Factors Influencing Omani Women's Autonomy to Study Overseas: A Synthesis of the Literature

Saif Juma Salim Al Weshahi

English Language Center, University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Shinas, Oman
Email: Saif.Alweshahi@shct.edu.om

Abstract

This paper explores why many Omani women choose not to complete their higher education studies overseas in affluent countries such as the UK, America, Canada, or Australia. The study has shown that with a gender population of about 50/50 in schools and where the World Bank report indicates that female students' outcomes outperform male students' within a high-income country context of Oman, the percentage of females who obtain external scholarships is underrepresented compared with men. It has also revealed that Omani women are to some extent cognitively stymied to perpetuating wrong conceptions and beliefs toward studying abroad, and this could be attributed to the influence of essentialization, socio-cultural conventions, religious misinterpretations, and micro-political practices which have relatively restricted Omani women's independence to pursue their aspirations. The article has investigated the status quo of gender equity in Oman and discussed what education should do to ensure more inclusive and equitable quality education, enable Omani women to realize their capabilities, and promote life-long learning opportunities for all. However, this account must be approached with caution because gender identity results from a complex interplay between structure and agency. In this study, data are collected using only a literature-based approach.

Keywords

Gender, Equity, Autonomy, Overseas Study, Capability Approach, Essentialism

1. Introduction

Studying abroad is a marvelous dream that many high school students look forward to seeing in reality. It is an excellent opportunity for young learners to ex-

perience a better education in developed countries to enhance their skills, develop well-being, and ensure sustainable livelihoods. However, to make this worthwhile leap in some conservative societies in the third world, female students need a tremendous amount of courage, unlike males. Although this gender inequity is remarkable in Oman, up to now, far too little attention has been paid to this specific issue.

Before addressing the issue of gender inequity, it is essential to understand how these two key terms are conceptualized through the lens of education. Field et al. (2007) argue that fairness and inclusion are the two notable features of equity in education. In other words, all learners must have the right, access, and opportunities to obtain a primary level of skills minimally. This premise is advocated by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012). Similarly, UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that equity as fairness entails considering students' socio-economic backgrounds, which should not impede student outcomes. In so doing, external factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, and disability which are more likely to give rise to disadvantaged students' low achievements, have to be removed to provide an equitable, fair and inclusive educational system. Does this mean that schools should treat all learners the same? Of course not! Dealing with all children similarly, regardless of their differences, is called equality, not equity. As a result, under a system of equity, academic support, funding, and resources should not be distributed equally; instead, they should be provided based on learners' needs to ensure all students have even chances to succeed (OECD, 2012). However, achieving equity involves considering all of these facets from the perspectives of students, teachers, school leaders, and the whole system (Watkins, 2014).

It is fundamental when dissecting gender to make it clear that it is distinct from sex. While the term sex is used to classify humans biologically and physiologically as male and female, the concept of gender is more relevant to the assumed norms, behaviors, and roles of men and women, which are typically stereotyped subconsciously by parents, friends, schools, media, societies, and religions (Connell, 2005). A broader perspective has been adopted by Jenkins (2014), who argues through his postulate "knowing who is who" that gender identity must be established on the ground that it is not fixed but constantly changes over time to meet the demands of societies. This implies that gender identity is a performance that can be acquired, not something inherited biologically. It means that the structure plays a vital role in shaping the agency of men and women. In claiming so, gender identity is a social construct. It is problematic because it neglects diversity and renders individuals unable to be themselves due to the disposition of essentialisation and the influence of Heteronormativity (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This view is supported by Aikman and Rao (2012). They maintain that the educational process has contributed to reinforcing gender inequities, and this is attributable to the impact of social, cultural, and historical contexts. While in a study (Rosa, Drew, & Canavan, 2020), it was revealed

that universities remain both gendered and gendering organizations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Educational Context in Oman

Public education provision in Oman started in the 1970s, and at that time, there were only three schools located in Muscat, the capital city of Oman, with no formal schooling for girls yet (Al-Lamky, 2007). Since then, the growth in the educational sector has flourished, and the number of students has surged impressively to over 600,000 in 2008/2009. As a result, almost 100 percent of Omani children are currently registered in primary education, and about 86 percent are enrolled in the post-basic education age. These figures indicate that the inclusive education levels in Oman are either similar or superior to other countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This is evident in the case of the high degree of young Omani women in completion of tertiary education, which is deemed to be equal to top-ranked countries such as Singapore and South Korea and achieving significant gender parity and nearly universal enrolment and literacy rates among both young males and females aged 15 - 24 years (UNICEF Annual Report, 2017).

