32% among those aged 48-60. There is also a higher proportion of those with post-graduate education among the youngest age group (6%), compared to the oldest group (2%). These increases among the youngest age group came at the expense of the lowered share of those with vocational secondary and below. For example, the share of those with vocational secondary education drops to 25% among the youngest age group, compared to 38% among the oldest age group. Similarly, the share of illiterate workers drops to 2% in the youngest age category, compared to 8% in the oldest group. compares the three age groups of the public sector in 2018. The figure shows that the share of those with university education among workers aged 18-35 is 50%. This is to be compared to 42% among those aged 36-47, and to 32% among those aged 48-60. There is also a higher proportion of those with post-graduate education among the youngest age group (6%), compared to the oldest group (2%). These increases among the youngest age group came at the expense of the lowered share of those with vocational secondary and below. For example, the share of those with vocational secondary education drops to 25% among the youngest age group, compared to 38% among the oldest age group. Similarly, the share of illiterate workers drops to 2% in the youngest age category, compared to 8% in the oldest group.

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<sup>6</sup> In exceptional cases, the law allows the extension of contracts beyond this retirement age for experts in specific fields.

**Figure 4. Education of workers in the public sector (percentage), by age group, ages 18-60, 2018**



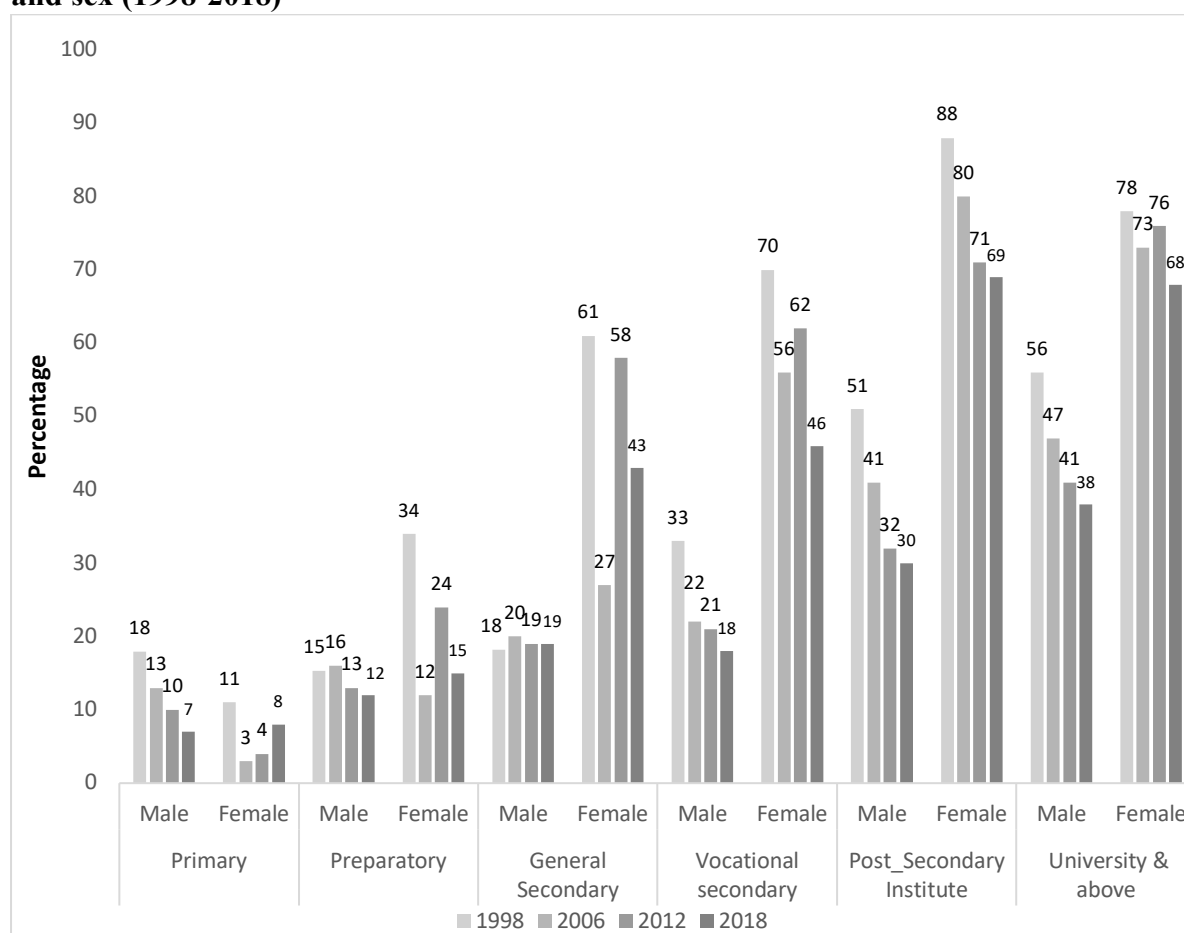
Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

