

What is Higher Education for?
Educational Aspirations and Career Prospects
of Women in the Arab Gulf

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Abstract

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Abstract

Across the six Arab Gulf countries, women enrolled in higher education perform at a level equal or superior to their male counterparts. The question here is why these women seek higher education in the first place.

Since the introduction of the human capital theory, education has been understood as exerting a strong influence, not only in the singular aspect of wide-ranging benefits pertaining on the individual level, but also on the social and economic development of a nation. In particular, for women, who have been and often still are oppressed and disadvantaged historically, education is their greatest potential source of empowerment. A positive correlation between female educational achievement and labor market participation has been found in various academic fields and in assessments of data. However, it must be noted that this correlation does not indicate that the primary motivation for females for higher education is for the sake of participating in the labor force.

It is appropriate to say that there is a clear discord in the performance of the labor market between women and women engaged in higher education. Especially in the six Arab Gulf countries, a significant discrepancy between educational achievement and labor outcome of women are found. This phenomenon has been highlighted mostly in the West,

in terms of promoting women's rights and utilizing human capital. These studies show the disparity between female educational attainment and labor participation, leading to high unemployment rate among highly educated women, caused by the unique structural and traditional cultural norms of the Gulf society. The question of why educated women cannot enter the labor-market appears that these discourses are founded upon the underlying assumption that GCC women pursue higher education primarily to secure employment. On the other hand, given the cultural significance the Gulf region attaches to family, including marriage, some arrive at the conclusion that the reason why women acquire higher education is for the sake of possessing the characteristics of becoming a wise mother and wife, while others argue that education is primarily used to delay or avoid marriage. However, despite the vigorous debate regarding women's participation in politics, economics, Gulf studies, gender studies and education, studies on the reasons as to why women in the GCC choose to attend higher education is scarce.

In order to bridge the gap in this study, I use a combination of deep quantitative and qualitative sources to answer the question of why women embark on such choices in terms of higher education and careers from sociological perspectives. By doing so, this knowledge can create a more sophisticated and multi-layered answer to the question at stake. The current study has deliberately chosen the few dominant theories to explain the

educational aspirations of a society: status attainment and status expression. Most literature takes one or both of these two theories at face value. As a result, this study was designed to examine the educational aspiration and career prospects of females in the GCC by applying the conventional aspiration theories as the first step in providing more sophisticated and multi-layered explanation based the collective voices of GCC women.

In order to examine women's reasons and motivation factors for obtaining degrees and their career aspirations, a mixed methods approach was applied to ensure a more sophisticated, and multivariate explanation for the remaining question: Why do GCC women pursue higher education, and what expectations do they hold post graduating? Within this study, a sequential explanatory designed mixed-methods approach was adopted.

A sequential designed mixed-methods approach is a two-phase design in which the quantitative data is collected first, followed by the collection of the qualitative data. The purpose is to use the qualitative results to further explain and interpret the findings from the quantitative phase. Quantitative data was obtained through an online survey conducted in Arabic, distributed during the time period from January to October 2016. In order to obtain in-depth and detailed individual experience and perspective on the research objective, qualitative data was collected through individual semi-constructive interviews. Both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were designed based on the Input-

Process-Output (hence after IPO) framework (Astin, 1991). This framework was chosen in order to illustrate women's awareness and perspectives regarding higher education, throughout their university careers. Moreover, as research ethics and the moderation of flaws pertaining to the online survey were taken into account, data was collected using snowball sampling.

A total of 2,573 people participated in the survey. Excluding those who responded to less than 50 percent the survey, data from a total of 1,849 respondents were analyzed using SPSS. Using 20 transcribed interviews and notes from four other interviews, data was analyzed, organized and lastly classified into respective theme categories.

The findings of this study show the importance of understanding the 'life-world' of GCC women in educational and career choices. Women in the region are making rational decisions regarding education and career, accepting, accommodating and even bargaining with rolls carried out by the region's economic, cultural and social structures.

While the recent progression of female labor participation stalling in all GCC countries, this study found that most young women in the GCC still hoped to acquire a job post-education and had high confidence in achieving their career goals. However, for many of these same women, their career aspirations never fully materialized, as evidence points out through an overwhelming proportion of educated women who later actively chose not

to work. Chapter 5 provides a set of explanations for these findings, in which the below summarized four main implications that help to further our understanding about the obstacles Gulf women face. First, there was a severe mismatch between survey respondents' chosen academic majors and their intended careers. The interview data further revealed their lack of appropriate qualifications, knowledge, and suitable skills necessary to pursue their chosen careers. Moreover, I found that GCC women particularly valued the environmental factors of a job over the tasks and responsibilities of a job which include but not limited to: working conditions, colleagues, and benefits. Their emphasis on these factors may have further contributed to the GCC women's broader mismatch, seeking opportunities based on benefits and convenience rather than aptitude and suitability.

Secondly, the inevitability and unpredictability embedded in the GCC's regional marriage norms may hinder GCC women from pursuing a long-term career plan. Many interviewees have hopes of obtaining a job post-graduation and continuing to work post marriage but in order to do so, this would necessitate them to take a variety of 'life-event leaves' just to accommodate this inherent biological inequality of childbearing and other aspects of married life. A lack of a concrete long-term career plan that results from these factors could lead many GCC women to abandon their career aspirations.

