

Influence of Higher Education and Migration on the Empowerment of Women from Conflict Zones

Authors: Mary Vayaliparampil & Rhea James

Abstract

This paper presents a pilot study of the influence of higher education and migration on the empowerment of women from conflict zones. Specifically, the qualitative study examines the experience of women who migrated to the United States or Europe from conflict zones. The study examines how higher education and migration to the United States and Europe from conflict zones influence 1) familial approval for women to participate in economic activity, 2) the decision-making capacity of women, 3) asset ownership for women, and 4) gender roles within families and communities. The study employs semi-structured interviews to collect data from female university students and educated working women living in the United States or Europe. The study highlights the transformative influence of higher education and migration on the empowerment of women from conflict zones as well as potential challenges and lessons that inform a more in-depth study.

1. Introduction

That women suffer gender inequalities is a well-documented fact borne out by international statistics. According to the World Bank, for South Asia in 2022, the adult female literacy rate was 67% while it was 82% for males; female participation in the labor force was 24.8%; unemployment within the female labor force was 7.2% compared to 6.9% for men. However, the participation of women in the different sectors of society is imperative for national development. The education of women especially promotes economic growth, average life expectancy, and the functioning of political processes (Hill & King, 1995). “Investment in girls’ education has the potential to generate the highest returns of any investment, is one of the most effective ways to promote social and economic development, reduce poverty, and advance gender equality” (Kattan & Khan, 2023). World Bank statistics for 2022 show that the adult female literacy rate was 59% while it was 73% for males; female participation in the labor force was 42.3%; unemployment within the female labor force was 7.0% compared to 6.4% for men.

For women from fragile and conflict contexts, in the last decade, there have been concentrated efforts to alleviate the stress of violent conflict through programs that help individuals from conflict zones to migrate to the United States and Europe. Understanding the influence of higher education and migration will help fill gaps in the literature on the influence of higher education migration on gender equality for women from conflict zones.

2. Review of Literature

While there is substantial literature on the conduct of education in emergencies, the literature on the education of girls from conflict zones is limited. The advocacy brief by Kirk (2006) on the gender implications of education in emergencies outlines strategies for education programs to be accessible as well as accomplish the physical, cognitive, and psychosocial protection needs of learners in emergencies. Buvinić et al. (2014)

illuminated the link between armed conflict, gender, and schooling to reveal that events associated with war, pre-war gender differences in educational achievement indicators, and opportunities for education and employment determine the impact of armed conflict on gender inequalities. Khan (2015) highlighted the impact of Taliban militancy on the education of girls. Kirk (2008) discusses strategies that fostered gender equality in education for learners during an ongoing emergency and reconstruction after an emergency. The literature on women's empowerment can be categorized in different ways. First, some studies illuminate how education contributes to women's empowerment and economic development (Jayaweera, 1997; Heward & Bunwaree, 1999; Duflo, 2012). Second, theoretical studies conceptualize the meaning of women's empowerment and provide models to understand the dynamics of women's empowerment (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990; Spreitzer, 1996; Kabeer, 1999; Mosedale, 2005; Gholipur et al. 2010). A third category of studies examines how income contributes to women's empowerment (Papanek and Schewede, 1988; Wilson-Moore, 1989).

The literature does not comprehensively illuminate the influence of higher education and migration to Western countries such as the United States and Europe on women from conflict zones. The understanding of how higher education and migration may or may not empower women from conflict zones is insufficient.

Furthermore, the international development community of practice does not sufficiently address the challenges men face in adapting to the change from traditional gender roles. The study addresses these gaps in the literature through a qualitative examination of the influence of higher education and migration to the United States and Europe on gender equality for women from conflict zones.

3. Research Question(s)

How do higher education and migration influence the empowerment of women from conflict zones?

