Chapter 6

WORK STATUS AND EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANTS

We saw from the previous chapter that economic reasons underpin the entire rationale of the movement of poor rural workers from Upper Egypt to Cairo. Low income, insufficient and unsatisfactory work, low-quality rural services and the need or pressure to “escape” were some of the key influences in migrants' decisions to move north. This, of course, is hardly surprising. As classic labor migrants, work defines the very essence of my research subjects' need to migrate. A brief glance back to Table 5.8 will confirm the overwhelming importance of income-related and work-dominated reasons for migration.

This chapter analyzes in more detail the work status and experiences of migrants including migrants' patterns of accommodation in Cairo and the process of looking for work. At a more specific level, I analyze occupation, type and mode of work (contract, daily basis, or task-based), number of working days per week, number of working hours per day, and other related work aspects. An analysis of occupational safety, health insurance coverage, and injuries related to work conditions is also incorporated in this chapter. Reference will be made to published survey data for Cairo districts and to fieldwork on non-migrant laborers, in order to provide a comparative frame of reference for the migrant surveys which, briefly to remind the reader, comprise the questionnaire/interview survey of 242 migrants plus in-depth interviews with 20 migrants. Much of the account will be structured – as with Chapter 5 – around a series of tables which present key data from the main questionnaire survey. I start by examining the process of arrival and of finding work and accommodation in the city.

6.1 Work search

6.1.1 Migrants' patterns of accommodation

Migrants face a whole range of urgent problems the minute they disembark in the city. The first is where to stay. The matter is important because most migrants have no job, nor even in many cases a clear idea about the labor market. Moreover, many new arrivals are very young. Typically, they are teenagers. They need a period, while looking for a job, in accommodation that is cheap, or preferably free. I asked my interview-subjects the following question: "*How did you come? When you first set foot here, where did you go? What did you do?*" Here are some answers.

"*When I arrived, I immediately headed to Guiza and inquired about the Faisal neighborhood. I heard about it from many people from my village who traveled to and from Cairo. I was told that I was already in it. I got out of the microbus and walked for a while till I was here. I got to know a guy from Fayoum. He generously allowed me to spend that night staying with him; he was a doorman*," said Mohamed from Menia. "*I came with a friend of mine. He persuaded me to come with him. I sat by a fountain and waited for a working opportunity. I have not moved away from this place for 15 years*" (Dessouky). "*As for the first time, it was my brother who accompanied me. I was 15 years old at that time, and hardly knew anything*" (Henein). "*I came to this place directly. Some people talked to me about it. Some of my relatives were living here when I came. I stayed with them*" (Mahmoud).

The above-mentioned examples, which are typical of many such replies I listened to, clearly indicate that friends and relatives in Cairo – not permanent residents, but other unskilled labor migrants involved in temporary work and circular migration with links back to the villages of origin – are often able to facilitate the accommodation of newcomers from Upper Egypt. On the other hand, particularly striking is the example of Mohamed, who came without any prior knowledge, friends or relatives in Cairo and who managed to build an instant friendship with a person that he just met for the first time in his life, to the extent that the older migrant invited him to spend his first night in Cairo with him. This illustrates the good faith, good manners and solidarity of those poor, but fatalistic people. It also illustrates the importance of social networks – both those that are based on village ties and family links, and those which are capable of being forged almost instantly in the destination setting. Further details on housing and living conditions of the migrants in Cairo follow in Chapter 7.

6.1.2 Relatives in Cairo and channels of labor migration

About 65 percent of migrants interviewed in the questionnaire have relatives in Cairo; earlier-established and more or less permanently-settled migrants from their place of origin in Upper Egypt. However, in this study of unskilled laborer migration I found – perhaps surprisingly – that these permanent migrants do not by and large take an active role to facilitate the migration process. More than two-thirds of the interviewees (including the in-depth ones) mentioned that they rarely or never visit their relatives in Cairo who are permanently settled in the city. Some of them mentioned that these permanently-resident relatives do not actually know that they are in Cairo. A few of them said that they do not want them (the relatives in Cairo) to know that they are in Cairo. I shall comment later (in Chapter 7) on some reasons for this and for the surprising lack of social contact between these two subsets of migrants

So, who helped these people in their migration process? How did they find their current job? The answer to this latter question is given in Table 6.1. Almost two-thirds of the migrants found jobs through their relatives in Cairo. But "relatives" here means laborers who work in Cairo, not permanent resident relatives. Friends, in the village and in Cairo, ranked second, accounting for about one fifth of migrants. Often current jobs were found through friends from the village who used to work – or currently work – in Cairo. They provide accommodation and an introduction to the labor market. Those

Table 6.1

How did rural Upper Egyptian migrants find their current jobs in Cairo?