While compares the three age groups of the public sector in 2018. The figure shows that the share of those with university education among workers aged 18-35 is 50%. This is to be compared to 42% among those aged 36-47, and to 32% among those aged 48-60. There is also a higher proportion of those with post-graduate education among the youngest age group (6%), compared to the oldest group (2%). These increases among the youngest age group came at the expense of the lowered share of those with vocational secondary and below. For example, the share of those with vocational secondary education drops to 25% among the youngest age group, compared to 38% among the oldest age group. Similarly, the share of illiterate workers drops to 2% in the youngest age category, compared to 8% in the oldest group. shows the difference between the three age groups, it is important to see whether the public sector is getting more educated or that the growth of the share of the educated is faster than for the population as a whole. To investigate this, we look at the percentage of the employed in the public sector by education (focusing on those with primary and above) and sex in the four waves. Consistent with results in the previous section, Figure 5 shows that the share of public sector employment has declined for all education levels. However, the figure shows that the share of public sector employment among men with primary education declined from 18% in

1998 to 7% in 2018 (a 61% decline), while it declined from 56% to 38% (only a 32% decline) for men with university and above.

This decline in share of employment of the least educated in favor of the most educated is more pronounced among women. The share of public sector employment among women with primary education declined from 11% in 1998 to 8% in 2018 (a 27% decline), while it declined from 78% to 68% (only a 13% decline) for women with university and above. These results are consistent with the data about the gender disaggregation of workers in the public sector discussed below.

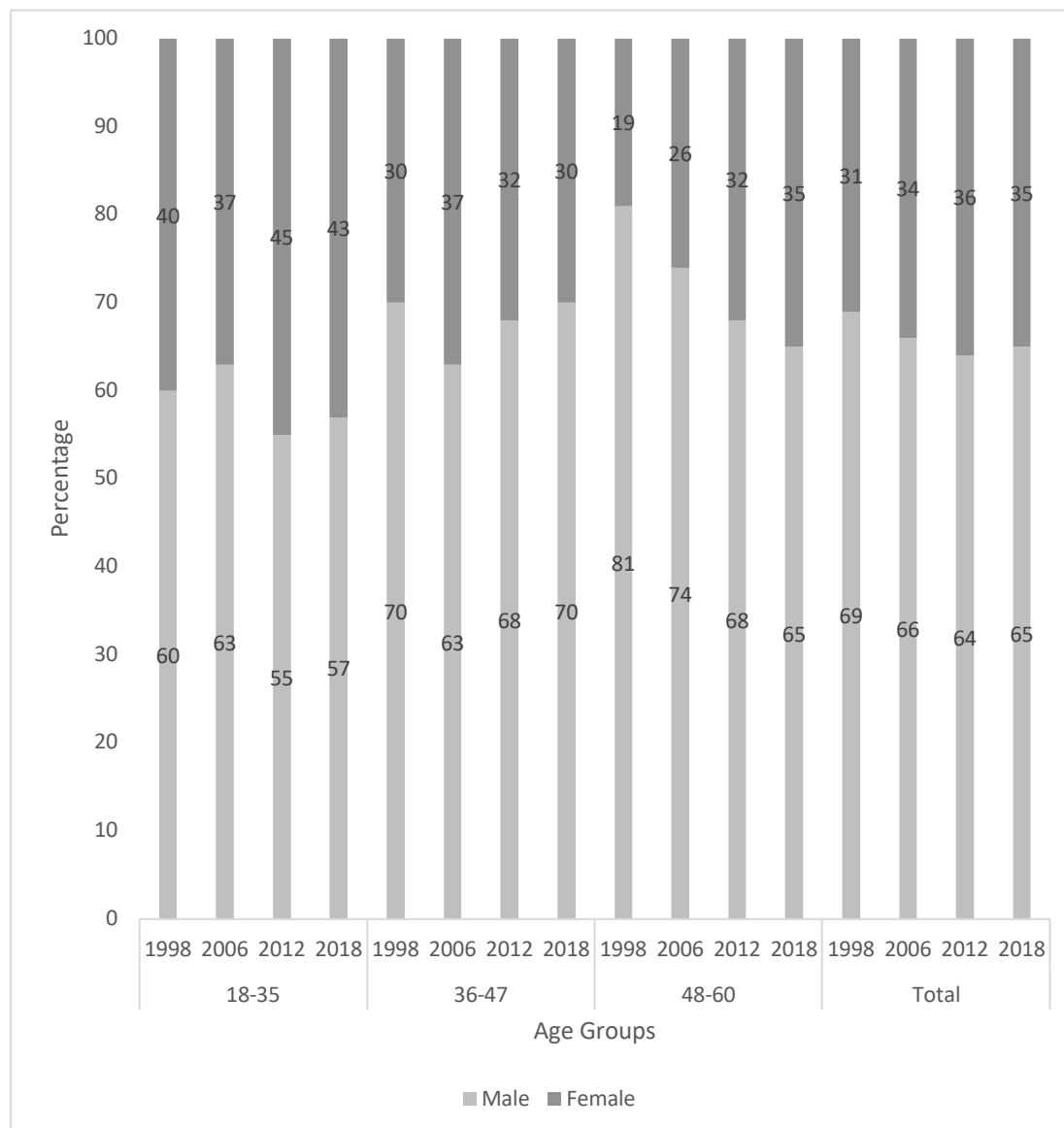
**Figure 5. Percentage of the employed in the public sector (ages 18-60) by education level and sex (1998-2018)**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 1998, 2006, 2012 and 2018