1) how do higher education and migration to the United States and Europe influence approval for women to participate in economic activity? 2) how does higher education and migration to the United States and Europe influence the decision-making capacity of women 3) how does higher education and migration to the United States and Europe influence asset ownership for women? and 4) how does higher education and migration to the United States and Europe influence gender roles within families and communities?

4. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens for this study is informed by Thomas and Velthouse (1990) psychological empowerment model and Mosedale (2005) framework for assessing women's empowerment. The focus of the study is on individual-oriented empowerment. The study examines psychological empowerment and the achievement of outcomes in the context of higher education and migration from conflict zones to the United States and Europe.

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) define psychological empowerment in the context of the workplace as the perception of impact, competence, meaningfulness, and choice. An individual's perception comprises an assessment of these four factors concerning the immediate task and a global assessment that is informed by cumulative learning from previous tasks that have been generalized over time. Impact refers to the extent to which the desired outcome of the task is achievable for an individual. Competence refers to the extent to which an individual has the skill required to complete a task. Meaningfulness refers to the extent to which a task is desired and meaningful to an individual. Choice refers to the extent to which an individual's action in the context of a task is self-determined.

Applying Thomas and Velthouse (1990) psychological empowerment model, for this study, impact refers

to the extent to which higher education and migration empower women in terms of their decision-making capacity, approval to participate in economic activity, asset ownership, and change gender roles within families and communities. Competence refers to the extent to which higher education and migration help women develop the competency needed to make decisions for themselves and their families, participate in economic activity, own assets, and expand their roles within families and communities.

Meaningfulness refers to the extent to which decision-making power, participation in economic activity, ownership of assets, and change in gender roles within families and communities are meaningful and desired outcomes for women. Choice refers to the extent to which the current status of women in terms of their decision-making power, participation in economic activity, ownership of assets, and change in gender roles within families and communities was a choice determined by them.

Mosedale (2005) framework for assessing empowerment conceptualizes empowerment by taking into consideration the myriad ways in which societies in the global north and global south differentiate women from men. According to Mosedale (2005), women's empowerment is "the process by which women redefine gender roles in ways which extend their possibilities for being and doing." The framework comprises two components: identifying constraints to action, identifying how women's agency has developed, and identifying how women's agency has changed constraints to action.

Identifying constraints to action involves applying the 'three faces of power' perspective questions relating to open, suppressed or avoided conflict. The three faces of power are power over, power within, power with, and social values and norms. 'Power over' refers to who has power over the individual. 'Power within' refers to the psychological conditions within an individual that need to be present to allow for the achievement of goals or desired outcomes. 'Power with' refers to the allies an individual might have to support the achievement of goals or desired outcomes. Social values and norms are the societal beliefs that constrain an individual woman's agency in making their own choices.

Identifying how women's agency has developed focuses on processes. It involves identifying individual and collective actions that enhance individual agency or empowerment. Identifying how women's agency changed constraints to action involves identifying whether the constraints to action have weakened as a consequence of women's individual or collective action or other reasons. Women's action as the causal factor of weakened constraints to action qualifies as empowerment. Other causal factors weakening constraints to action do not qualify as empowerment.

The Mosedale (2005) framework is based on Hayward (1998) conceptualization of women's empowerment and its functions. According to Hayward (1998), the unit of interest is 'the capacity to participate effectively in shaping the social limits that define what is possible'. This framework provides a baseline for a comparative examination of the extent of women's empowerment before an action is taken and the extent of women's empowerment after an action is taken. It allows for the assessment of the outcomes of an action across geographical regions. The framework's three faces of power perspective questions provide guidelines for directing the engagement of participants in the study. Mosedale (2005) framework's conceptualization emphasizes the achievement of change that expands options not only for women themselves but also for women in general over time. This is helpful in a qualitative understanding of impact over time and people that this study seeks to do. The framework also provides a basis to examine male attitudes and beliefs through a constraint-to-action prism.

5. Methodology

The study is qualitative and employs a phenomenological approach to understand the influence of higher education and migration for women from conflict zones. The social phenomenon of interest in this study

is the pursuit of higher education by women who have migrated to the US from conflict zones namely Afghanistan.