	Frequency	**Percent**
Friends	47	19.4
Relatives in Cairo*	154	63.6
Hired by employer	40	16.5
Other	1	0.4
Total	**242**	**100.0**

* Relatives in Cairo here mean laborers who work in Cairo, not permanent resident relatives
Source: Cairo questionnaire survey (2000)

who are hired by employers by word of mouth while the migrants are in their villages comprise 16.5 percent of the interviewees. Laborers who are hired by employers always come for task-based activities starting on a specific date. After the completion of the task they usually stay in Cairo and join their village friends and workmates in seeking day-to-day work.

Once again, the relevance of kinship and friendship networks is confirmed – in finding work as well as initial accommodation. But we also note another interesting social phenomenon: these networks of social solidarity are largely confined to the migrant laborer class and do not extend to relatives and co-villagers who are permanently settled in Cairo. My reading of this situation is as follows: long-term settled migrants are likely to have better living conditions and more secure jobs than the recently-arrived or shuttle migrants who work only in casual laboring and who frequently have no fixed abode – hence the latter feel an element of shame because of their inferior position and are reluctant to visit their better-off relatives and village contacts.

6.2 Work characteristics of migrants

6.2.1 Mode of work

By mode of work I mean whether migrant laborers work in a contract-based, daily-based, or task-based work mode. The first of these is relatively rare. In fact, it is not surprising when talking to a group of unskilled migrants waiting for work in the street to find that not one of them works (or indeed has ever worked) in a contract-based mode. As Table 6.2 shows, most respondent migrants accept to work on a combined task-based or daily-based mode (76.0 percent). Those who prefer to work solely in a task-based mode comprise 5.4 percent only. Those who get work solely in a daily-based mode comprise 18.6 percent of the migrants. Migrants mentioned to me that the task-based work is potentially more profitable than the daily-based, but less regular. The daily-based work is for a fixed rate – usually 15 or 20 LE (4 or 5 US$) – while the task-based work is by bargaining and may lead to double the revenues of the daily-based

work. On the other hand, daily-based work guarantees a fixed income for that day. Migrants who go early to the focal points and parks to look for jobs are more likely to

Table 6.2

Work characteristics in Cairo

Work Characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Mode of work	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Contract-based	0	0
Daily-based	45	18.6
Task-based	13	5.4
Task- or daily-based (combined)	184	76.0
Number of working hours per day		
5	2	.8
7	2	.8
8	156	64.5
9	59	24.4
10	15	6.2
11	2	.8
12	4	1.7
18	2	.8
Mean		8.5
Number of working days per week		
1	1	.4
2	2	.8
3	12	5.0
4	84	34.7
5	81	33.5
6	36	14.9
7	26	10.7
Mean		4.9
Current wage per day on average (Egyptian pounds)		
15	32	33.9
17	2	.8
20	124	51.2
25	24	9.9
30	6	2.5
35	2	.8
40	2	.8
Mean		19.31
Mode of receiving wages		
Daily	238	98.3
Weekly	4	1.7

Total	**242**	**100.0**

Source: Cairo questionnaire survey (2000)

be offered daily-based work for that day. Building contractors in the private sector start construction work early – about 7.30 in the morning. They go to the nearest migrant gathering points and pick the number that they need. Migrants who work on daily bases guarantee themselves an average income for that day, but no other opportunity to gain more money in that day. Laborers continue working until 4.00 pm or so. However, the employers and hirers of this kind of work have a different perspective. One rather angry contractor told me in an interview: "*We have to watch the performance of those laborers since they don't have any motive to work. They always try to waste time since they are guaranteed the daily rate. They take more than one hour break at noon"*. Naturally, the migrants have a different perspective on this, stressing the tough, physical nature of construction work, often carried out in extreme heat, and the failure of the hirers to pay up properly.