The public sector is also getting slightly more feminized. Figure 6 shows the composition of public sector employment by age group and sex across waves. Overall, the share of women in the public sector rose from 31% in 1998 to 34% in 2006, 36% in 2012, and was 35% in 2018. The share of women in the public sector has increased from 1998 to 2018 among the youngest age category (18-35) from 40% in 1998 to 44% in 2018. It is still the case, however, that women have not reached gender parity in the public sector. Figure 6 also illustrates that for the oldest age group, the share of women increased from 19% to 35% from 1998 to 2018. However, for ages 36-47, the share of women was 30% in both 1998 and 2018, although it rose and then fell again in the interim.

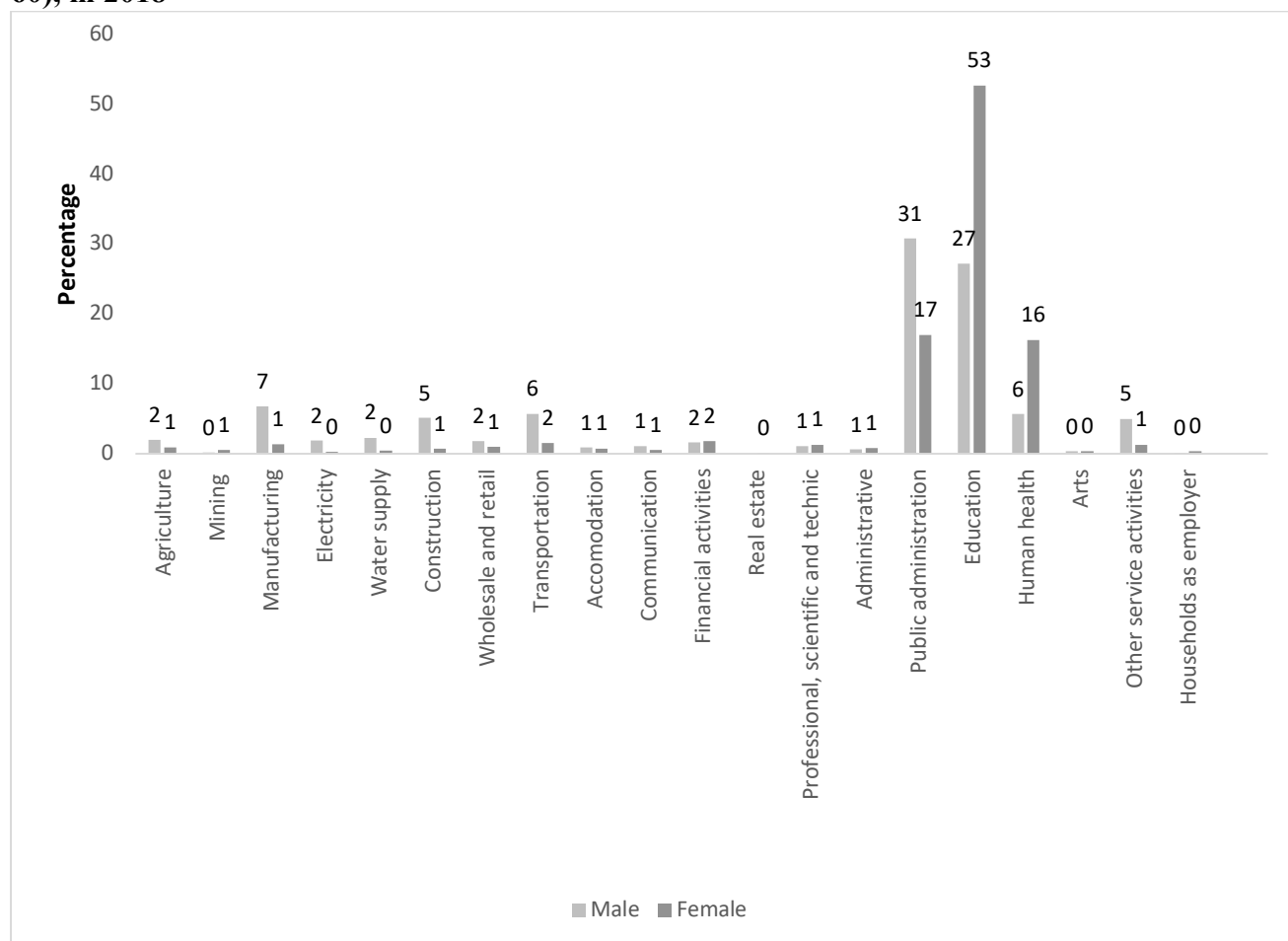
**Figure 6. Sex composition (percentage) of public sector employees (ages 18-60), by age group and wave**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2006, 2012 and 2018