According to Oman 2016-2017 Enrolment Rates Report, despite the large proportion of enrolment in primary and secondary education, 94% and 95%, respectively, for both males and females, only 45% of students participate in early childhood education and 44% in higher education,. By analyzing the ratio of male and female students throughout all stages of education, from the Pre-primary level to the tertiary level, it is evident that the numbers of both genders are equal to a great extent, and elementary and high schools have witnessed a noticeable transformation. Overall, undoubtedly, the Government of Oman has taken consistent steps to respond to the UNESCO recommendations to close the gender disparity gap and ensure both girls and boys can access schools in rural and urban areas irrespective of students' gender or their families' social-economic background. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to argue that it is time to take gender equity in Oman to the next level and examine to what extent men and women have equal opportunities to obtain high-quality undergraduate and Postgraduate Education.

2.2. Evaluation of Local and International Policies

Women will be empowered by one of the memorable statements that his Majesty the Sultan of Oman emphasized in his address to Unesco's 33rd session during the signing of the convention to eradicate all sorts of prejudice against women (Al-Lamky, 2007). This declaration was a direct decree to policymakers in Oman to embark upon new strategies to promote women's capabilities in all spheres of the country. This proclamation was issued at a crucial historical time in Arab history when the international community compelled them to improve gender equity in the region and the need to exploit their possibilities for socio-economic

and political development (CAWTAR-UNDP, 2001; Fergani, 2002). Consequently, the Government in Oman has embraced a policy of education for all that has substantially uplifted the percentage of girls in schools.

Additionally, according to UNESCO's Country Strategy for the Sultanate of Oman 2019-2023, the Omani Government has effectively consolidated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4), which strives towards inclusive and equitable quality education and promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all. The Government is committed to updating its progress in fulfilling the SDG4 through voluntary national reviews (VNRs). While 750 million adults remain illiterate worldwide, where the majority are women, the adult literacy rate in Oman is 96.11%, and for females, in particular, it is 93.21%. The rapid reaction from the authority in Oman to the implementation of UNESCO's interventions and programs outlined concerning women's rights despite the Omani conservative societies where historically women have been marginalised in everyday life, could be interpreted in an absolute political way.

However, even with the enormous strides that the Sultanate of Oman has made toward gender equity and after 48 years of cooperation with UNESCO, the percentage of females' participation in the labor force is still low, around 30 percent, compared to above 80 percent for men in a country where over half of the working-age population is women (Donn & Issan, 2007; World Bank, 2018). A study conducted by Al-Lamky (2007) reveals that feminizing leadership has been poorly represented in Oman. This means that focusing on enhancing gender equity in schools is not enough and is unlikely to bring about change. So, investigating female students' quality of higher education has become indispensable. To underpin this argument, it is essential to analyze SDG4 and look at it from a new perspective.

By breaking down the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) into elements, there are two keywords policymakers must take into consideration when they plan for equitable education. First, it is "lifelong", not just for primary and secondary levels, and most importantly, it involves "quality" for both males and females. The question is, do Omani women's opportunities as men in obtaining good quality higher education? Since few to none of the higher education institutions in Oman are mentioned in the top 500 ranked universities based on the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), those who can get a chance to study abroad would have a better quality of education and a better future by default. Surprisingly, with an equal gender population in schools and where the world Bank report demonstrates that girls' attainments surpass boys' within a high-income country context of Oman, the number of females who study overseas is underrepresented compared with Omani male students.

There is, therefore, a definite need for examining the factors which affect Omani women's educational aspirations and capabilities and deprive them of traveling to study abroad. This perspective has been underpinned by Morley (2005), Phipps and Young (2015), who argue that structures of social inequalities

in higher education need to be scrutinized.