It is important here to refer to a unique type of hiring that prevails among migrants who have solid family and social networks in Cairo. As I mentioned before, for some villages – or a group of villages – in Upper Egypt there are well-known permanent focal points representing a concentration of old migrants and transitional migrants who refuse to be fully absorbed by the Cairo urban system. They live pretty much as if they are in their villages, keeping the same customs, norms, daily lifestyles, and traditions. It is an example of a kind of "urban ruralization", and has many parallels in the squatter barrios of recent migrants around Latin American cities or, closer to Egypt, the shanty-towns of Istanbul and Ankara, where "peasants without plows" bring elements of rural life into, or at least to the margins of, the city (see Skeldon, 1990 for a general overview, and Karpat, 1976 and Suzuki, 1966 for the Turkish case). In Cairo, newly-migrated unskilled laborers live together in these urban suburbs and districts, which facilitate their accommodation and the finding of work opportunities for them. Henein told me in my interview with him that "*we are about 200 people here from the same home town (Malwy in Menia governorate)… We are all acquainted with each other because we know each other back home.*" The most noteworthy examples of these migrant suburbs

are *Imam Shaf'i* and *Bassateen* in southern Cairo. Thousands of families who have migrated from two village groupings in Souhag governorate – mainly Seflaque and Sawam'a villages – have settled and resided in these areas near the Mokattam "mountains" and then established and expanded these two suburbs as a kind of model of slum areas in Cairo. About half of these families live in cemeteries (the infamous "city of the dead") and other areas with no access to public services.

Most of the newly migrated Upper Egyptian laborers who migrate to such areas in Cairo, however, cannot be seen in the typical focal points and parks of migrants. Migrants with counterpart villages (as I may call them) sit in specific coffee shops in the evening – after 5.00 pm – and the employers come to them instead of the migrants seeking employers or work opportunities. Employers or contractors are usually old migrants from these areas – but who have now become permanent residents. They select the number of workers that they need and confirm with them their job for the following day(s). When the contract is made between the contractor and the laborers, workers sometimes receive a "*biata*", an advance of approximately 5–10 LE, to take the work without a written contract. Oral agreements are very common in the construction sector in Egypt (Choucri *et al.*, 1978). It is worth mentioning here that these coffee shops function as highly effective means of networking among the migrant workers, where they may see each other daily, and know about the latest news of their village in Upper Egypt. Because the migrants do not have permanent residence at a recognized address and due to the fact that their living spaces in Cairo are often unplanned areas with no street names, the coffee shop plays an important role in communications. Newcomers from the village of origin come directly to the coffee shop when they arrive to Cairo. The coffee shop owner and the servers are key individuals in facilitating communication among the workers' groups since they all know each other and most of the customers. Workers frequently leave oral messages for their workmates with them. In addition to oral messages, sometimes they leave work tools, and other things to be picked up by their co-workers. As I mentioned before, this network also greatly facilitates communications with the origin village, since there is frequent travel contact by migrants moving back and forth – a topic I shall expand on later in my account.

The remainder of migrant laborers – after the daily-based hired workers – work in the so-called task-based mode. Task-based workers work for two groups of employers: the private sector contractors, like the daily hired workers, and the family sector. In addition to the daily-based workers, private sector contractors hire laborers in a task-based mode to do specific heavy jobs like unloading and lifting sacks of cement, sand, or loads of bricks. Migrant laborers refuse to do such work on a daily-based mode in most cases, simply because such physically demanding tasks are difficult to carry out all day long. In the family sector, families hire task-based laborer migrants to do construction and non-construction works. Construction work includes unloading and lifting packages of cement, sand, bricks, or tiles like the construction sector but for small-scale in-house works. The non-construction work includes lifting lighter loads, such as furniture and home equipment. Task-based workers are more likely to have more than one task per day. Like the contractors who hire migrant laborers on a daily basis, the family sector members who employ migrants on a task basis are not happy about them too. "*They abuse us. After agreeing with them about the cost of the task, they ask for more money. In addition they want me to offer them cigarettes and food*", one family member said. "*I needed one laborer to lift three pieces of furniture. Three of them insisted on turning up. They rushed into my car without me permitting them. I took them all after agreeing about the deal. After they lifted the furniture, they started to bargain again with me. They started nagging at me to give them more money*", said another person I interviewed in this capacity.

6.2.2 Working hours and wages

Before the analysis of working hours and wages of the surveyed population it is helpful to recall that government employees in Egypt work 36 hours per week over six days since the official holiday for most government agencies is only one day per week (Friday), the holy day for Muslims. In addition to the Friday holy day, Christian employees start work one hour later than their Muslim counterparts on Sunday to enable them to attend the Sunday prayer, which starts at 7.00 am in most churches. The average employee in the public sector is paid only 200 LE per month (about 50 US$). The private sector works up to seven days per week. Private sector employees work eight hours on average per day, six days per week, with days off in rotation. Visitors to Cairo

hence may not notice any difference in the daily life on Friday. This information is important to bear in mind while presenting the averages of working hours, days, and wages of migrant laborers.