As Figure 7 shows, in 2018, women in the public sector were predominately in the field of education (53%). The second largest group was public administration (17%), followed by human health and social work (16%). Men worked in more varied economic activities. Similar to women, the three economic activities of education, health and public administration were the main economic activities for men. However, men also have much higher presence in manufacturing, construction, and transportation.

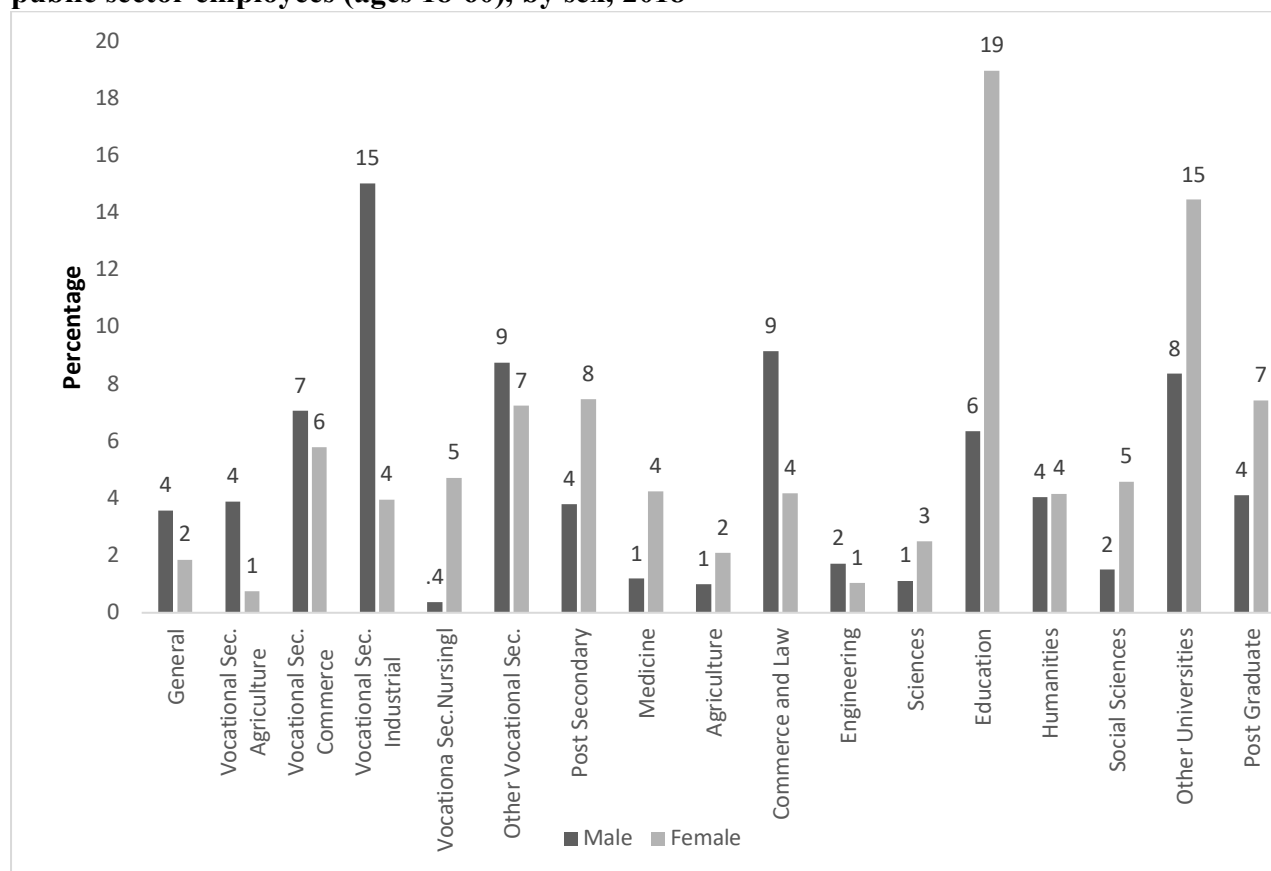
**Figure 7. Economic activity by sex among those employed in the public sector (ages 18-60), in 2018**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