Thirdly, due to the social context of the GCC region, GCC women's career aspirations are not so-much driven by necessity as by the simple desires of being happy and financially independent. Simultaneously, the interviewees reported that they were aware of the prevailing social expectations for women in the region, in which women are generally not financially obligated to provide for their families. This helps us to better understand their definition of financial independence, which typically implies having an addition to the family's total income, rather than being the sole and primary breadwinner of the family. Hence, women's role in the family is more centered on forming and organizing the family, in order to gain respect from both the family and the surrounding community, given that family is a core value in GCC societies. Consequentially, it can be inferred that the social setting in the GCC allows women to be 'out of labor', and mostly they gladly accept or choose their given roles as wives and mothers. Interviewees also stressed the importance of personal growth in their decision to work, which gave further supports the idea that to GCC women, working is an integral part to achieving personal development. Perhaps this aspect of thinking is a product of great economic stability and job security granted to most GCC nationals under the social contract with their respective states. This has influenced GCC women to see careers as more of an option than a necessity.

Lastly, I found that GCC women cared more about fulfilling societal expectations than following professional and financial pursuits. While these two values did not necessarily conflict with one another, the interviewees stated the importance of balance in work life and family life. Additionally, while GCC women did not automatically accept the traditional gendered division of labor, but still accepted the heightened importance placed on performing their duties as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters within the family.

This study found that most young women in the GCC have strong educational aspirations and have a particular fondness for doctoral degrees. In Chapter 6, I summarized three main findings that help further our understanding about the educational aspirations and motivations of GCC women. First, although GCC women wish to attend graduate school to earn advanced academic degrees, the reason for attendance was not primarily driven by career-related ambitions. Instead, under no significant statistical difference among nationality and academic concentrations, the most significant reason for pursuing higher education was personal ones. Hence, in this respect, neither status attainment theory nor status expression theory explains the steep and dynamic rise of women's higher education in the six Gulf countries.

Secondly, as noted, I found that GCC women see university as the logical next step after high school. None of the GCC female interviewees attributed professional and

financial success as the reasons for pursuing higher education; instead, they saw their university experience as something taken for granted. Due to the generous financial support of their oil-rich governments that provide mass access to higher education, the interviewees had no social or financial hindrance in pursuing higher education. The interviewees also saw education as a way to give back to their country and to their communities by improving themselves. Moreover, GCC women saw education as fundamentally and religiously a good thing. Additionally, due to gender-segregation in the region, universities are regarded as the ‘safest’ public place where young women can enjoy considerable freedom without the risk of dishonoring themselves and their families. This further attracts many women to higher education. Women’s emphasis on these factors may further contribute to the drawn finding that the educational aspirations of GCC women are more so based on benefits, rather than the pursuit of a career.

Lastly, I found that GCC women were connected through a social definition of a doctorate degree, which may have contributed to their overwhelming desire to become a ‘doctora’. Several interviewed women hoped to hold a doctorate degree, but not for career purposes. According to these women, the term *doctora* takes on a symbolic value associated with self-realization and social recognition for herself and her family. A *doctora* was respected not because of her academic prowess but instead, respected because of her ability

to stay productive and managed. However, for many of these women, pursuing a doctorate degree was conditional upon major life events, such as employment, marriage, and childbearing, due to the high value placed on fulfilling a role within their families. In addition, the interviewees perceived that pursuing a doctorate degree does not undermine their traditional values, social norms and religious beliefs. With all being said, GCC women's strong educational aspirations could be better understood through the value of 'being a doctora' in society and GCC women's internal desire of self-fulfillment. These findings provide important insight into the dominant educational discourse that views academic degrees as mainly a source of economic capital.

The insights gained from this study provide a new perspective on understanding the phenomenon regarding the education and careers of women in the Arab Gulf countries, the phenomena have most often been contradictory. If education is assumed to be the means for career or family formation, the current situation of educational aspiration and job attainment by GCC women is most definitely contradictory. However, this study revealed that for GCC women, education and career were not the "be all, end all" goal, but instead, an aspect in the grander scheme of fulfilling their inner desires of self-fulfillment. Furthermore, in the Gulf region, higher education degrees – and above all, doctorate degrees – have symbolic value beyond academic qualifications, which has driven many

women to higher education. Given that education has its own unique meaning for the women in the region and is not just a means for establishing a career, the situation of highly educated women not being in the workforce is not a conflict but rather, is consistent with their social standing. In recent years, the function of education in general and higher education in particular is stressed by governments as a bridge to the labor market. Still, the function of higher education in the GCC seems to be different to what has been argued so far, as well as the determining factors of educational aspiration still being questionable, which too, necessitates a new framework that is needed to explain female education in Arabian Gulf societies.

Although the changes in the GCC region in the past two or three decades have been breathtaking in their range and impact, and yet there is no reason to assume that the coming few decades will not see changes equally profound. However, understanding how and why this has occurred in addition to its implications is therefore of deep importance, as this informs not only of the recent and current position of women in GCC societies, but also women's potential futures and prospects for social, economic and political change in the region in the years ahead. This thesis takes one small but important step in identifying and elucidating some of the salient – and often, unexpected – dynamics that are at work in the Gulf in this regard.