Working hours per day for the surveyed population range between two and 18 hours. Migrants who work more than 10 hours represent only 3.3 percent of the total migrants (Table 6.2). The average working time is 8.5 hours per day, 2.5 hours more than the government sector and 0.5 more than the private sector. Task-based workers are likely to work more hours if they can find enough work to do. It is important here to refer to the underemployment problem in the government and the inflation of the number of government employees. The productivity of government workers in some sectors is less than one hour per day (*Al-Ahram* Newspaper, 1998). Building on my experience of observing laborers while doing their work and as reported to me by the workers themselves, their work is very hard, especially in task-based activities. Migrant workers in task-based activities try to finish the task in the shortest time that they can. This is to return back to their focal point to be ready for another task. However, in some cases, their colleagues prohibit them to go to another job if they themselves did not get any work since the early morning.

Daily work is not guaranteed. Some migrants work the seven days while some others may, if they are unlucky, work only one day per week. Reference in the questionnaire is made to the week that preceded the date of interview. Workers who work three days or less per week comprise 1.3 percent only. The average working days per week is almost five (4.9 days to be exact). Multiplying average hours per day by average days per week gives average hours per week. Average hours per week are 41.7 hours which is 5.7 hours more than the average for government employees but 6.3 hours less than the average for the private sector employees.

Most migrants receive their wage on a daily basis. Only four migrants out of my sample of 242 reported that they receive their wage weekly. Those migrants are the luckiest among all migrants since they are guaranteed work opportunities for one week in advance. Those four migrants are closely tied to a contractor who guarantees this work for them. Advance payments and installments within the week are common in this case. I

interviewed those migrants in their work place, not in the focal points. They mentioned that their employer provided them with shelter in addition to their wage. He permitted them to stay in the unfinished building until they complete their task.

6.2.3 Comparative perspectives

Now I compare the earnings of those migrant laborers whom I interviewed in the questionnaire survey with their equivalents in Cairo and Upper Egypt. Given the importance of the time of the survey in monetary comparisons, it is important to note that only very few studies have recently been carried out to investigate regional and sectoral disparities of wages, and even these are not very recent (see American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt, 1996; Wahba, 1996). Wahba's study, carried out to investigate earnings and regional inequality in Egypt, found that the mean annual earnings for laborers in Cairo was 1703 LE (around 400 US$), versus 1102 LE (about 250 US$) in rural Upper Egypt. The average annual earnings in Cairo are thus more than 50 percent higher than in rural Upper Egypt. Put another way, annual earnings in Upper Egypt are about two-thirds those in Cairo. A comparison between the annual earnings of my study population and non-migrant laborers in the regions of origin and destination reveals that migrants' annual earnings in Cairo are if anything higher than that of their equivalents in Cairo and certainly far beyond average wages in rural Upper Egypt. The annual earnings of the study population may be estimated to be around 2800 LE, rather less than US$700. This estimate is based on the calculated average number of working days per week, the mean duration of the working day, and the likely potential loss of active service due to injuries. However, it should be remembered that there is a five-year lag between my study and Wahba's study, and so comparisons have to be adjusted according to an annual inflation rate of about 10 percent, which brings the figures more in line with each other.

The American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt (1996) carried out a field study targeted on the national, bi-national and multinational companies that work in Egypt to examine Egypt's labor force and to review recent trends in the Egyptian labor market. A comparative survey of salary levels in Egypt was provided in the study. One major defect of the study was its narrow focus on companies in Cairo and only a few other

governorates. The second defect of the study was its focus on national and multinational companies in the private sector, excluding the government and the public sector in Egypt. The results however are not a surprise, at least to me. The average annual salary of the lowest administrative level (office boys and messengers) is 6000 LE (US$1500), which is more than double the study population's average annual income, and probably more like triple the difference if the wage inflation over five years is taken into account.