2.3. The Power of Orthodox Misconceptions on Affecting Women's Agency to Study Overseas

Virtually all Omani citizens are Muslim (World Population Review, 2020), and Islamic Sharia is the basis for legislation (Basic Statute of the State, Royal decree No. 99/2011). The influence of religion, unlike Western cultures, is generally embedded in male-dominated societies where some gender equity issues are socially very sensitive to touch and unwelcome to be questioned in view of the fact that gender equity has been fixed and regulated by Islamic creeds (Al-Azri, 2013). In essence, akin to conservative Islamic communities, in Oman, male supremacy and female subordination are practised by the name of God. For instance, it is forbidden from the Islamic point of view for an Omani woman to decide to study overseas without taking permission from her father or husband and in some cases, a brother can make a decision on her behalf,. Although the idea of a single dominant form of masculinity is being increasingly contested (Aboim & Vasconcelos, 2021; Hearn, 2020), this rule stems from the interpretation of the Holy Quran verse which says {men are the protectors and maintainers of women} (Surat Al-Nisa', ayah 34), whereby men Islamic scholars grant the right for males to take the privilege of leading the family (Larson, 2015). Although there are multiple verses in the Holy book which empower women, they have been overlooked by Muslims clergymen or Imams as they cherry-pick what suits their agenda so that they can take advantage of this situation (Chaudhry et al., 2012). Hence, Omani women don't have complete freedom to make such critical decisions about their personal lives. However, what if an adult liberal female disobeys her parents in making a key decision for herself? Based on Islamic traditions, she has committed a major sin and culturally caused a family stigma (Khan, 2009).

Moreover, another religious barrier which hinders Omani women's independence is what so-called "Fatwa". In the light of Islamic law, women are not allowed to travel alone without a male relative guardianship. Al-Azri (2013) argues that in the modern Omani state and despite the provision of legal implements securing equality for all citizens, the public still relies on Islamic elites for legitimacy. Two Omani researchers (Al-Makhmari & Amzat, 2012) have conducted a study to explore Omani female students' perceptions on the idea of studying abroad. The study uncovers that all female participants show their desires to study abroad and agree that it is a beneficial experience for them. Nevertheless, interestingly 80% of them believe that their parents' approval is pivotal for them to study outside Oman, and unexpectedly 65% of them accept that their parents have the right to prevent them from studying overseas. A possible explanation for this might be that the girls have been brainwashed by parents to follow these Islamic norms without allowing them to critique their beliefs objectively so that they feel guilty if they travel alone or if they disobey their parents.

It can therefore be assumed that the Omani woman's autonomous decision to study abroad has been impeded by religious beliefs and conversely, a man is more likely to have the capability of "autonomy", to choose to study abroad and get a better quality of Education.

2.4. Evaluation Capability Approach

Recently, considerable literature has grown up around the theme of Capability Approach (CA) and how its comprehensive framework can play an essential role in addressing the issue of equity (Aikman et al., 2011; Alkire, 2002; Nussbaum, 2003; Robeyns, 2004; Stromquist, 2002; Unterhalter, 2003; Walker, 2005). In fact, the Indian Amartya Kumar Sen, an economist and philosopher, was the first to theorize CA. However, some views of the CA can historically be traceable to Aristotle's, Adam Smith's, and Karl Marx's ideologies (Nussbaum, 1988). Sen insists that to develop the economy, the main focus should be on promoting people's freedom rather than merely providing resources, considering capabilities an absolute concept that respects human diversity (Walker, 2005). He also maintains that CA is not about sending people the recourses but what individuals can do with these resources to make their lives good. For example, what is the point of offering a bicycle to a disabled person if he cannot ride it? This indicates that obstacles must be removed in peoples' lives so they can have more opportunities to do what they would like to do, be the person they would like to be, and choose the kind of life they value and want to lead. So, it is equality of capabilities rather than equality of income (Sen, 1993). Simply the CA implies concentration on freedoms to achieve in general and the capabilities to function in particular (Sen 1995). According to Robeyns (2008), the core elements of the CA are capability and functioning, which are related. In contrast, capability is the potential functioning premised on freedoms or opportunities a person has to accomplish functioning which is the outcome, actual doing, or achievement (Walker, 2005).

However, researchers need to be circumspect when they employ the CA in educational settings because it has been developed in a non-educational context and is a general framework of thought that can be adopted for a wide range of purposes (Robeyns, 2008). Therefore, the definition of CA theory has been used and interpreted interchangeably among scholars. This can be illustrated briefly by comparing Sen's earlier and later publications on CA and how the notion evolved gradually and was perceived differently by social scientists. For instance, Sen contends that each individual has just one capability (or capability set), which comprises an integration of possible functionings equivalent to a person's opportunity set (Sen, 1997). In contrast, Nussbaum (2004) describes "capabilities" as potential functioning and achievements which are promoted within true freedoms. Overall, before applying the CA to educational issues, it is crucial to note that, unlike Nussbaum, Sen has not proposed a specific list of capabilities; their approaches have various theoretical assertions.