The study employs semi-structured interviews to collect data from female university students who had some or no education in their home countries, women who did not have jobs in their home countries but are currently working since at least three years, and women graduates who are currently working since at least three years. The study will also include the spouses of the female participants. The conflict zones of interest are Syria and Afghanistan.

Interpretive phenomenology, also known as existential or psychological phenomenology, acknowledges that the researcher cannot completely bracket their own perspective and background, and that the data analysis involves a co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the participants. The data analysis process involves three steps: reading, reflecting, and writing. Reading means immersing oneself in the data and identifying significant statements or expressions. Reflecting means analyzing the statements in relation to the context, the purpose, and the literature of the study. Writing means creating a narrative that conveys the interpretation and understanding of the phenomena and their implications.

The reflexive approach to thematic analysis highlights the researcher's active role in knowledge production (Braun and Clarke 2019). Codes are understood to represent the researcher's interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset. Reflexive thematic analysis is considered a reflection of the researcher's interpretive analysis of the data conducted at the intersection of (1) the dataset; (2) the theoretical assumptions of the analysis, and (3) the analytical skills/resources of the researcher (Braun and Clarke 2019).

The unit of analysis is individual women. A phenomenological approach using thematic analysis will be applied to analyze data. A comparative lens is to be employed to evaluate the experience of university students, women with some education who are currently working, and graduate women who are currently working. An exploratory pilot study was conducted in 2024 to test and inform the design of more in-depth study. The pilot study involved semi-structured interviews conducted online with three Afghan women residing in the United States and Europe to understand how higher education and migration influence the empowerment of women from conflict zones. . The purpose of conducting a pilot study was to identify potential challenges in conducting the study and apply the lessons learnt towards a more in-depth study.

6. Preliminary Findings

The study found that higher education and migration to the United States and Europe positively influence the decision-making capacity of the participants. Counsel and suggestions on important household matters regarding health, expenses, education, and careers were actively sought by immediate and extended family members including men and elders in Afghanistan from the participants in the study. Pursuing higher education programs has helped the participants to be perceived as role models within their families. With regard to gender roles, participants felt that their role within the family expanded due to higher education and migration. They were still expected to fulfill traditional roles within the home in terms of household chores to some extent but the participation of male members in household chores improved and there was greater acceptance of their role as income generators.

Higher education and migration did not influence the approval for the participants to engage in economic activity. The study revealed that significant male relatives allowed them to pursue education and careers while they lived in Afghanistan. Higher education and migration to the US therefore did not change their approval to participate in economic activity in a significant way.

Higher education and migration to the United States and Europe also did not influence asset ownership for women. The participants explained they had not spent sufficient time in the United States and Europe to allow for the accumulation of savings to buy assets.

Challenges

Two challenges were identified in conducting the study. The first challenge is determining how to qualitatively separate the impact of higher education from the impact of culture and income on gender roles. In discussing whether higher education and migration to the United States and Europe influenced gender roles within their families, one participant revealed that her father supported women's education and employment even while they were in Afghanistan. Therefore, her migration for higher education to the United States and Europe did not change gender roles within their families. Another participant revealed that western culture that she and her husband were exposed to in the United States influenced her husband's perception of gender roles.

Similarly, separating the influence of income from the influence of higher education on gender roles is another aspect of the study that needs to be addressed. Differentiating between the impact of economic hardship versus socio-political circumstance on attitudes towards gender roles would explicate the question: were gender roles within the family influenced more by economic forces (resource scarcity, unemployment) or prevailing cultural norms?