So, how to interpret these various comparisons? Wahba's data first suggest clear income disparities between Lower and Upper Egypt, something that is well-known and well-documented elsewhere. What is interesting is where the migrant laborers fit in. First, migrant laborers from my own Cairo survey appear to be earning two to three times the average levels in rural Upper Egypt: around 2800 as against 1100 LE on average. This ratio was often confirmed by interview data, including some quotes given earlier. However, some refinements to these comparisons have to be made. Given that the migrants I surveyed were drawn disproportionately from the poorer groups amongst the sending society, generally their income-earning capacities in their home villages can be assumed to be below the regional average for Upper Egypt. On the other hand, the undoubted wage contrast between Cairo and Upper Egypt has to be calibrated by the extra costs of being a migrant laborer in Cairo – accommodation, food, travel back and forth, plus of course the psychological costs of separation from family. The second comparison, between migrant and non-migrant laborers in Cairo, yields the surprising result that migrants appear to earn at least as much, on average, as the local-born laboring class. This parity is again, perhaps, more apparent than real, because of the extra living and psychological costs of the migrant workers, and their often inferior material conditions in Cairo, in particular their poor houses and meager diet (more on this in Chapter 7). Another factor to be brought in here is the nature of the work done, and the possible existence of a segmented employment structure – a point I shall return to very shortly, and again in Chapter 9. The third comparison, with the private-sector companies, needs only brief comment, since this is a favored sector as far as general income levels are concerned, and the migrant laborers are never likely to get jobs in this labor market segment.

Now I move to another, but related, comparison, which is that between the migrant

laborers and their supposed equivalents from Cairo in the workspace. In my fieldwork I visited many construction sites in Cairo and I interviewed – via unstructured interviews – employers and employees from Cairo to carry out a comparison between unskilled migrant laborers and the native Cairo unskilled laborers. The findings of my fieldwork in this respect were a surprise to me. I discovered that no Cairo-born native workers – even those with little or no educational qualifications and who come from an equivalent social background to "my" migrants – were working as casual unskilled laborers; and furthermore, that there were none who were even willing to contemplate such work nowadays. They see that unskilled laborers come from Upper Egypt – or from "other regions" as they said – "*but us, we work as masters and we are able to train our relatives to be masters too. If they are not willing to work in construction we send them to car repair workshops or any other work that they may like.*" These words are from one of the specialist tradesmen that I met on a construction site in Guiza. Another employer explained to me how Cairo residents have more options than those who came from Upper Egypt to work in Cairo: "*It is difficult for many young men in Cairo to do such harsh work. They are spoiled. They have many options other than working as ordinary laborers in this sector. If they do not have any qualification to do productive work they can work as street vendors, work in a coffee shop, or in any workshop with any of their relatives*". Another employer whom I interviewed stressed the economic importance of unskilled Upper Egyptian laborers in the construction sector: "*These very poor people are the backbone of the construction sector in Cairo. Before, they were the backbone of the construction sector in Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and Libya. Now, they are very important to us in this sector. We use newly developed machines and equipment but also we use Upper Egyptian laborers.*" So it is clear that hard work in the construction sector in Cairo is an Upper Egyptian specialty. It is clear also that they are more eligible than any other segment or category of laborers to do such work, physically and psychologically. I shall return to comment further on this key finding in the concluding chapter.

6.3 Work dynamics

By "work dynamics" I mean, first, the type of occupation (whether migrants have special occupations or are ordinary unskilled labor migrants); duration of working away from

village; work experience in different jobs in Cairo; evolution of various jobs and professional development; work experience in other places in Egypt; and finally work experience in the village. Each of these dimensions will now be briefly analyzed in turn.

6.3.1 Occupation

About 94 percent of migrants are ordinary laborers without any specific occupation. Only 5.8 percent of migrants claimed that they have a specialized trade or occupation (14 cases out of 242 cases). I asked those 14 individuals why they generally work as ordinary laborers since they have a trade. They replied that they cannot compete with city residents since they do not have a permanent place of residence or a permanent place of work (workshop). They mentioned also that their occupations are not profitable in their villages. My personal impression is that they are not qualified for any occupation in the urban labor market. Their skill level is lower than urban residents and their work style is different, especially in occupations like painting or scaffolding. The main trades that they possessed were construction-related.