2.5. Application of Capability Approach to Gender Equity

As demonstrated above, the challenges that render Omani girls unable to pursue their goals of obtaining high-quality education in international environments are primarily grounded various norms. As a result, women in Oman are given fewer opportunities to develop "capabilities" concerning autonomy, recognition, respect, and integrity (Walker, 2005). Therefore, she is more likely to lack the ability to turn capability, such as autonomy into functioning. In other words, she does not have an autonomous decision as a man regarding the choice of studying overseas, whereas a male has more freedom. Thus, he is able to convert capabilities into functioning. This is why the writer has chosen CA to address the gender disparity in Oman. This perspective is advocated by Nussbaum (2011) and Walker (2005), who have ascribed gender inequality in some developing countries to some traditions.

The question is, what is expected from the education system in Oman to tackle this issue effectively where the public still favors following traditions over the national legal policies? The mission of education is not only to align learning outcomes with a globalized economy and market-driven solutions, but more importantly, to empower the marginalized, promote agency and enhance well-being (Unterhalter et al., 2012). It appears that enacting policies were inadequate to close the gender gap in Oman. It would have been more helpful if legislation and education had worked together to overcome this unfairness. A reasonable approach to eliminate these barriers could be taken into account the significance of the collective consciousness to bring about change and allowing the school system to discuss the curriculum to prepare a more open-minded generation that believes that both men and women should have fair chances in terms of higher education.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

This essay explored the degree of inequity between genders in education in Oman and investigated the main reasons behind it. The results of this study indicated that the Government of Oman has successfully bridged the gender gap in primary and secondary schools regarding access to education. Nevertheless, the rate of female students studying abroad remained low compared to males. Furthermore, an implication of this is the possibility that legal instruments and awareness have no choice but to work collaboratively and consistently to curb this gender inequity in Oman. This study has also found that no empirical research has investigated this particular issue in Oman in-depth, so this would be a fruitful area for further work.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

Aboim, S., & Vasconcelos, P. (2021). What Does It Mean to Be a Man? Trans Masculini-

ties, Bodily Practices, and Reflexive Embodiment. *Men and Masculinities, 25,* 43-67. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X211008519

Aikman, S., & Rao, N. (2012). Gender Equality and Girls' Education: Investigating Frameworks, Disjunctures and Meanings of Quality Education. *Theory and Research in Education, 10,* 211-228. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878512459391

Aikman, S., Halai, A., & Rubagiza, J. (2011). Conceptualising Gender Equality in Research on Education Quality. *Comparative Education, 47,* 45-60. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2011.541675

Al-Azri, K. M. (2013). *Social and Gender Inequality in Oman: The Power of Religious and Political Tradition*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203115589

Alkire, S. (2002). *Valuing Freedoms: Sen's Capability Approach and Poverty Reduction* (356 p.). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0199245797.001.0001

Al-Lamky, A. (2007). Feminizing Leadership in Arab Societies: The Perspectives of Omani Female Leaders. *Women in Management Review, 22,* 49-67. https://doi.org/10.1108/09649420710726229

Al-Makhmari, S. R. S., & Amzat, I. H. (2012). Parents and Female Students' Acceptance of the Phenomenology of Females Studying Abroad: A Case Study of the Sultanate of Oman. *OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development, 3,* 83-96.

CAWTAR (Organization) and Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organizations (2001). *Globalisation and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women*. Center of Arab Women for Training and Research.

Chaudhry, I. S., Nosheen, F., & Lodhi, M. I. (2012). Women Empowerment in Pakistan with Special Reference to Islamic Viewpoint: An Empirical Study. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences, 32,* 171-183.