Adaptations for In-Depth Study

The study revealed that higher education and migration to the United States and Europe did not change approval for the participants to engage in economic activity as male elders in their family were already progressive enough to support their education and career in Afghanistan. Based on this revelation, it would be good to include women who were not employed in Afghanistan but are currently employed in the United States or Europe. Another finding is that higher education and migration influenced male relatives of the participants to be more accepting of women's employment and their own role in sharing household chores. The participants also revealed that the significant male relatives making decisions to allow women in the family to pursue education and work were ridiculed sometimes by community members and extended

relatives. Therefore, male participants will be included in the sample to understand the perceptions of men about how they navigate the influence of higher education and migration on the empowerment of women.

A further revision in data collection would be to include interview questions that separate the impact of higher education from the impact of culture and economic gain.

7. Significance of the Study

The findings of the study will be used to conduct an in-depth examination of how higher education and migration influences the empowerment of women from conflict zones. These findings have the potential to inform the international development community including national governments that support refugees, international aid agencies, and other practitioners. The study will reveal the extent to which the efforts of international governments to rehabilitate women from conflict zones are successful in providing women with a safe space that empowers them with an education and transforms their lives. The findings will also assist in designing initiatives that support men to develop skills that help them adapt to changing gender roles within families and communities.

8. References

1. (2023, March 9). Closing the gap: Tackling the remaining disparities in girls' education and women's labor market participation. World Bank. Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/closing-gap-tackling-remaining-disparities-girls-education-and-womens-labor-market>
2. Buvinić, M., Das Gupta, M., & Shemyakina, O. N. (2014). Armed conflict, gender, and schooling. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 28(2), 311-319.
3. Duflo, E. (2012). Women empowerment and economic development. *Journal of Economic literature*, 50(4), 1051-1079.
4. Gholipour, A., Rahimian, A., Mirzamani, A., & Zehtabi, M. (2010). IMPACT model of women's empowerment. *International Business Research*, 3(1), 57.
5. Hayward, C. R. (1998) *De-facing power*. Polity, Vol. 31 pp 22-34 Hayward, C. R. (2000). *De-facing power*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Heward, C., & Bunwaree, S. (Eds.). (1999). *Gender, education and development: beyond access to empowerment*. Palgrave Macmillan.
7. Jayaweera, S. (1997). Women, education and empowerment in Asia. *Gender and Education*, 9(4), 411-424. Hill, M. A., & King, E. (1995). Women's education and economic well-being. *Feminist economics*, 1(2), 21-46.
8. Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), 435-464.
9. Kattan & Khan, (2023). Closing the gap: Tackling the remaining disparities in girls' education and women's labor market participation. World Bank. Retrieved December 20, 2023, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/closing-gap-tackling-remaining-disparities-girls-education-and-womens-labor-market>
10. Khan, S. (2015). Impact of Armed Conflict on Female Education in Tehsil Matta, Kabal and Khawaza Khela of District Swat, Pakistan. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 4(12), 19-31.
11. Kirk, J. (2006). *Education in Emergencies: The Gender Implications*. Advocacy Brief. UNESCO Bangkok. Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, PO Box 967, Prakhnong Post Office, Bangkok 10110, Thailand.
12. Kirk, J. (2008). Addressing gender disparities in education in contexts of crisis, postcrisis, and

state fragility. *Girls' Education in the 21st Century*, 153.

13. Mosedale, S. (2005). Assessing women's empowerment: towards a conceptual framework. *Journal of international development*, 17(2), 243-257. (n.d.). Indicators. The World Bank.
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator>
14. Papanek, H., & Schwede, L. (1988). Women are good with money: earning and managing in an Indonesian city. *Economic and political weekly*, WS73-WS84.
15. Spreitzer, G. M. (1996). Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment. *Academy of management journal*, 39(2), 483-504.
16. Thomas, K. W., & Velthouse, B. A. (1990). Cognitive elements of empowerment: Na “interpretive” model of intrinsic task motivation. *Academy of management review*, 15(4), 666- 681.
17. Wilson-Moore, M. (1989). Women's work in homestead gardens: Subsistence, patriarchy, and status in Northwest Bangladesh. *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 281-297.