Table 6.3

Duration of working away from village

Year groups	**Number of migrants**	**Percent**
0–4	80	33.1
5–9	65	26.9
10–14	48	19.8
15–19	23	9.5
20–24	10	4.1
25–29	8	3.3
30–35	8	3.3
Mean	8.95 years	
Total	**242**	**100.0**

Source: Cairo questionnaire survey (2000)

6.3.2 Duration of working away from village

Given the mean age of migrants (28.9 years) and the mean duration of working away from the home village (8.95 years), it is clear that the surveyed population has spent about one third of their life in a migratory status (31.0 percent exactly) and more than one half of their active life, given the fact that they enter labor market activities at a very young age. Duration of working away from the village ranges between less than one year and 35 years (Table 6.3). Migrants who spent 15 years or more comprise 20.2 percent of migrants. The correlation between age and duration of working away from village (0.667) is positive and highly significant; the older the age of the migrant the longer the duration of working away from village. This is hardly surprising, but it may also show that migrants are not fully decided about their aims behind migration. The migration outcomes are not clear enough to them before migration, so that they have little clear idea about the likely or probable duration of migration. Migration is not seen as a means of achieving planned long-term goals. It is a survival strategy, above all to get money to feed children and other family members left behind in the village.

6.3.3 Work experience in different jobs in Cairo

Only 25 migrants in the questionnaire survey have worked in different jobs in Cairo before; they comprise 11.8 percent of the surveyed population. Migrants have worked as car tenders, porters, masons, street vendors, and workers in car repair workshops. By and large, these individuals represent migrants who failed to adjust themselves in work other than construction. Others who succeeded to continue in such jobs are to some extent beyond the scope of this study. It is not easy to track them because they stayed and continued in their jobs in other sectors. The following interview quote from Kamal gives an example of a migrant who started in a specialized sector (a garage) but then left it. *"I traveled with a relative of mine to Cairo. He used to work in a garage in Badran neighborhood. I told him that I was thinking about going to Cairo. He was a neighbor of mine, and approved my plans. I accompanied him from our village to Menia town,*

and we took the train to Cairo. It was him who had a previous idea about the place, so he took me by the hand and we went to Badran neighborhood. I hardly knew anything, but reading. I went with him to the garage, and joined him in working there for 15 days. I was paid 25 pounds a week, in addition to the tips I got, but I was then badly treated by the job master. Moreover, working hours were too long: from 8 in the evening till 9 in the morning – all through the night shift."

6.3.4 Evolution of various jobs and professional development

In the early stages of preparing the field questionnaire, I thought that the work turnover of migrants would be high, with migrants moving from job to job frequently. From my pre-field work exploratory investigations, however, I found that most migrants tend to stick with one type of job for a long time. The original question to measure the professional development of the migrants through moving from lower level jobs to higher level jobs was then changed to mean the conditions or performance of various earlier jobs and the current job in Cairo over time. Migrants were asked to evaluate their job conditions by selecting one statement out of the following three options: *remained about the same, got better, or got worse*. As shown in Table 6.4, almost one half of migrant laborers mentioned that their job performance conditions remained about the same. They reported that since their arrival to Cairo they are doing the same tasks without any evolution or acquisition of any new skills. About one fourth said that work conditions got better, while the remaining one quarter of migrants said that work conditions got worse. The main complaint for those who claimed that their work conditions deteriorated is the police. "*The police are after us on a daily basis. They want to force us away from this bridge. They claim we look filthy. I can guess that someone in a high place was passing by, and he looked down on us, then he must have ordered the police to move us away from here*" (Ismail). The police appear to be particularly vigilant about groups of laborers who stay in modern places in Cairo, rather than frequenting old places and newly established slum suburbs. Here is another account of a police raid on migrant workers: "*A police detective threw our tools on the ground, and took four of us together. We were driven in a car with two or three other workers. We were taken to the police station, and interrogations were carried out. We were finished in the afternoon, and taken then to a cell. It was absolutely overcrowded. More*

than 120 or 130 detainees were in the same cell which consisted of two small partitions and a corridor. We sat down on the floor, let alone the contaminated air and smell. We sweated heavily. It was the most horrible night I have ever spent."

The general question about possible improvements in job status and type needs some further comment, especially in the light of the field research strategy I adopted. By mainly targeting casual laborers and construction workers at their workplaces, hiring sites and coffee-shops, I naturally tended to exclude those who had made a qualitative shift to better kind of employment. However, from general knowledge and other conversations with informants, I know that some movement out of the construction sector has taken place – more in the past than at present. Whether this is true "upward" mobility is doubtful, since the moves which can be observed are "horizontal" into parallel informal-sector fields, such as street-vending, working in the cemeteries, or as assistants in workshops.