These limited economic activities for women in the public sector are a reflection of their education specializations. As Figure 8 shows for 2018, the largest education specialization among women in the public sector is education (19%), followed by the sum of the share of other universities and post graduate (15%). Men in the public sector showed a more diverse education background, with vocational secondary education being the highest attained education for 15% of men, followed by commerce and law at the university level.

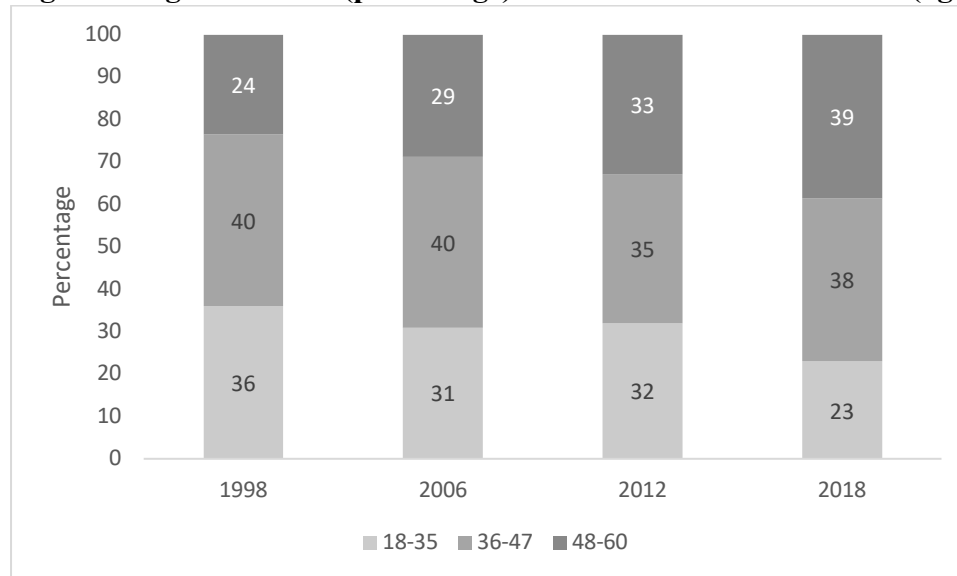
**Figure 8. Major Education Specialization (Secondary and above) (percentage) among public sector employees (ages 18-60), by sex, 2018**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

The public sector in Egypt is also aging. We compare the age structure of public sector workers along the different waves of 1998, 2006, 2012, and 2018 in Figure 9. The figure shows that 39% of workers in the public sector were in the oldest age category of 48-60 years old in 2018. This figure has consistently increased. It went up from 24% in 1998 to 29% in 2006 to 33% in 2012, to reach the peak in 2018 of 39%. Conversely, the share of public sector workers in the youngest age category 18-35 is down from 36% in 1998 to 31% in 2006. It slightly increased to 32% in 2012 due to reasons related to the political unrest as discussed earlier, but declines sharply to 23% in 2018. Assaad and Barsoum (2019) show a similar pattern analyzing data from the labor force sample survey.