Connell, R. W. (2005). Work/Life Balance, Gender Equity and Social Change. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 40,* 369-383. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2005.tb00978.x

Data.worldbank.org (2018). *World Bank Open Data*. https://data.worldbank.org

Donn, G., & Issan, S. (2007). Higher Education in Transition: Gender and Change in the Sultanate of Oman. *Scottish Educational Review, 39,* 173. https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-03902007

Fergani, N. (2002). *Arab Human Development Report: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations*. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Field, S., Kuczera, M., & Pont, B. (2007). *No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education*. OECD. https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264032606-en

Hearn, J. (2020). Men and Masculinities in Academia. Towards Gender-Sensitive Perspectives, Processes, Policies and Practices. In D. Eileen, & S. Canavan (Eds.), *The Gender-Sensitive University. A Contradiction in Terms?* (pp. 97-109). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001348-8

Jenkins, R. (2014). *Social Identity*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315887104

Khan, F. (2009). Maulana Thanawi's Fatwa on the Limits of Parental Rights over Children. In B. D. Metcalf (Ed.), *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (pp. 305-316). Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv301gh6.36

Larson, L. (2015). Men Are the Protectors and Maintainers of Women: Three Fatwas on Spousal Roles and Rights. In Z. Mir-Hosseini, M. Al-Sharmani and J. Rumminger (Eds.), *Men in Charge? Rethinking Authority in Muslim Legal Tradition* (pp. 197-218). OneWorld.

Morley, L. (2005). Gender Equity in Commonwealth Higher Education. *Women's Studies International Forum, 28,* 209-221. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2005.04.008

Nussbaum, M. (1988). Nature, Function, and Capability: Aristotle on Political Distribution. In J. Annas, & R. H. Grimm (Eds.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* (Supplementary Volume, pp. 145-184). Clarendon.

Nussbaum, M. (2003). Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice. *Feminist Economics, 9,* 33-59. https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570022000077926

Nussbaum, M. (2004). Beyond the Social Contract: Toward Global Justice. In G. B. Peterson (Ed.), *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Vol. 24, pp. 413-507). University of Utah Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511614743.014

Nussbaum, M. (2011). *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061200

OECD (2012). *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*. OECD Publishing.
https://asiasociety.org/files/equity-and-quality-in-education_0.pdf

Phipps, A., & Young, I. (2015). Neoliberalisation and "Lad Cultures" in Higher Education. *Sociology, 49,* 305-322. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038514542120

Robeyns, I. (2008). Justice as Fairness and the Capability Approach. In K. Basu, & R. Kanbur (Eds.), *Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen: Volume I: Ethics, Welfare, and Measurement and Volume II: Society, Institutions, and Development*. Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239115.003.0022

Rosa, R., Drew, E., & Canavan, S. (2020). An Overview of Gender Inequality in EU Universities. In D. Eileen, & S. Canavan (Eds.), *The Gender-Sensitive University. A Contradiction in Terms?* (pp. 1-15). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001348-1

Schilt, K., & Westbrook, L. (2009). Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: "Gender Normals," Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality. *Gender & Society, 23,* 440-464. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243209340034

Sen, A. (1993). Capability and Well-Being. In M. Nussbaum, & A. Sen (Eds.), *The Quality of Life* (pp. 30-53). Oxford University Press.
https://doi.org/10.1093/0198287976.003.0003

Sen, A. (1995). Gender Inequality and Theories of Justice. In M. Nussbaum, & J. Glover (Eds.), *Women, Culture and Development: A Study of Human Capabilities* (pp. 61-104). Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/0198289642.003.0011

Sen, A. (1997). *Resources, Values, and Development*. Harvard University Press.

Stromquist, N. P. (2002). Education as a Means for Empowering Women. In J. L. Parpart, S. M. Rai, & K. A. Staudt (Eds.), *Rethinking Empowerment: Gender and Development in a Global/Local World* (pp. 22-38). Routledge.

UNESCO (2016). *Education for People and Planet: Creating Sustainable Futures for All. Global Education Monitoring Report*. Paris: UNESCO.

UNICEF (2011). *MENA Gender Equality Profile: Status of Girls and Women in the Middle East and North Africa* (p. 1).

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2017). *Djibouti. MENA Gender Equality Profile. Status of Girls and Women in the Middle East and North Africa*.

Unterhalter, E. (2003). The Capabilities Approach and Gendered Education. *Theory and Research in Education, 1,* 7-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878503001001002

Unterhalter, E., Yates, C., Makinda, H., & North, A. (2012). Blaming the Poor: Construc-

tions of Marginality and Poverty in the Kenyan Education Sector. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 42,* 213-233.
https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2012.652386

Walker, M. (2005). *Higher Education Pedagogies: A Capability Approach.*

Watkins, K. (2014). Leaving No One Behind: An Agenda for Equity. *The Lancet, 384,* 2248-2255. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)62421-6

Worldpopulationreview.com (2020). *Oman Population 2020.*
https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/oman-population