Table 6.4

Evaluation of various jobs in Cairo

	Frequency	**Percent**
Remained about the same	116	47.9
Got better	62	25.6
Got worse	64	26.4
Total	**242**	**100.0**

Source: Cairo questionnaire survey (2000)

6.3.5 Work experience in other places in Egypt

Almost one quarter of migrants have had work experience in places other than Cairo and their home villages before migrating to the city (24.8 percent). Migrants have worked in Alexandria governorate (55.0 percent of this subset) in addition to other governorates such as Daquhlyya, North and South Sinai, and Ismailia – all in Lower Egypt. Their work experience and tasks were in the construction sector, like their current work in Cairo. The difference lay only in the mode of work. There, they used to work for

contractors who used to hire them direct from their villages to work on given construction projects in these governorates for specific periods of time, usually 30 to 40 days. This type of work is temporary and cannot be guaranteed for a long time, since once the contract expires, unemployment may result.

6.3.6 Work experience in the village

About four-fifths of migrants (189 cases) experienced work in their villages in the past or on their visits to their villages in Upper Egypt; most of them worked as farmers (81.0 percent), and masons (11.1 percent). About two-thirds of migrants (62.6 percent) work in their villages during their visits to their places of origin, either for others or on their own farms. The wage made per day – for the last five years as a reference period – was 7.96 Egyptian pounds on average. This village daily rate is way below (only 41.2 percent) the daily rate in Cairo (19.31 LE). In addition to the rarity and seasonality of job opportunities in rural Egypt, the wage difference is the most important factor in rural–urban migration in Egypt, as we have already seen. These findings are consistent with the earlier discussed LFR dual economy theory of rural–urban migration (Lewis, 1954; Fei and Ranis, 1961), where Upper Egyptian laborers migrate to Cairo primarily to benefit from the difference in wages between rural and urban sectors.

These findings also reinforce the social rootedness of migrants in their home villages, despite the fact that they spend the greater part of their time as migrants living and working in the city. The fact that two-thirds of respondents habitually, if occasionally, work in their places of origin, where most continue to maintain their families, means that we are dealing with a rather specific type of rural-urban migration, commonly known as circulation. The literature on the nature of circulation as a migratory form was reviewed in Chapter 3 (section 3.4.2), and I will elaborate on the Egyptian case further in the next three chapters, when appropriate.

6.4 Occupational safety

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right of all people to just and favorable conditions of work. Yet, it is estimated that worldwide, workers suffer

250 million accidents every year, with 330,000 fatalities. The economic losses are equivalent to 4 per cent of the world's gross national product. While occupational safety and health law enforcement covers practically 100 percent of the economically active population in the developed countries, the figure for many developing countries is close to 10 percent or less, leaving major hazardous sectors and occupations uncovered, such as agriculture, fishing, small-scale enterprises and the informal sector, and including very hazardous sectors such as construction (Alli, 2001).

First of all I have to say that all the migrant laborers – the 242 interviewees and the 20 case studies – are not covered by any type of health or even social insurance. In addition, the percentage of those who have had serious job-related injuries while working in Cairo comprises one fifth of the total migrant laborers surveyed (19.8 percent). This percentage is higher than that of the formal sector and other sectors in the Egyptian economy which is less than 5 percent (National Institute of Occupational Safety, 2001). Some of the injuries were very serious such as "*stone has fallen onto my back*", "*A machine fell on top of me*", "*I fell from the car while I was carrying cement*", "*I fell from the scaffold and my arm was broken*", and "*A lump of rubble hit my leg*", as per some respondents' words. A more serious incident was reported to me by Nasralla in the following account: "*I fell from a tractor speeding at about 80 kilometers per hour. I went into a coma, then was taken to the hospital where I spent 5 days unconscious. When I checked out, I stayed for about 45 days jobless. Since then, I feel as if there was something wrong in my head. Sometimes while walking, I get the feeling that I am about to faint*". Another incident was related to me by Ibrahim: "*When I was walking through a scaffold, it all collapsed. I was taken to the hospital where my head was stitched and my leg was set in a cast. It took some time till I became conscious again*". And Selim told me: "*We were doing some demolition and a chisel dropped on my leg, badly wounding it. I had stitches and I remained jobless for 10 days*."

About 80 percent of the injured workers went to the hospital (38 cases) while the remaining workers did not go. They just returned to their village of origin until recovery. For those who went to the hospital, who took them there? More than one half went to hospital themselves, while about one third were taken to hospital by their colleagues. Employers took only four cases to the hospital. In most cases laborers paid for their

transportation and medication while employers paid only for 11 cases. After injuries, migrant laborers spent inactive periods ranging between one day for light injuries and three months for very serious injuries. Table 6.5 summarizes my questionnaire data on this. Amongst the one in five of my sample who suffered work-related injuries, the average loss of work time due to these injuries was 24.5 days or about five working weeks.