**Figure 9. Age Structure (percentage) of those in the Public Sector (ages 18-60), by wave**

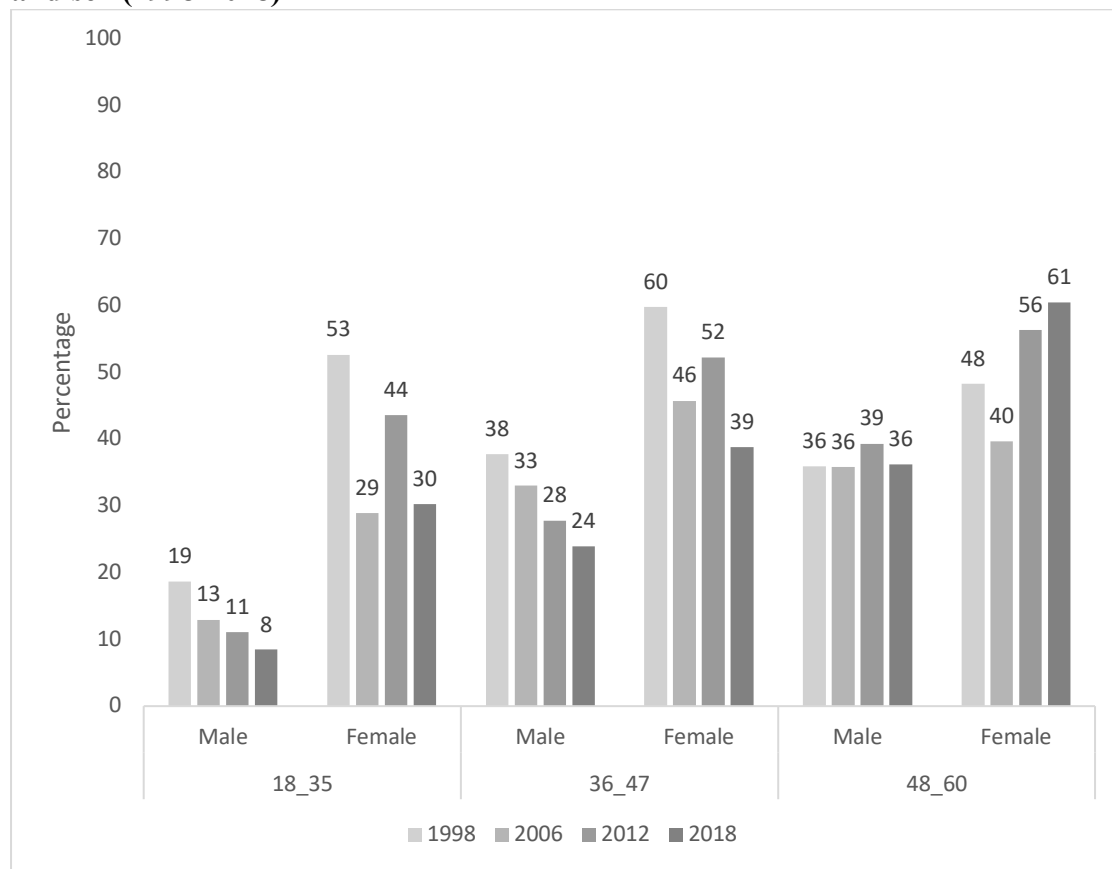


Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 1998-2018

To infer that this age structure is driven by reduced employment, we examine the share of employment in the public sector by age group and sex. Figure 10 shows that the share of public sector employment is much lower among the youngest age categories, compared to the oldest age categories. This difference is most pronounced comparing 1998 and 2018. The public sector hired 53% of working women in the age category of 18-29 in 1998. This share dropped to 30% in 2018. The public sector has a much higher retention rate of working women than the private sector in Egypt (Krafft, Assaad and Keo, 2019). This is reflected in the higher share of working women among the older age categories. Upon marriage, Krafft, Assaad and Keo (ibid.) note that women exit the private sector upon marriage. This pattern does not hold for the public sector. This helps explain the higher share of public sector employment among older working women, compared to younger working women. The sector hired 60% of working women (36-47) in 1998. This share went down to 46% in 2006; went up to 52% in 2012 and down again to 39% in 2018. These figures are consistent with the data on public sector hiring discussed above.



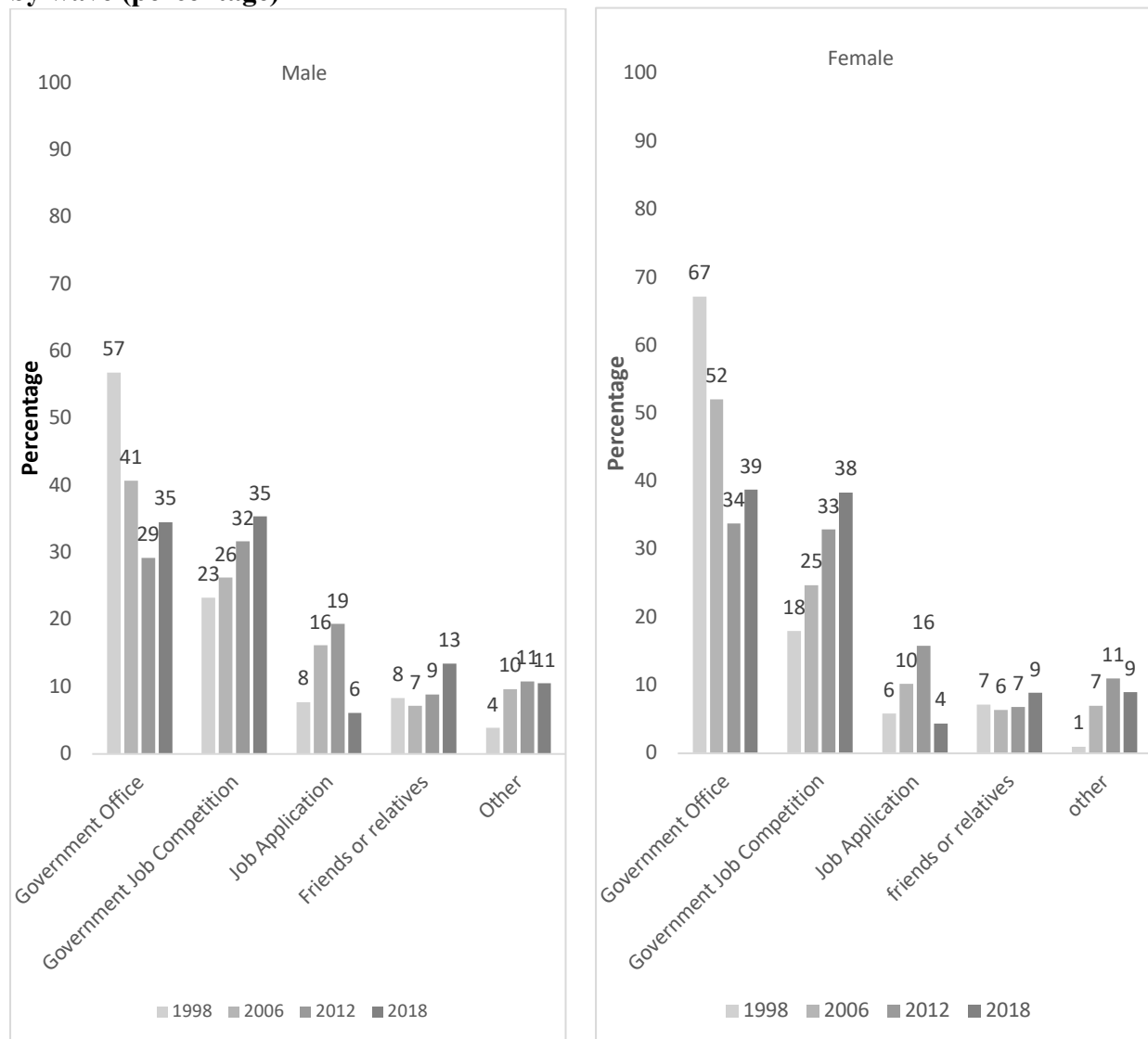
**Figure 10. Percentage of the employed in the public sector (ages 18-60), by age group and sex (1998-2018)**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 1998, 2006, 2012 and 2018

We also compare how workers in the public sector obtained their job across the different survey waves. We aim to investigate if hiring in the public sector is getting more meritocratic. We operationalize meritocracy as further relying on competitions as opposed to relying on friends and relatives. Figure 11 shows that women were more likely to get public sector jobs through government offices and job competitions than men. We also find that working men in the public sector were more likely to rely on friends and relatives to find a public sector job. Comparing data across the four waves, we see a steady decline in the role of government offices from 1998 to 2018 for both men and women; an increase in the role of competitions; and an increase in the role of friends and relatives in finding jobs in the public sector.

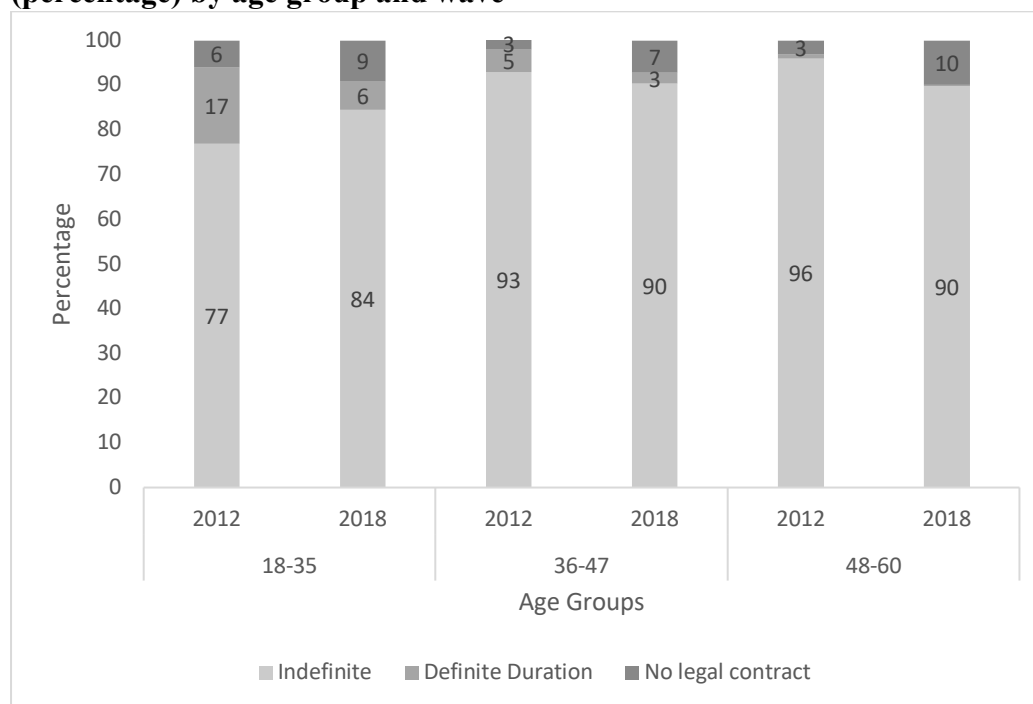
**Figure 11. Job finding methods among those employed in the public sector (ages 18-60), by wave (percentage)**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 1998, 2006, 2012 and 2018