Table 6.5

Duration of inactive period due to injuries

	Frequency	**Percent**
Less than 7 days	22	45.9
7 days – one month	16	33.3
More than one month	10	20.8
Mean	24.5 days	
Total	**48**	**100.0**

Source: Cairo questionnaire survey (2000)

6.5 Conclusion

Work and work-related issues have constituted the main themes of this chapter. My analysis of initial accommodation, work search mechanisms, work characteristics and dynamics, in addition to the special topic of occupational safety issues, has revealed the following points.

Old and long-established migrants who reside in Cairo permanently do not appear to have any role in facilitating the migration of new unskilled laborers from Upper Egypt. However, already-present labor migrants help newly-arrived migrants and facilitate their accommodation. Almost two-thirds of the migrants from Upper Egypt to Cairo found jobs through their migrant-labor relatives in Cairo (Table 6.1).

Migrant laborers work an average of 8.5 hours per day. Daily work is not guaranteed,

but they work 4.9 days on average per week. Their average daily wage is 19.3 LE, three times higher than their non-migrant equivalents in Upper Egypt (Table 6.2).

Upper Egyptian laborers who work as unskilled laborers in the construction sector in Cairo appear to have ended up by monopolizing this type of employment, with the dual result that the sector has become structurally completely reliant on this supply of labor from Upper Egypt whilst, at the same time, native Cairo workers reject this type of hard labor. Cairo residents tend to be specialized in certain trades and work as “masters” and “assistant masters”. They train their relatives to continue in their trade or profession after them. Some employers appreciate the role of unskilled Upper Egyptian laborers in the construction field in Cairo, although not a few instances were noted of complaints by employers.

The above constitutes solid evidence for the existence of a segmented labor market in Cairo, with more or less mutually exclusive components. My uncovering of village-based migration chains (to be explored in more detail in the next chapter) with their own social networks and hiring circuits in Cairo supports Skeldon’s notion of “segmented migration fields” (1990: 140–142); although the Egyptian case does not provide illustrations of specific transfers of village-based skills to the urban context, as researched by Skeldon in Lima and Peru.

The mean duration of working away from the village for the study population is almost nine years. Taking a cross-section of the surveyed population at the time of interview, migrants have spent about one third of their lives in a migratory status, but most of them do the same job and the same tasks without any professional evolution or skill development plans. As a result, about one half of migrants felt that their work conditions remained about the same over their time as a laborer in Cairo. However, it has to be pointed out that this finding is constrained by the nature of my questionnaire and interview surveys which were focused on one main type of labor migration.

Regarding migrants' work experience in other places in Egypt and in their villages, almost one quarter of migrants have worked in places other than Cairo (Alexandria,

Daquhlyya, and Sinai). About 80 percent of migrants experienced work in their villages, most of them as farmers and farm laborers, thereby opening up evidence for rural–urban labor circulation as perhaps the main migratory definition of the phenomenon under study.

On the topic of occupational safety, about one fifth of the migrants have had serious injuries related to their job while working in Cairo. The average loss of time due to work-related injuries is about five working weeks per year. Migrant laborers are not covered by any social or health insurance.

All of the above findings regarding the working lives of Upper Egyptian migrants in Cairo lead towards one overarching conclusion. This is that these migrant workers, coming from another, and rather different, region in Egypt, one characterized by rural poverty and overpopulation, function as an almost entirely separate segment of the Cairo labor market. Although the evidence suggests that they are a highly important structural and functional element of that overall urban economic system, they achieve this by living and working in an almost parallel universe. They do not have access to many of the "normal" aspects of Cairo life – proper accommodation, decent health care, social welfare, workers' rights, opportunities for social and economic advancement. There is a close correlation between their precarious (but structurally indispensable) position in the metropolitan labor market (marginal workers with no rights, low pay, tough working conditions etc.), and their precarious access to housing, social facilities and what might be regarded as "standard" rights as citizens of Egypt and Cairo. To some extent, these socio-economically marginal characteristics are imposed on them by an urban economy and society that seems to want to keep them in their allotted role as a supplier of cheap, flexible and disposable labor. But, as rural migrant laborers, their links remain, in most cases, oriented to their villages of origin in Upper Egypt. In the next chapter I turn to a more in-depth explanation of their living conditions and lifestyles in both Cairo and their rural places of origin, and an analysis of the key rural–urban linkages that are sustained both through, and in spite of, long-distance migration to the city.