Finally, we look at the nature of work contracts among those in the public sector. Figure 12 shows that there is a higher incidence of those without a work contract among the youngest age groups comparing the two points of 2012 and 2018. The share increased from 6% in 2012 to 9% in 2018. The share of those with fixed-term (definite) contracts in the same age cohort is down from 17% in 2012 to 6% in 2018. It is likely that those in the age group 48-60 have misreported the status of their contractual agreement in the public sector. This can be explained by the fact that the hiring process in the public sector, particularly for this older cohort, does not involve an actual signing of contract for this earlier cohort. This is consistent with data discussed by Barsoum (2016) about public sector hiring in Egypt.

**Figure 12. Type of contracts among workers in the public sector (ages 18-60), (percentage) by age group and wave**



Source: Authors' calculations based on ELMPS 2018

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The public sector in Egypt remains the preferred sector of employment. The public sector offers much better working conditions than the private sector, with those in the private sector outside of establishments facing the worst conditions. In fact, the public sector remains a haven of job stability and benefits within a context of rising job informality in Egypt (Assaad, AlSharawy, Salemi, 2019). However, the rate of public sector employment among new entrants to the labor market has been declining. This is a timely policy approach aiming to right-size the sector. Public sector hiring has served for decades as a political tool to get the support of politically volatile groups of educated new entrants to the labor market (Assaad and Barsoum, 2018). Untangling the relationship between public sector hiring and politics is a step in the right direction. It is also a step towards making it a more meritocratic and efficient sector.

The analysis of the different characteristics of workers in the public sector shows a number of emerging patterns. The sector is clearly more educated. It is slightly more feminized, but not at gender parity yet. It is also an aging sector, with more than one third of its employees in the age category 48-60. There is, therefore, a potential opportunity for reforming the sector, creating innovation in government and increased efficiency as these aging employees retire.

For this highly sought-after employment sector, hiring based on merit can potentially improve the quality of public services. However, the analysis in this paper shows that women in the public sector were more likely to get their jobs through competitions and application to institutions, as opposed to getting their jobs through contacts. The use of these informal channels to finding jobs in the sector has increased comparing data from different waves.

Women's share in public sector hiring has not reached gender parity, despite increasing access to higher education. Women still do not constitute half the workers in the public sector, despite a trend of feminization. Women were still in what can be described as "gender-appropriate" activities in the public sector, with education institutions hiring the largest share of women. Perhaps the limited working hours in this field attract more women, who have competing tasks for their time as mothers (Barsoum, 2019).

More policy focus needs to be placed on improving job quality in the private sector. This can potentially limit the preference for employment in this sector. It will also contribute to untangle hiring in the sector from politics. This requires an urgent debate on the policies that aim to offer more flexible social and health insurance systems and implementing enforcement measures. The role of government has been central to the implementation of "flexicurity" policies that partially shoulder the burden of these benefits from the private sector in other parts of the world. For example, Ploug (2014) highlights the experience of Denmark as a gradual but strategic model that helped influence employment in the private sector. Denmark's flexicurity system originated in the 1960s and gave employers the flexibility to control the size of their workforce but also gave security to employees who might lose their jobs through access to unemployment benefits and income replacement (Ploug, 2014). The flexicurity system was further developed in the mid-1970s with the introduction of training programs for the "rehabilitation" of the unemployed and, then, with the adoption of family policies that increased access to childcare opportunities for both parents in families with children (Ploug, 2014).

While these policies have challenges in moving to other contexts (Barsoum, 2018), there is need to discuss these policy options in Egypt and bring them to the public debate. There is also need to discuss policies governing entrepreneurship and support to small businesses in Egypt to address this preference for public sector hiring (Ismail et al., 2018).

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